

Not Your Typical Owner

Rob Curtis tries to keep a low profile, which isn't easy when you own the NRHA Futurity Open Champion.

By Megan Arszman

As a member of one of the world's largest management strategy consulting firms, Rob Curtis is always thinking about innovative business models that will help his clients succeed. As the owner of one of the most talked about mares in the reining world, he's always thinking about building a long-term strategy and plan for his reining horses. So far, he's been pretty successful at both.

Curtis flew to the forefront of the reining industry when his mare, Shesouttaylorleague, scored a 224.5 to win the run-off and the 2015 National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) Futurity Level 4 Open with Equi-Stat Elite \$1 Million Rider Casey Deary aboard.

A budding owner-trainer relationship has grown to more of a friendship in the four years Curtis has known Deary, and their trust factor has grown right along with it. Likewise, it has sprung the normally

reserved gentleman from Fort Worth, Texas, into the spotlight.

Family man

Curtis, 48, and his wife, Heather Curtis, have two children, Stephen and Katie Curtis. He and his wife enjoy spending quality time together traveling and learning about new places, patronizing the fine arts, riding horses and exposing the kids to as many new and different things as they can.

The memorable vacations they take are often ones where Curtis can practice his photography skills. He enjoys wildlife and landscape photography, but has no plans for it to be any more than a hobby.

"I just enjoy taking photos," he said. "I've always been good at logic and math, but horrible at art, so photography has been a really great way to make me grow. So far my favorite places to photograph have been South



Curtis shot this photograph at the Londolozi Game Reserve in South Africa. Finding a leopard in a tree is the “holy grail” for photographers, said Curtis, adding that the image is his favorite of the thousands of pictures he took that week.



This chameleon, rarely seen in the light of day, necessitated an unplanned stop while driving through the Londolozi Game Reserve. Curtis got down on the ground to shoot the lizard with a 600mm lens.



Curtis snapped this photo at Lamar Valley in Yellowstone National Park. The family was looking for wolves, based on son Stephen’s research into the reintroduction of wolves to the park. His favorite pack frequents this valley.

Africa and the Rockies.”

Many times, Curtis can be found at the barn, capturing moments in the training journey of his horses under Deary’s tutelage.

“I think he just likes to be behind the scenes,” Deary said. “I think his camera costs as much as my first truck did!”

Stephen, 12, could be the one to thank for the journey that brought Deary and Curtis together when he started taking riding lessons with Deary. He still enjoys riding, but has no aspirations to compete in the ring. Katie, 16, rode English and also enjoys the occasional ride at Deary’s ranch. And although Heather did quite a bit of riding as a child, her experience as a financial executive in the farm and ranch industry continues to be invaluable as the family plots the course for their reining horses.

The consummate client

Curtis has been involved in the horse industry off and on through the years with both cutting and reining horses. After a few years away from the sport, he called Deary about riding lessons for Stephen. A year later, Curtis expressed interest in buying a futurity prospect. Deary, however, wasn’t exactly sure what he was getting into.

“At the time, I didn’t know much about him or what he did, I just knew he drove an old truck and paid for his son’s lessons on time. So I thought I’d find him something inexpensive that he could play around with and have a good time,” Deary recalled.

Curtis bought a filly that Deary then started showing. While she was well-bred, she wasn’t top of the line, and Deary told Curtis she wouldn’t make his top three for the

NRHA Futurity in Oklahoma City. Wanting to own only the best, Curtis had Deary sell the mare and they set out to find something else.

Fate stepped in when Deary heard about a long yearling out of 2007 NRHA Futurity Level 4 Open Champion Wimpys Little Chic. Deary knew she was a filly they needed to see.

“I didn’t know it at the time, but Rob is a pedigree guru. So when I told him about this filly, he immediately wanted to go look at her,” Deary said.

Even though Curtis might have given the impression he was a reining neophyte, he knew a lot about pedigrees, thanks to his time in the cutting industry and his attention to detail.

“When I was in cutting, I always wanted to own a daughter or granddaughter of Royal Blue Boon, but I could never get my hands on one. Nobody would sell them,” Curtis said. “I had it in the back of my mind that Wimpys Little Chic would be that kind of mare. Her entire family has produced consistently and she was such a great show horse. So I thought this was my chance to own the reining equivalent of a Royal Blue Boon filly.”

The two went to look at the filly, and they both fell in love with the palomino by Walla Walla Whiz.

“She just had this look and way about her, even as a yearling,” Deary said. “The way she carried herself and the way she was with other horses, I loved her.”

Curtis felt the same way. After Deary told him to wait a week and see if he was still interested, Curtis called him back two days

later to say he wanted to buy her.

“I couldn’t get her out of my mind, and I didn’t want anyone else to get ahold of her. She was what I like, what I want, so I said, ‘Let’s go do it,’” Curtis explained.

Deary, not being one to dive into the economic status of his clients, mentioned Curtis should get two or three more buddies together to buy the filly. Curtis commented they didn’t need anyone else, he could buy her himself.

“I looked at him thinking, ‘Hold on, is this the same guy that pulled up here in a truck that has 500,000 miles on it?’ It was a shock to me, but we bought her right then,” Deary said.

Curtis became personally invested in Shesouttaylorleague, driving the short 10 minutes to Deary Performance Horses multiple times a week to watch his prized possession work. He kept other horses there, too, so he could relax outside of the office on top of his horse while Deary worked the filly, enjoying the entire time.

“The whole process was such a fun experience for both of us,” Deary said.

While it might sound like Curtis was the type of client who wanted to be in the middle of everything, he was more prone to trust his trainer in making the decisions that were best for his horse.

“He’s been a really excellent customer. He lets me do whatever the mares need to have done, and I keep him in the loop on everything,” Deary said.

Curtis said that’s because he trusts his trainer.

“I have thought very highly of him – both his eye for good horses and how he conducts



Megan Parks Photography

his business," he said. "Obviously he is at the top of the profession as a trainer, but honestly, I wouldn't be doing the things we are doing if it weren't for his quality and integrity. I trust him like a brother, and he is a role model for doing things the right way."

"It's nice to have a customer that's involved," said Deary, not minding his client's frequent presence. "I bet he watched 25 percent of my rides on that mare in two years, and for an owner to see that much and still have it be a pleasant experience, that says a lot about his character and his understanding of the process and understanding of good quality horse flesh."

The Futurity

Two weeks in November and December can be some of the most stressful times for trainers and owners alike. So much pressure is put on a 3-year-old's back, but perhaps the only one who didn't feel the pressure was Curtis.

Leading up to the NRHA Futurity, Curtis kept reminding Deary how much fun he'd had through the process of getting his mare to Oklahoma City.

"Even before the show started he said, 'I

want you to know that I don't care if we don't make the second go-round, I have really enjoyed this. I've loved watching you. The whole thing's been fun,'" Deary said.

"I was relaxed," Curtis said. "I wasn't overly concerned about her performance. They're big animals and they have a mind of their own. If she didn't do well, then she'd do well in either the [National Reining Breeders Classic] NRBC or the NRHA Derby. Casey is more competitive than I am, which is saying quite a bit. I knew he was going to do absolutely everything he could to show her the best he could. And that's all you can do."

The first round came and went, and the pair moved on to the second go-round. Again, Curtis was happy with making it to the second round, and reminded Deary it was alright if they didn't make the finals.

The mare slid to a win in the second round, putting her in a solid position for the finals. Curtis was unable to attend the second round, but when he heard they had made the finals, he called Deary elated, saying he couldn't believe they had made it to the NRHA Futurity finals.

"This is a dream come true. I don't care if you fall off, this has just been a great jour-

Curtis is a frequent presence at Deary Performance Horses in Weatherford, Texas.

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ney," Deary recalled Curtis saying to him.

Shesouttaylorleague and Deary were the last draw of the finals. When it was announced the pair had tied Inferno Sixty Six and Franco Bertolani with a 224, Curtis leapt over seats and scrambled to the holding area to find his trainer.

"I told Casey to do what was best for her. My mare had run her heart out for the two weeks she was there; I was perfectly happy to be co-champions," he explained. "On the other hand, I thought we had a lot of horse, and if the other folks wanted a run-off, I knew Casey would do really well."

And that's what Deary did, winning his second NRHA Futurity, giving Curtis his first, and setting the course for Curtis' new career as an owner.

"It's been a fun journey," Curtis said.

Round two

Curtis now owns a total of four horses. One, Lonely At The Top, is a half-sister to Shesouttaylorleague sired by Colonels Smoking Gun (Gunner). There is also a yearling filly bred similarly to Shesouttaylorleague in that she is by Walla Walla Whiz and out of an NRHA Futurity

Champion. Americas Supermodel is out of Deary's 2012 NRHA Futurity Champion Americasnextgunmodel. Curtis also keeps one horse, a full sister to Boonlight Dancer (Peptoboonsmal x Little Dancer Lena x Smart Little Lena), to ride himself and for Deary to rope on.

Deary is excited about the future with Shesouttaylorleague, Lonely At The Top and, particularly, Americas Supermodel.

"It was one of those deals where Rob said, 'Don't let me buy another horse,'" Deary recalled. "But then I saw that filly."

Because Deary and Curtis are friends, Curtis knew how the trainer felt about Americasnextgunmodel. Deary had always wanted to own a baby out of the mare. When he saw the Walla Walla Whiz filly, he knew he had to figure out a way to buy her.

"I told Rob that I have felt that way about only one other female, and I married her," Deary said with a laugh. So Curtis purchased the filly, adding to his arsenal.

"He owns the best stock in the country," Deary said. "He's got three outstanding mares."

It's not often that someone wants to own only mares. Mares often have the reputation

Kelsey Peczak



Deary's first stop after winning the NRHA Futurity Open run-off was to shake hands with his friend and client, Curtis, who trusted him to make the right decision for the horse.

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Curtis often turns his lens to his own horses, including Lonely At The Top.



With nothing left to prove to her owner, Shesouttaylorleague is scheduled to return to the show pen this year. Wherever the journey leads, Curtis will be there, enjoying the ride.

of being moody, bossy and sometimes just not the best to deal with. But that doesn't deter Curtis. For him, it's all about business.

"If you're going to be successful with a stallion, to me it feels like that only happens one out of every three to five years. It's not every year that a stallion goes on to be a very successful stud," he explained.

Curtis knew the statistics. He knew that if a mare was successful in making it to the finals of most of the major events, she could do very well as a broodmare.

"You can own a very good mare and be able to produce some extremely nice horses that are also worth quite a bit of money," he said. "I don't think you'll make as much money on a mare as you would a top stallion, just because of how many times you can breed a stallion. However, I think I like the odds of a very well-thought-out mare. If she's bred right, looks right, and is trained and handled right, I think the economics work better on the average."

While he might sound all business, Deary pointed out that Curtis has a soft heart for his mares, ensuring that their care is top notch. He relies on Deary and his wife, Nicole Deary, to care for them while he's busy with his career and family.

"He's been great about communicating his thoughts and wishes for his horses, but he always tells me that I have the final say because I know them so well," Deary said.

"I think it's uncharacteristic in our industry to have a customer care for his horses as much as he does, to the point that he would sacrifice the Futurity championship, or just give it to somebody else, if he felt like I was uncomfortable.

"It's refreshing to have someone in the background saying, 'Make the right choice for the horse,'" Deary said.

As far as their future plans for Shesouttaylorleague, Curtis and Deary are already aiming for the 2016 NRHA Derby and NRBC.

"She's proved everything she's ever needed to prove to me and, I think, everyone else. We'll just enjoy whatever comes," Curtis said. "If she never shows again, I'm fine with that. At this point, her health and comfort are absolutely the most important. When we do retire her, I'm looking forward to that journey, as well."

For now, he'll be beside at Deary Performance Horses, aiming his camera at his favorite fillies and spending time with his new friend. ★