

## Marketing Horse Performances to the General Public

By Tracy D. Dowson

Horses and their riders are entertaining and that special presence can be translated to the stage, if the show is managed properly. This column will explore how one person brought her dream of an equine related performance to the masses and had them begging for more.

An Evening of Dancing Horses brought laughs, standing ovations, cheers and tears to a privileged audience at the Denver Events Center last January. Whether it was laughing with the Phantom Hill Junior Young Riders' stick horse quadrille, cheering with excellent movements of the freestyle dressage and reining horses, or tearing- up with the lonesome cowboy songs of Michael Martin Murphy, the beauty of horses tilled the hearts and minds of everyone in attendance.

When a horseman sees a horse performing well, he knows it, but when it can be translated to an audience of over 5,000 horsemen and non-horsemen alike, it's sheer magic. It takes many hours of hard work and a great deal of foresight to bring a large scale production to life. But what makes it an enchanting event?

This event was coordinated by a soft-spoken woman named Sandi J. Pence who has been involved with horses, in many capacities, all of her life.

Sandi is employed by the National Western Stock Show to manage the ASHA horse show portion of the National Western and was asked to fill an empty evening while the show horses were moved out to make room for the draft horse and mule show. I wanted Sandi to tell us how she brought the world of horses to the general public and had them pleading for more.

In a society where horses and horse activities are being squeezed out by development and lifestyle changes, it is more important than ever to keep horses in front of the general public and in the most favorable light possible. We must always remember that we are marketing our horses to non-horse owners every time non-horse owners watch horses or equine events. Sandi was looking for something that was, "different, non-competitive and entertaining." And dressage was one event that had rarely been seen by the usual audience at the large and historical event that is the National Western Stock Show.

"The first year (1996) we put together a small program in about 4 -6 weeks", Sandi admitted. She gathered some of the programs she had seen put together by Rocky Mountain Dressage Society previously and added a little extra for transitions between the dressage freestyles. Even with the limited time and resources the event was standing room only by individuals who had paid general admission to gain gate entry to the NWSS. It was obvious that people were hungry to see horses performing to music in a non-competitive atmosphere. The response was a little unexpected because Denver has a reputation for being a "big little cow-town". NWSS is where audiences have gathered to watch rodeo and cattle judging classes for over 90 years.

After the success of the first year, Sandi and her close group of supporters began brainstorming to put all of the pieces together. Sandi described their goals as developing an event that was, "Somewhat educational, entertaining, and to make it truly a family event". And, "we are focusing on the horse", Sandi said strongly. During their first attempt at this public event Sandi said that they had learned, "That you have to make it very appealing to people who do not, at all, understand dressage".

The first aspect of this event was to provide an educational experience. This was done creatively with the help of ballet dancers and a professional choreographer. Just as a ballet dancer spends years learning and refining their art, so do horses and their riders. To develop the educational aspect of the program Sandi said, "On the front end (of the performance) we took the time to compare children with horses".

Yearlings in hand were introduced with really cute pre-school dancers, young horses in long-lines were compared to the young students at the bar and finally, the seasoned performers were brought out together.

Another aspect that made this event different this year, is that it featured the cowboy singer, Michael Martin Murphey and the Rio Grande Band. "We wanted to preserve the country western flavor of the NWSS". Sandi went on to add, "we also wanted to add live music to make the event special". Michael Martin Murphy is also a fine horseman and works with the American Quarter Horse Association as a spokesman. Any other performer, who did not understand the passion of horse lovers, might have felt a blow to their ego when the loudest cheers went to the horses' who performed lawless lead changes or covered a few acres with a smooth sliding stop.

The Evening Of Dancing Horses also brought commercial success and now corporate sponsors are coming to them to be involved. It helped that the NWSS has a person dedicated to coordinating corporate sponsorships.

"You offered something for everyone", many people said to Sandi. She added, "all of the reactions have been very positive and encouraging". It was a fast paced program with variety that kept the audience asking for more. Sandi also mentioned that everyone involved wanted the program to be successful and were accessible and accommodating.

Sandi has promised that each year the performance will be different and will introduce new talent. They are also considering adding an afternoon performance because of the popularity of the event. With the extensive variety of horse disciplines, choosing fixture programs will be easy. This event has found a new home at the National Western Stock Show.

This offers proof that horses can be marketed to the masses as a form of family entertainment. I am reminded of new found popularity of figure skating. Figure skating came from way behind in popularity polls to rival football as the favorite American sport to watch. If the world is a stage, then every horseman is an ambassador.