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Sshaq shows off

By Matthew Tynan | JUNEAU EMPIRE

For some people, a dream is as fleeting as each passing day, often changing even more frequently. But for others, they are reached after what may seem like an eternity.

In the case of Debbie Canaday, a life-long wish has come true. After years of patience and hard work, Canaday has brought a Reserve National Champion Arabian Horse to the state of Alaska.

"It's been a 30-year dream for me," she said. "When I was a young woman, I had two horses qualify for the Arabian nationals. My parents did the best they could while we were growing up, but we never quite had enough pennies to get me to that last step.

"This dream has been laying dormant for a very long time."

Canaday and her horse, Sshaq, returned from the Arabian Sport Horse National Championship Horse Show in Nampa, Idaho, in late September after winning multiple honors. The two competed in both the open (to professionals) and amateur owner to ride and handle divisions in the Sport Horse In Hand, Sport Horse Under Saddle and Show Hack events.

"We competed in six divisions, and out of those six we placed in five," Canaday said. "We brought five national honors back to the state of Alaska."

Sshaq, a 10-year-old Arabian Sport Horse, was purchased by Canaday and her husband, Dayton Canaday, a year and a half ago in Chico, Calif., from Mike and Gretchen McDaniel at the McDaniel Training Center. But on their original journey to find a horse on the West Coast, Sshaq wasn't even on their radar.

"My coach and mentor Leah Kadush went with me (to California), and we went to look at another horse. But it wasn't as advertised," Canaday said.

Kadush, who lives in Juneau for part of the year, has served as a national horse judge, and she also owned Arabian horses as well as mentored many children in the area.

"I feel very fortunate that (Kadush has) taken me under her wing," she said. "Without her I never would have found that horse, and I certainly wouldn't have gone to nationals as quickly as we did had she not been there pushing me and encouraging me along the way."

Canaday said while in California, it was Kadush that spotted Sshaq.

"(Sshaq and Kadush) kind of checked each other out, then Leah asked Mike and Gretchen about him and they said he wasn't for sale," she said. "They eventually let us take him out and look at him, but they still said he wasn't for sale. We got to test-ride him but he wasn't completely broke - he was green-broke.

"He just had the basics given to him, and he was broke Western. We wanted a Western horse, but Leah saw some potential and had other ideas."

After convincing the McDaniels to let them buy the horse, the training began. Canaday, the trainer and rider, said Kadush had some strict guidelines when it came to Sshaq's workouts.

"You don't want to work too long in the arena so your horse doesn't get bored - or sour," she said. "So it's a 20- to 35-minute workout in the arena, followed by a trail ride."

Sshaq got his unusually spelled name from his sire, whose name is Sshameless. Canaday explained owners of Arabian Horses often come up with different ways of spelling names considering how long Arabian Horses have been around.

"I'm sure that's why there's a double-s in Sshameless," she said, "and the reason for the double-S in Sshaq is it's a way to show that he is the son, or get, of Sshameless."

Canaday also said she believes the horse's name was inspired by NBA superstar Shaquille O'Neal, whose celebrity was at its peak during the time of Sshaq's birth in 2000.

"My horse is extremely tall for an Arabian. Sshaq is 15 hands, three inches tall - a hand is four inches - from shoulder to ground," she said. "I'm sure that was something that jogged the idea in their mind because Shaq (O'Neal) was very famous at the time."

But Canaday's biggest obstacle was getting to Juneau to work the horse, which resides at Fairweather Stables. With the Canadays' home of eight years being on Hood Bay of Admiralty Island, Debbie Canaday must travel to the capital city once a month to make sure Sshaq is exercised properly.

"I have to come (to Juneau) once a month via plane to work Sshaq," she said. "So it's not like I have the luxury to be here every single day. I'm in town part-time, and (Kadush) would make time for me when I did come to town to give me lessons, but she's only here half a year during the summer."

But these inconveniences did not prevent Canaday from reaching her goal. She said through a series of events - or serendipity and great friends - she had made it.

"Susan Hunter-Joerns, a local neurologist, and I bumped into each other with horse tack. She let me ride her Arabian, and the next thing I know she's telling me to come back to town and compete in this local horse show with a horse I had only ridden one time. But we did very, very well and rekindled this 30-year dream." Canaday said. "To get to the nationals you have to qualify - you can't just pay your way - and we got enough points. There were horses from 41 states and two Canadian provinces, and more than 400 horses competed.

"So to be able to go and compete - it's a really big deal," Canaday said.

And Canaday achieved the goal she had set in front of her.

"I wanted to go to nationals, I wanted to compete and I wanted to bring home a national title to Alaska," she said. "We won a national Top 10 in five of the six classes. And of the Top 10, they pick a Reserve National Champion and National Champion.

"We had the privilege to be judged Reserve National Champion, Show hack, Amateur To Ride."

Sshaq also earned his Legion of Honor in a very small amount of time, something Canaday said generally takes much longer.

"In order to get a Legion of Honor, you have to be successful in the ring, place highly and beat a lot of horses to get the points," she said. "He earned his Legion of Honor - which takes 75 points - in three shows this show season."

And while Canaday has seen a dream come true with Sshaq at her side, she still has her sights set on more. The Canadian National Championship Horse Show is next on the docket for the Canadays, and because they've already qualified for nationals once, they are eligible for another two years.

"I'd like to go back and win the pewter trophy, which is awarded to the National Champion. I have to have a matching set," she said laughing. "I need to go back and win the National Champion Trophy and the bed of roses that goes with it."

But for now, Canaday said she is content admiring her new prize.

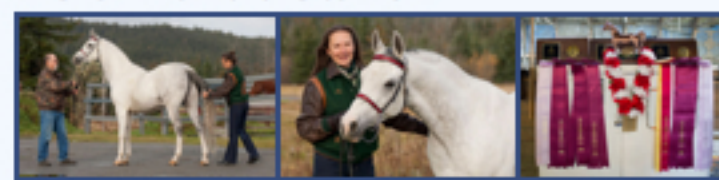
"We brought home a Reserve National Champion," she said, "an incredibly beautiful bronze horse."



Michael Penn / Juneau Empire

Dayton and Debbie Canaday work with their 10-year-old Arabian, Sshaq, at the Fairweather Equestrian Center last week after returning from the Sport Horse National Arabian Half-Arabian Championship Horse Show in Idaho.

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Dayton and Debbie Canaday work with their 10-year-old Arabian, Sshaq, at the Fairweather Equestrian Center last week after returning from the Sport Horse National Arabian Half-Arabian Championship Horse Show in Idaho.



Michael Penn / Juneau Empire

Debbie Canaday and her 10-year-old Arabian horse, Sshaq, recently returned from the Sport Horse National Arabian and Half-Arabian Championship Horse Show in Idaho after winning several national honors.



Michael Penn / Juneau Empire

A collection of the many awards won by Debbie Canaday and her Arabian horse, Sshaq, at the Sport Horse National Arabian Half-Arabian Championship Horse Show recently in Idaho.