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Keeping Up

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Karen Johnson and GQH Summer Camp compete at the 2016 Lucas Oil AQHA World Championship Show. The mare has more than 550 points in ranch riding classes.

*Marriage, halter, breeding, ranch riding, reining, plus a second business – Bob and Karen Johnson make a full life look easy.*

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**By Megan Arszman**

**B**OB JOHNSON ISN'T A BOASTFUL MAN. THAT IS, UNLESS YOU ASK him about his wife, Karen, and their marriage ...

"We've been married 25 years and pretty proud of it," Bob says.

The two met at a horse show in Harriman, Tennessee. Originally from South Dakota, Bob was living in Pennsylvania at the time and was contracted to promote a stallion named Jonathan Swift for the Honor Roll. Karen was a Tennessee native and showing horses with Randal Tucker.

Bob and Karen spent the next six months talking on the phone and becoming good friends. They traveled to visit each other frequently, and once his contract was complete, Bob moved to Tennessee...

"And voila!" proclaims Bob.

Now the two own a farm in Burns, just west of Nashville. Their farm sits on 11 acres with a sliding track, roping arena, indoor round pen and a 15-stall barn. Next to them is 100 acres of pasture where they have permission from the owner to ride because they help care for the cattle.

"We looked for a long time to find our place, and we really love it," says Bob, an AQHA Professional Horseman.

And while the couple counts the years they're together, they don't pay attention to the calendar when it comes to their ages.

"I turned 50 this year, but age is just a number," Karen says. "That's not how old I feel. I feel about 35 ... well, maybe not after we came back from the World Show I didn't feel 35, but normally I feel about 35."

"I look in the mirror and I see my father," Bob says. "But I don't feel much over 30. I love to ride, and I get to ride great horses, so I don't feel very old."

Bob says he's already retired – he gets to play all day, every day, riding horses and playing cowboy.

"I think if you enjoy what you're doing, it's not really working," he says. "We get to do for a living what most people can't even do as a hobby. So, I get to play every day."

While the Johnsons might think their day jobs are all about fun, they also know all about hard work and dedication. Bob has a master's degree in education from South Dakota State University and Karen a degree in computer systems design from Middle Tennessee State University. On top of their farm, they've owned a payday and title loan office for 20 years.

"It's our second income," Karen says. "It allows for me to have two really nice horses; otherwise, we wouldn't be able to afford that."

Respect has been key to staying married for 25 years while running a farm and a business together.

"Neither one of us gets angry or hot-headed," Karen says. "There are going to be some tough times, but you just either talk your way through it or keep your mouth shut and not say anything hurtful. We respect each other."

"I think it's a lot about respect," Bob agrees. "We don't holler at each other; we just have fun. We have a good time."

"I've often told Bob he doesn't have a big ego, and I'm constantly having to pump him up and give him a boost of confidence," Karen says. "It's about knowing when to push him and say, 'You've got this.' We support each other through tough times and good times."

## Playing Cowboy

BOB IS A MULTIEVENT COWBOY, HAVING COMPETED IN ROPING, western pleasure, halter and reining. He has shown more than 60 AQHA Champions. So it's only fitting that he has taken on ranch riding.

"I think the reason ranch riding has taken off like it has is because you can take a horse that is pretty and is a good

mover and get him broke," he says. "(The class) has been good to us because we can do that."

After years of competing in roping, Bob's knees couldn't handle the stress anymore and needed to be replaced in 2002. While he no longer competes in roping, he still trains and shows horses in reining, halter and ranch riding. Karen competes in boxing, halter and ranch riding as an amateur and as a Select.

"We feel fortunate that we can do something other than halter because the halter industry has been a tough market lately," Karen says.

"That's why the ranch horse deal has been really good to us," explains Bob. "It's hard to explain, but it's so much fun for everyone. Everyone watches each other and claps and cheers ... we just have fun, and that's how it's supposed to be."

Currently Karen competes on GQH Summer Camp, a 2011 daughter of Little Blue Lynx out of the Mr Sun O Lena mare South Camp. The mare has earned 286 open ranch riding points and 270 amateur ranch riding points, and the pair placed in the top 10 at the 2016 Lucas Oil AQHA World Championship Show in amateur ranch riding. Karen also shows the mare in boxing, capitalizing on her cow sense.

As of press time, the pair has three horses on the Honor Roll for ranch riding, a nod to the couple's hard work. But don't expect them to venture away from the halter pen totally.

"I like the halter, I really do. I like getting a horse fit and the science of it," Bob says. "It's like a body builder – you don't want them fat, it's about getting them as physically fit as you can. Halter horses can be winners if they're just fit; it's not about putting them in a stall and feeding them."

The Johnsons don't change much when it comes to working with their halter horses or their riding horses.

"We treat our halter horses as horses – they get saddled, they learn to be hobbled – they need to be broke, as well," Karen says. "No matter what you're doing, you need to stay consistent in how you prepare. Every horse is an individual. We don't have a set 'program' that a horse has to go through, we tailor what we do to what the horse will allow.

"I think that's how Bob has been able to make so many AQHA Champions," she continues. "He'd take a horse that ran AAA on the track, then teach it to rope. If you think about it, the starting gate is a lot like the roping box – you just have to teach the horse how to rate the cow, and that's the hard thing.



The Johnsons' homebred Mo Secrets was third at the 2014 AQHA World show in 2-year-old stallions.

K. C. MONTGOMERY

With every horse, and individual, you have to put yourself in their shoes and just try to think of how to communicate with them. And Bob does that very well.”

Bob likes to consider the horse’s personality when he’s training.

“I think being smart enough to know when to give and take is important,” he says. “You need to know how much and when with horses. They can fight back, and you’re going to lose – they’re a whole lot bigger than we are. It’s about being smart enough to know what you’ve got.”

On top of their business and Bob’s training program, the pair are working on building their breeding program with their mare Imagine Me In Lace, an 18-year-old daughter of Image Of Kid out of the Conclusives Beau mare Conclusive Lace.

In 2013 and 2014, Imagine Me In Lace was the winner of the produce-of-dam class at the World Conformation Horse Association Breeders Championship Futurity.

The Johnsons’ goal is breeding a halter horse that can be successful in the performance arena. Their first subject is Mo Secretz, a 4-year-old gelding by Secretz that placed third in the 2014 World Show in 2-year-old stallions. He’s currently in training for ranch riding, and the Johnsons hope to be able to get him back in the halter pen for performance halter after earning his Register of Merit.

“He did well as a baby in the futurities and has grown up to be a really nice horse,” says Bob. “It’s easy for him to lope and

he’s very athletic. We’re excited about showing him in 2017.”

Bob and Karen are excited to see what the future holds for them and for the American Quarter Horse.

“I think we’re seeing more people come back to the show pen with ranch riding,” Karen says. “They might have stopped showing because western pleasure has gotten to where the middle-income person can’t afford the designer saddle, designer clothes and designer horse, but they can bring their broke horse, ride in a nice, clean work saddle, compete and have a good time in the ranch riding.”

*Megan Arszman, a former AQHA Media employee, is a special contributor to the Journal. To comment, write to [aqhajrnl@aqha.org](mailto:aqhajrnl@aqha.org).*

## INTERESTED IN RANCH RIDING?

Get more tips and information on ranch riding in AQHA’s *Ranch Horse Journal*. The quarterly magazine is dedicated to ranching American Quarter Horses. Read the magazine online and subscribe at [aqha.com/magazines/ranch-horse-journal/](http://aqha.com/magazines/ranch-horse-journal/).

FELECH PHOTOGRAPHY



Bob and Timber Chic Olona perform in ranch riding at the Kentucky State Fair.

FORENER WORKS PHOTOGRAPHY



Bob judges at a show in Kentucky.