

Simbalu Brought Joy and Found Success as Show Hunter...
by Lauren Giannini for Middleburg Life

Not every horse, let alone an OTTB (Off The Track Thoroughbred) gets to live the equine version of the life of Riley, but Simbalu proved to be an exceptional exception, enjoying the best of all his worlds: show hunter, sire, and best riding pony pal for his devoted human partner, Sue Attisani Lyman.

The chestnut horse by Leonato out of So Worthy boasted a pedigree with classic old-fashioned bloodlines from England, Ireland and France. Had he been human, he could have indulged in impressive name-dropping: The Tetrarch, Nearco (Bold Ruler), Native Dancer, Royal Charger, Fair Play (sire of Man O War), and the great broodmare Mumtaz Begum. Princequillo, grandsire of the great hunter sire Keelo, appears in Simbalu's topline.

Simbalu made his mark not as a racehorse, but as a show hunter and sire, stamping his get with agreeable temperament, scopey jump, and knees that snapped up smartly, almost framing his face. With Lyman in the irons, he established himself as a champion on the A-circuit from 1990-2000.

They worked their way up from Pre-through 2nd Year Green and into the Working Hunters (fences at 4 feet). The horse jumped so consistently with nearly perfect form and was such a pleasure to watch round after round that the great Virginia horseman Rodney Jenkins chose Simbalu to represent the quintessential show hunter for his classic video, "Selecting Hunters and Jumpers."

When Attisani married Huntington Lyman, her focus changed to family as she "produced" their son Christian, now 10. They stopped running up and down the East Coast and just showed locally. Simbalu had bred mares while he was showing, behaving like a gentleman for his stud groom (Lyman herself) and he still enjoyed courting a few ladies.

By the time he had turned 26, however, he mostly lived a life of leisure. A chance accident while turned out in mid-July resulted in a life-ending injury. It wasn't easy when Lyman rode down memory lane, harking back to her first introduction to the big red stallion that totally changed her life with horses.

She met Simbalu a few days after Jimmy Jackson saddled him for a race at Charles Town. At the time she was galloping racehorses and Jackson called her that night (the horse had won--Lyman still has the win photo), saying, "You're really going to love this horse--he's just your type." It was prophetic and, as it turned out, exactly what happened.

"Of course, I loved him-- he had such perfect manners. When I galloped him, he was lightning fast and knew his business on the track, but he was good going to and from the track," recalls

Lyman. "He was 3 years old -- dead quiet in spite of being in the stall all the time -- and a beautiful mover."

They thought Simbalu had an epiglottic entrapment, because he couldn't breathe after a half-mile of speed work. They planned to have Jackson train him and run short distances to earn enough money for the surgery. When the young horse chipped his ankle, the owner sent him to Lyman for six weeks of stall rest. During the layoff, his stifles got loose and as soon as she could, Lyman started him on the lunge line to improve his condition.

"That was at the end of May and his mind was so good -- he was only 4," says Lyman, completely hooked. When the owner called with the news that the horse could come back and be gelded, she dug in her heels and thought, "No way." She got shivers when she longed him over a small X: His knees were up around his eyeballs.

"He was scopey -- everything you wanted in a hunter. Then I build an oxer -- maybe it wasn't fair, but I wanted to see when he would do." she admits. "The first time he stopped, crashing into the rails, I built it right back up, and he went right down to it, jumping it in perfect form, over the top of the standards. I knew I had to buy him to keep him a stallion. He was just too nice."

The rest, as they say, is history. Lyman struck a deal that pleased her and the owner, who didn't have to pay for lay-up board or gelding or surgery to fix the horse's breathing.

Simbalu settled...She knew he had what it takes to be a top hunter and that is where his training began. She gave him worldliness and mileage by taking him to schooling shows at The Grove, outside Warrenton. "He was so easy to deal with -- I did everything by myself back then," she says. "He over-jumped everything -- as if it was 4-foot-- but he just impressed me with how easy he was around other animals. That fall I showed him to Katie (Monahan Prudent), and they offered me \$10,000."

During the pre-purchase exam, Simbalu was a bit off when turned tightly to the right. Even though his X-rays were fine, the Prudents passed on him. That winter, Lyman started taking him to bigger shows. Dale Crittenberger helped her during his Baby and Pre-Green Hunter days. That fall, when the Prudents saw the horse at a show, they offered Lyman \$30,000. She rejected their offer, knowing he was worth far more. Horse and rider started their A-circuit partnership; because he was still a stallion, the gentlemanly hunter eventually contributed to Lyman's finances to earning stud fees.

Keeping animals for 20 years makes them like family, and so it was with Simbalu. The silver lining in the cloud of his untimely demise is that Simbalu's son, The Lion's Share, is co-owned by Lyman with Amanda Hartmann, a New Yorker from the area who attended The Hill School, where she's president of the alumnae, and Foxcroft.

In July, The Lion's Share and Lyman won the \$5,000 Devoucoux Hunter Derby at the Cavalier Classic during HITS Culpeper. The gelding jumps like his daddy, making Lyman hark to the good old days.

"Yes, I made him what he was, but I could not have done it if he was not born with all those qualities -- intelligence, kindness, willingness to work and being a superior athlete," says Lyman. "Of course, at the same time, he made me who I am. Simbalu taught me how to ride well, and most important he taught me to listen to him and my other horses, and to trust myself. And that is just the tip of the iceberg." After she bid fond farewell to Simbalu, messages came pouring in from the stallion's extensive fan club. Her personal favorite was a message from the good friend who had helped her with Simbalu during his baby green hunter days. Dale Crittenberger stated: "It was a privilege to help you with Simbalu -- he made so many people feel good about themselves." He opened Lyman's eyes to boot.

The first season they went to Florida, she was too nervous to ride him in big shows. Monahan Prudent gave the young stallion the benefit of her show ring expertise.

"I got to watch all these really nice horses go and I realized that even if I had my choice of any horse, I would still pick Simbalu," says Lyman. "That's how nice he was. When I nearly sold him to the Firestones, it broke me up. But the week he was vetted, Katie had that really bad accident, and the chip in his ankle showed up in the pre-purchase exam, and the Firestones passed on buying him. I was really happy to put him back on the trailer even though I owed a lot of money."

Lyman had the chip removed, and Simbalu did even better as a show hunter. When the Firestones offered a lot more money for him, Lyman was able to respond, "Thanks but I'm keeping him."

"Simbalu was my pet and a show horse," says Lyman, her voice full of emotion. "I was lucky he was a stallion, because I was able to keep a really nice horse, which I wouldn't have been able to afford otherwise. But I didn't over-book him. He was showing, and breeding is hard on a horse. I was careful how many mares he had. I could have made more money and he could have made more horses, but it wasn't the right thing to do. That horse gave me so much -- he validated my existence in some ways. He was my teacher. People say he was lucky to have me, but I say I was so lucky to have him."