

By Audrey Humphrey
Photos: Gerald R. Wheeler

GYPSY MVP AND MAGNOLIA RANCH

Katy, Texas and Bellville, Texas

A select few people can truly hold bragging rights of helping to establish a breed in the United States to the highest standards and qualities, and Doug Kneis of Gypsy MVP and Magnolia Ranch is one of those deserving individuals. Based out of Katy, Texas, Kneis' life as an oil businessman took a sharp turn during one casual errand he ran 10 years ago, when he picked up a box of horse treats at a grain store. The box was illustrated with a gorgeous Baroque-style horse standing tall with billowing feathers and a long, profuse mane falling down an arched, rainbow neck. "I just freaked," Kneis recalls. "I ended up calling the company and asking if this horse was real. They said it was, and I immediately asked where I could get it!"

As a child, Kneis was "the kid sitting in the back of the baseball field picking grass," and as he tells it, horses became a way for his parents to increase his activity level. Well, Kneis became hooked. "I started showing horses as a child in the 1960s and loved working around them," he explains, "but as I grew older, I lost touch with riding. It was only after my marriage that I got back into horses." Captivated by the Baroque-style breeds, Kneis was drawn to Friesians and Andalusians, so when he stumbled upon the Gypsy Vanner, he was eager to become involved. Kneis had a story and vision of the way the horses should look, the kind of temperaments they should possess; and, in looking for these traits, he realized that he was not finding the horse on the treat box. In fact, Kneis found some imported horses that, according to him, were downright pitiful. "They didn't look like the horse that got me excited, and I was so upset about the breed becoming devalued and not held to standards. So my wife, Elaine, said to me, 'Well, why don't you do it then?'" So he did.

A founding member of the Gypsy Horse Registry of America, the Gypsy Vanner Horse Society, and the Gypsy Cob and Drum Horse Association, Kneis began making connections abroad with people who had owned stock for years. When these friends found something spectacular, Kneis would get a call, and he began importing horses from the UK, Germany, France, and Ireland. "When we started registering our horses," Kneis says, "we were horse number 15, then 35, then 50 – we really were in the beginning stages of getting the breed going here." As the ranch developed, several key players emerged, one of them being Anne Bevan, President of Gypsy MVP UK, who now approves and buys horses for Kneis all over Europe, including at the Appleby Fair. Bevan's keen eye for specialty is owed to a lifetime of connections with Gypsy horses, and her inside into the most unique and spectacular horses in the European communities has been paramount to the development enjoyed in the United States and at Gypsy MVP.

The first Gypsy stallion ever bought by Kneis is Dazzle Dance, a lovely piebald from the UK with classic conformation and a talent for dressage. He stands at Magnolia Ranch with other notable stallions. Ghost Rider is a spotted Gypsy Vanner stallion that, at two years old, will take your breath away. A true rarity in



The foal, Lone Star, by Ghost Rider, a spotted Gypsy Vanner stallion, and out of a Dutch Friesian mare, is the perfect cross. His movement and conformation are next to none, and his coloring is one of a kind.

his form, he is kind and willing, and he has a whole crop of babies due to arrive this year. When his first offspring arrived, born from a Dutch Friesian mare (the only non-Gypsy he was bred to), nobody could speak for a few minutes. "While the purists are saying its bad, bad, bad and while we don't do a lot of this, this baby (named Lone Star) is the perfect cross, and his movement and conformation are next to none. His coloring is unlike anything I have ever seen before," says Kneis. "A bay with a white blanket and brown and black spots in a swirl pattern; he's a tri-color that somebody is going to have out there showing for sure!" Another popular stallion is Sundance Kid, a rare buckskin and white Gypsy Vanner. "He's a very muscular, powerful horse with a temperament like an angel," says Kneis.

In keeping with the utmost standards, all horses on the website are registered (some double- and triple-registered). The website is frequented by close to two million viewers, and those logging on can scan references a mile long, client testimonials, and a link to their 100% record with the Better Business Bureau. The website is translated into over seven different languages and updated frequently, and over 1,000 photos are taken every month by two full-time photographers. Kneis attributes part of the farm's success to these world-class photographers – longtime photographer, Gerald R. Wheeler, and newer addition, Jennifer Wilkening. "Sometimes

you go on these websites and see horses in a herd, head down grazing, or standing in mud," says Kneis with disdain. "I need to see the horses moving; I need to see their heads, their conformation," he explains.

Kneis does keep awareness in his mind of his ideal Gypsy Vanner horse. "The temperament needs to be phenomenal. I need a horse that can have children running in circles around it and hanging off of it. Then, we want a Baroque-looking horse that has a sweet pony head, medium ears, a rainbow neck, a short back (but not too short), and ample hindquarters with the apple-tight butt. Important are a good round chest, straight legs, good bone and profuse feathers on both front and back feet, and a pair of kind eyes," lists Kneis, who understands that his version of the perfect Gypsy horse is not always another person's – and that's ok. He's even working on an upcoming movie with a world-renowned judge explaining what people are looking for in their Gypsy horses. "Some want less bone or a slightly longer back, and I can understand that," he says. An important overall necessity? "Goosebumps," says Kneis. "We want you to lose your breath by the horse standing in front of you."

Clients of Gypsy MVP have experienced this exact sensation – as a matter of fact, Kneis's Texas ranches are the destination for any Gypsy horse-lover and are frequented by celebrities and breed followers from all over the world. Fueled by repeat and referral clients, Kneis has reformed the idea of selling horses by inviting his clients into a family of support and commitment. This could not be possible without Erica Barton-Holliday, Operations Manager and President of Sales and Marketing. Kneis describes Barton-Holliday as having a gift for matching horses with owners. "She knows each horse, inside and out, does most of the delivering, helps get the horses settled in and will help with finding appropriate trainers," says Kneis. "Believe it or not, 70% of our clients are first-time horse owners, so we help them every step of the way with whatever aspirations they have," says Kneis. "Erica knows every horse has



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their good points and weak points," Kneis explains. "We want every customer to be happy – we lay it all out there, we are honest, and we want everybody to know what they are getting."

Because Gypsy MVP is committed to the happiness of their horses and clients, if for some reason a client is not happy with a horse they buy, Kneis's policy is to trade it back or take it back and work the situation out. "The music doesn't stop just because the dance is over," he says. "We don't want anybody unhappy and not loving the horse as much as we do. We are a hands-on help center, and that's why we have so many repeat customers. Between the two facilities of MVP Gypsy and Magnolia Ranch, there are about 50 horses available for sale – up to 30% are consignment horses from friends and associates. "We advertise in other countries and sell horses all over the world. We do it right, and we like to have the horses at our ranches because then we know the horse through and through," says Kneis. "We do this as a favor to our friends and also because they are wonderful horses – and our customers are friends for life."

With the conformation and temperament aspects mastered, Kneis offers the public more than just excellence in breed standards. He's breeding exciting color combinations and offers a distinctive array of exceptional horses. "We like to show off," he admits, "and if the horse doesn't have a 'wow' factor – we don't want it. That's our motto." He then jokes, "Sometimes we buy the young ones that we know will have the 'wow' factor but hide them around the back of the barn until they are two!" A jovial, unmistakably happy person, Kneis exudes affection for his horses anytime he speaks about them. "I get the biggest kick out of putting a new horse on the website that everybody goes nuts about. It's the biggest thrill of my life. We have something really unique, and that is something to be proud of."

For more information on Gypsy MVP, visit www.gypsymvp.com. ■