

Mighty



BREANNE HILL

The lifetime leading point earner in Youth, Amateur and Open

By Breanne Hill

Fancy

November 12, 1997, was a great day to be Amanda Graber.

After two years of helping her father, Neil, prepare his horses for the show ring, the 8-year-old Alexis, North Carolina, honor student received an unbelievable early birthday present from her parents—the 1997 APHA world champion Western pleasure horse, Ima Hugable Jet.

“I was so thankful and excited,” says Mandy. “I could barely sit through school that day. I couldn’t wait to get home and longe her. I had wanted her so badly.”

The Graber family had seen Ima Hugable Jet win at the World Show and had been impressed by what Neil describes as the 1994 sorrel overo mare’s “obvious natural ability.” When, less than five months later, the Paint was offered for sale, Neil and his wife, Roxanne, didn’t hesitate to make an offer.

“We thought she would be the perfect fit for Mandy,” says Neil. “She’s little, only 14.3 hands, and Mandy was little. It made sense.”

Ima Hugable Jet was indeed small, but Mandy didn’t care about the mare’s size. As she longed her new horse for the first time that November afternoon, Mandy was focused on

only one of Ima Hugable Jet’s features: the mare was beautiful when she loped.

“I kept thinking, ‘She is so fancy to look at,’ ” says Mandy. “That’s what kept coming to mind, so I decided her barn name should be ‘Fancy.’ ”

Eight years later, Mandy describes that first longeing session with a bright, and slightly sentimental, smile. She admits that, on that day, she and her parents had no idea that a history-making horse had just entered their lives.

“We knew she was good,” says Mandy, “but we were still inexperienced, so we weren’t dreaming too big.”

These days, the Grabers’ dreams have changed. They now know exactly what they have in Ima Hugable Jet. Their kid’s little mare has become APHA’s lifetime leading point earner in Open, Amateur and Youth Western pleasure, and that’s quite a feat considering that Western pleasure is one of the most popular—and populated—events on APHA’s show circuit.

But, what is most impressive about the mare’s accomplishments is that she was not born with a silver bucket in her stall. At the beginning of her life, no one in the horse community

had any great expectations about what kind of athlete or show horse Ima Hugable Jet might become.

As is the case with most great champions, however, Ima Hugable Jet was lucky enough to be born tough. And, most importantly, she had the backing of a visionary breeder named Mike Holloway.

Built for cruisin’

Mike Holloway was at work when he received the phone call from his neighbor telling him that his 1983 sorrel solid mare, Hugable Dixon, had just given birth in the pasture.

“I said, ‘No, that’s not right,’ ” says Mike. “My mare isn’t due for another two months.”

Unable to leave work, Mike sent a friend to check on “Dixon” and see what was going on. The friend reported back that the neighbor was right. Hugable Dixon had prematurely foaled a filly.

“I was worried, but the vet checked the filly, and she was just fine,” says Mike. “She was just as healthy as she could be.”

“But, that’s Fancy for you. She’s always been durable.”

Western pleasure, Ima Hugable Jet is APHA’s Queen of the Ring.



COURTESY MIKE HOLLOWAY



K.C. MONTGOMERY

Above left: Fancy's dam, Hugable Dixon, is the lifetime leading dam for performance points earned. Right: Fancy's sire, Ima Gallant Jet, is APHA's top Western pleasure stallion.

At 14.3 hands, Fancy (center) is a stand-out in English events. Her height has earned the mare the nickname "Mighty Mouse" from some of Mandy's competitors.



ADRIANNA SILVESTRI

Mike was primarily a halter horse exhibitor when he purchased Hugable Dixon in 1989. Good-minded and strong, the mare was in foal at the time to the Jetalito son Jetamatic.

The following March, Hugable Dixon gave birth to a chestnut overo colt that Mike named Ima Gallant Jet.

"Jet" became a favorite of mine," says Mike. "He was a champion halter

horse by the time he was a yearling. I was still kind of new in the horse business, so that was a thrill for me."

In 1992, Mike bred Jet for the first time—to only one mare the entire season. In 1993, he bred Jet back to Hugable Dixon, and Ima Hugable Jet was born the next January.

When Fancy was a weanling, Jet's performance career finally took off

when he won the APHA world championships in both hunt-seat equitation and Western pleasure.

Soon after, Mike sold Fancy to a friend in Mississippi. He wouldn't see the mare again until she was a 2-year-old.

"One day, I went out to visit my friend and see how Fancy was doing," says Mike. "And I notice right away

that this little mare can move. Then, my friend tells me that she doesn't think she's ever going to do anything with her.

"I just about fell over. I couldn't believe she was going to just leave that mare as a pasture horse."

Uncomfortable with the idea of Ima Hugable Jet being a lawn ornament, Mike called another group of friends, the Roberts family of Cable, Ohio, and suggested that they buy Fancy and make a show horse out of her. The Roberts, whose daughter Elizabeth would eventually show Jet to his spot on APHA's Amateur Lifetime Point Leaders list in Western pleasure, believed in Mike's opinion and bought Fancy in May of 1996.

With Carrie Roberts on board, Fancy finally had the opportunity to show that she was her sire's daughter. The "little Paint who could" made a huge splash during her first year on the show circuit, garnering a Superior in Western pleasure and winning the 1997 Amateur Junior Western Pleasure world championship at her inaugural World Show.

Ima Hugable Jet caught the eye of almost everyone in the Paint Horse community that year, including avid Western pleasure competitors Neil, Roxanne and Mandy Graber.

"Fancy made a real impression on us," says Neil. "It was like she had been a Western pleasure horse for years already, yet she was only 3 years old."

The owners of a spa and hot tub business, the Grabers had bought their first Paint, the 1992 sorrel tovero mare MLB Tuff E Nuff, the year Ima Hugable Jet was born.

The family spent the first four years of their horse show careers tirelessly attending weekend events and

putting enough points on "Tuffy" to make her number one on the Novice Amateur Lifetime Point Leaders list in Western pleasure.

By 1996, citing their own experience and demanding practice schedule, the family had made the unusual decision to stop using a full-time professional trainer. As a result, Neil, Roxanne and Mandy became a self-governing unit. They were their own coaches, transportation coordinators and bridle-path clippers.

This situation often left young Mandy in the position of groom. Neil remained Tuffy's primary exhibitor, and that was one of the reasons why Mandy couldn't believe her good fortune when she was finally given her own horse for her birthday.

"I had seen Fancy for sale in the *Paint Horse Journal*, and said that I'd like to have her," says Mandy, "but I never thought it would really happen. Not really."

Mandy and Fancy's first day together did go smoothly, and Neil revealed in the idea that the Grabers might have a championship Youth team on their hands.

Then it was time for Mandy to actually ride her mare.

That ride was one of the roughest Mandy has taken in her life.

"I immediately thought I'd made a huge mistake," says Neil. "I thought, 'There is no way I'm going to let my daughter ride this crazy horse ever again.'"

The rare bird

"My first ride on Fancy was a disaster," says Mandy. "She wouldn't listen to me and just wanted to race as fast as she could around the round pen.

"To be honest, it really scared me because I could not control her. My

dad made me get off of her and said I couldn't ride her again until he got her figured out."

Neil was stumped. Thinking it was perhaps Mandy's size that made Fancy try to take advantage of the situation, he attempted to ride the mare himself.

Fancy bolted around the pen with him, as well.

"I thought, 'What is going on here?'" says Neil. "This is a Western pleasure world champion, and we can't get her to walk around the round pen."

Neil says that, after the riding incident, he considered selling Fancy. Those thoughts didn't last long. He reasoned that if Fancy wasn't as calm as they assumed she was, it was just as much their fault as hers.

"I called my trainer friends and asked for suggestions," says Neil. "We had to figure out what worked for Fancy. She had certain buttons that you could push to get her to go through a Western pleasure class, but, if you didn't know those certain buttons, you were operating without a net."

The Grabers worked diligently with Fancy, figuring out which training techniques she responded to the best.

"We discovered that we couldn't bully her into doing something," says Neil. "She's a smart horse, and she demands that you think, too. We had to figure out how to teach her without forcing her to do something. She really is eager to learn if you approach her with respect and give her room to learn."

Six months after her first crash course in riding Ima Hugable Jet, Mandy was allowed to take her new mare to a major show, the 1998 Rail-splitter in Springfield, Illinois.

"I was scared to death," says Mandy. "A six-judge show with tons of people, and again, we get there and

It was like she had been a Western pleasure horse for years already, yet she was only 3 years old. —Neil Graber



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could not get Fancy to focus. She wanted to visit with everybody and look around, everything but get ready to do her job.”

An hour before Mandy was scheduled to be at the in-gate, Neil told his daughter that he didn't think showing Fancy was going to work out after all.

“I was ready to call it quits,” says Neil. “I wasn't going to send my daughter into that ring on a horse that might take off with her.”

Thirty minutes before her class, Mandy convinced her father to at least let her try to show. Neil reluctantly agreed.

“The weirdest thing happened,” recalls Mandy. “For some reason, when we got to the arena, Fancy straightened up and became focused. She did her job and was so good. We ended up placing first under all six judges.

“The crowd gave us a standing ovation.”

Roxanne says that at that moment it became evident to her that there was no place Fancy would rather be than in the arena.

“I'd never seen anything like it,” says Roxanne. “Fancy is a rare bird. She just adores showing and being in front of people.”

If Fancy wanted to be in the show ring, the Grabers were happy to oblige her. During the next three years, Neil rode the mare in Amateur classes and Mandy rode her in Youth. Then, whoever did the best in their individual division rode Fancy in the Open class.

“We didn't think about honor rolls or Top 20 lists then,” says Neil. “We just knew that we liked what we were doing and wanted to be good at it.”

It wasn't unusual for the Grabers to attend two or three shows in one weekend, hitting the Western pleasure classes with the dexterity of a tiger on the prowl.



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Top: The Graber family—Neil, Roxanne and Mandy. They train their show horses themselves. Above: Mandy and Fancy had a rough start as a team and the Grabers considered selling the mare. But, once they figured out the training techniques that worked with Fancy, she and Mandy became a competitive team.

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Left: Fancy and Mandy practice trail. They are in the top 10 on the Lifetime Leading Point Earners List in Youth trail. Right: Fancy enjoys her favorite treat—a peppermint.

The family's commitment paid off in impressive ways. In 2000, Mandy and Fancy won their first APHA reserve world championship, in Youth 13 & Under Western pleasure, and placed 17th on the year-end Youth 13 and Under Top 20 list.

In 2001, they did even better. Not only did they win their second reserve world championship in Youth 13 and Under Western pleasure, but they began racking up points in other classes, as well.

"I started showing in horsemanship first," says Mandy. "I thought it would be the easiest transition from Western pleasure. Then, I moved on to other things."

Mandy says Fancy thrived on the new challenges, and, with Mandy as her trainer, speedily learned such maneuvers as extending her trot for English events and backing through obstacles for trail.

"I discovered that she also loved barrel racing," says Mandy. "I didn't know she was that fast!"

Fancy's newly found versatility resulted in 2001 reserve world cham-

pionships in Youth 13 and Under hunt-seat equitation and reining.

That year, the team also earned Superiors in Youth hunter under saddle, hunt-seat equitation, hunter hack, reining, showmanship and trail.

Mandy and Fancy finished 2001 at Number 2 on the Youth 13 and Under honor roll.

It was a satisfying end to Mandy's Youth 13 and Under career.

Buck-ing the competition

Breeding season 2002 marked a new chapter in Ima Hugable Jet's life. By this time, she and Neil had earned the top spot on the Amateur Lifetime Leading Point Earners list in Western pleasure, with 1,133 points, and that was more of an accomplishment than the Grabers ever thought possible.

Certain that they'd done all they could with Fancy for a while, Neil talked Mandy into giving the Paint a break and breeding her for the first time to the family's 1995 buckskin tobiano stallion, Color Dynamics.

"My only objection was that I wanted to keep showing," says Mandy,

"but I didn't want to ride Fancy when she was pregnant."

Neil's solution to Mandy's problem was to geld Color Dynamics after the breeding, and then train him to be Mandy's new all-around horse.

Tall and lean, "Buck" certainly fit the traditional all-around-horse mold better than Fancy did, and Mandy and the gelding worked well enough together that they became strong contenders in the show pen.

After only half a year of showing, Color Dynamics and Mandy finished in 19th place on the 2002 Youth 14-18 Top 20 list. Then, in 2003, they jumped up seven spots, finishing at Number 12.

"I had high hopes for Buck," says Mandy, "but it bothered me because I knew that Fancy was stressed out about being left behind."

Ever the travel enthusiast, Fancy paced in her stall and whinnied while the Grabers loaded the other horses in the trailer before a show. Then, after the trailer was pulled out, she would stand in a corner with her head down for hours at a time.

Top 5 Youth Lifetime Point Leaders in Western Pleasure

Rank	Exhibitor/Horse	Points	Status
1.	Amanda Graber Ima Hugable Jet	1,760	Active in Youth 14-18.
2.	Melissa Danielle Busch Zippos Outlaw	1,632	Youth career ended in 2000.
3.	Shannon Curl White Stone	1,264	Youth career ended in 2002.
4.	Molly Coughlin Easy Red Rider	741	Youth career ended in 1995.
5.	Jennifer C. Leitow Hf Runforthe Roses	728	Youth career ended in 1992.

Top 5 Amateur Lifetime Point Leaders in Western Pleasure

**Note: those who last showed as a team in 2004 are listed as still active.*

Rank	Exhibitor/Horse	Points	Status
1.	Neil Graber Ima Hugable Jet	1,133	Active in Amateur.
2.	Shawnee D. Wayman Reddys Review	984	Active in Amateur.
3.	Elizabeth Roberts Ima Gallant Jet	726	Last showed together in 1998.
4.	Peggy S. Wood Zee Sonny Dee	675	Last showed together in 1991.
5.	Melissa Danielle Busch Chistenonimpulse	621	Active in Amateur.

Top 5 Open Lifetime Point Leaders in Western Pleasure

Rank	Horse/Owner	Points	Status
1.	Ima Hugable Jet Amanda Graber	1,313	Active in Open.
2.	Zippos Outlaw Crystal and Melissa Busch	1,281	Last shown in Open in 2001.
3.	Reddys Review Shawnee D. Wayman	1,119	Active in Open.
4.	What A Attitude Lauren Willis	1,112	Active in Open.
5.	Jets Rookie Cowboy Rockin' Bar S LLC	749	Last shown in Open in 2002.

"It seemed so hard on her when we left her that we decided, as soon as we weaned her foal, to let her go to some shows," says Neil. "We would let her do some Senior Western pleasure and trail. As long as it didn't interfere with doing all-around on Buck, that would be fine."

Ima Hugable Jet's filly, "Mini Me," was born in spring 2003, and, true to his word, Neil allowed Mandy to show Fancy again in Western pleasure.

This was great news to Mike Holloway. Unlike the Grabers, he was keeping track of Fancy's climb on the Lifetime Leading Point Earners lists.

"Mike called us one day and said, 'Do you realize that Fancy is close to being the lifetime leader on the Youth and Open Western pleasure lists, too?'" says Neil. "Before that, the number-one position on the Amateur lifetime list hadn't meant a whole lot to me. But, I thought, 'Heck, if we could get to the top on all three, that would be something.'

"That's when we decided to go for it."

Legacy-ready

Mandy continued to show Color Dynamics in all-around through late 2004, but she also exhibited Ima Hugable Jet in Youth Senior and Open Western pleasure classes. The double schedule proved to be worth its hectic pace when Fancy ended the year with 1,313 points in Open Western pleasure and 1,760 points in Youth Western pleasure.

These totals assured her the number-one positions on all three Western pleasure Lifetime Leading Point Earners lists.

This placement also meant that Fancy's horse family would dominate several APHA performance charts. Jet continues to be the number one Open Western pleasure stallion in APHA history, and Hugable Dixon is APHA's Lifetime Leading Dam for Performance Points Earned.

"I figure, if you have one horse in a bloodline at the top of a lifetime leaders list, you're lucky," says Mike. "If you have two, you're good. But if you have three, you've got to attribute it to great bloodlines."

“Jet was a remarkable horse, but I think you’ve got to hand it to Dixon. Not only did I love that mare, she left a legacy that I’m extremely proud of. I see a lot of her in Fancy.”

The Grabers say they will retire Ima Hugable Jet one day, so that she can pass Hugable Dixon’s legacy down to her own foals. That day, however, will not be any time soon because, in April of 2005, the Grabers sold Color Dynamics to David Stewart of Powderly, Texas, after receiving what Neil calls “an offer we couldn’t refuse.”

“I was a little disappointed,” says Mandy, “but, you have to remember that I had Fancy, so I never really got attached to Buck like I would have if he was my only horse. Fancy was always there, so I wasn’t hurt by it.”

Without another all-around horse, Mandy began riding Ima Hugable Jet in all of her 2005 classes. And no one, it seems, has enjoyed this unexpected turn of events more than Fancy herself.

“Fancy loves to learn and go and do different things,” says Mandy. “She gets bored easily, so I’m happy to have her back out doing everything with me, and she appears to be glad about it, too.”

“Her ears stand up, and she gets so excited before we go into the ring. I’m glad to experience that with her.”

Neil says he might consider selling Fancy some day for the right price, but no sooner are the words out of his mouth than the normally cool and collected Mandy speaks up.

“No, we won’t,” she says. “Fancy will be with me forever.”

Neil smiles and shrugs.

“I guess I spoke too soon,” he says.

Mandy, who hopes to become a large-animal veterinarian specializing in leg care, will begin college in 2006. Whether or not this will prompt Ima Hugable Jet’s retirement, however, is still up in the air.

The only thing the Grabers will confirm is that if Fancy does take an extended break, those coveting her lifetime records better beware.

“We will bring her out of retirement to defend her place on the lists,” says Roxanne. “We have no problem with that.”

“There’s nothing Fancy likes more than a little competition.” **PHJ**



BREANNE HILL

Western Displeasure

As the owners of APHA’s lifetime leading point-earning Western pleasure horse, the Graber family has strong opinions about future changes to the event.

To begin with, they believe random and frequent drug testing should be standard in Western pleasure—especially with those horses placing in the top 10 at events such as the World Show.

“Our mare has been drug tested more than any horse I know of,” says Neil Graber, “and that’s fine with us. Test away. We do not drug our horses.”

“In fact, we think the association should drug test more. Come out of the woodwork and do it. If your horse can do the job and you can ride it, drugging shouldn’t be an issue with you. Let’s make this thing fair!”

The Grabers also take issue with the judging of recent Western pleasure classes.

“Judges need to look at the individual horse and see if that horse looks natural and comfortable when it moves,” says Neil. “That’s what Western pleasure is all about—an easy-going movement.”

“Now, it seems like horses are being judged on whether or not their top lines are straight, and it doesn’t matter what their legs are doing. That’s not what this sport is supposed to be, if you ask me. Let the horses hold their heads in a way that’s natural for them and see how well they move. If you’re constantly messing with the way a horse holds its head, then its movement is going to suffer. It’s as simple as that.”