



Blair And Karen Cudmore Have Built Something Big In The Heartland

“Made in America” is the prevailing theme at their large-scale hunter/jumper breeding operation.

BY ANNE LANG

Horse buyers have traveled to Blair and Karen Cudmore's front door in a steady stream since 1994, when the Canadian couple started the aptly named Heartland Farms on the chilly plains of Nebraska.

At a time when most North American breeders have scaled way back or dropped out of the business entirely (surrendering to the poor economy and overwhelming popularity of European imports), the multi-site Heartland Farms remains home to about 400 head, mostly warmbloods, comprised of breeding stock, youngsters in training, show horses and sales prospects.

“I don't know anyone else in America who's produced as many international-level jumpers as Blair and Karen, from the ground up,” said Kris Killam, owner of neighboring Dresden Manor Farm and a former longtime Heartland staffer. “All of their horses are either homebred or bought as young horses. Blair and Karen start them, show them and go all the way to the top with them.”

The Cudmores combine shrewd

The Cudmore family, (from left) Kiley, Blair, Karen and Brooke, has built a big business in the heartland breeding and producing horses. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CUDMORES



vision, copious research, infinite patience and riding talent. Karen is a competitive show jumper who has represented Canada on the world stage, and Blair comes from a renowned equestrian family, where he cultivated his breeding expertise as well as his riding chops.

A Grassroots Beginning

A native of Victoria, British Columbia, Karen (née Olson) developed a love for horses during visits to an uncle, who ran a horse-drawn carriage business. Karen was 9 when she acquired her first pony, a black-and-white gelding named Scout whose price tag was \$50.

"I showed him in the English flat classes wearing black gum boots and a western bridle," Karen said with a laugh. "All the showing I did was local. I had a jumper mare that went well, but she was older and not real high quality. I didn't go out and campaign like a lot of juniors do; I just kept working for various people."

Those people included two members of the Canadian Equestrian Team: Bo Mearns (for whom Karen began working at 16) and Danny Foster. Karen also worked at Spruce Meadows in Calgary. At age 21, she moved to California to work for Linda Allen.

Blair grew up in Regina, Saskatchewan. His father, Glenn Cudmore, was an international three-day eventer whose wife, Carole, also was an equestrian. Blair and his brothers, Brent, Brian and Barry, all became accomplished riders, first learning at a succession of barns where Glenn and Carole trained and produced horse shows in Canada, and then in the United States. In 1971, the family moved to Omaha to train at Ponca Hills Farms.

All six family members rode with Omaha's North Hills Hunt, where Blair became the youngest member to earn his colors, at age 13. The Cudmore boys did "some of everything," said Blair, 50.

"Eventing, Pony Club, dressage, gymkhanas and all the shows. When I was 7 or 8 years old, I thought I would become the next Jim Day [a top Canadian international show jumping rider in the 1960s and '70s]. I was doing pony jumpers by then. We had a bunch of ponies that we just terrorized."



Blair Cudmore grew up doing Pony Club, eventing, foxhunting, pony jumpers and a bit of everything else. He tried to leave horses behind upon graduating from high school, but he couldn't escape their siren song. MOLLY SORGE PHOTO

Onward And Upward

In 1976, Glenn and Carole Cudmore started Glencarry Stables, a hunter/jumper show and sales barn in Crescent, Iowa. They also bred Thoroughbreds to produce show jumpers.

"We had a lot of mares by Hay Hook, who sired Idle Dice," Blair recalled.

After high school, Blair worked on oil rigs for a time but quickly realized horses were his true passion.

Blair met Karen at Arsia Ardalan's Caspian Stables in Valley Center, Calif., in the early 1980s.

"Blair was working there, and I was working just up the street," said Karen. "I stopped by to introduce myself, and Blair tried to sell me a horse! I didn't end up buying it, but I did ride it. Blair and I continued our relationship from there."

They married on June 10, 1987. "We scheduled it between the breaks at Spruce Meadows," Blair said, laughing.

By then, they were living in Omaha and working for Blair's parents, whose Iowa farm was just a short drive away. Two years later, Blair's growing interest in breeding led to the purchase

of a Holsteiner stallion named Caracas (Cor de la Bryère—Eroica, Consul).

"He was Cor de la Bryère's first approved son," said Blair, "and I wanted to start a breeding operation with him. So we leased a breeding farm in Colorado Springs for a couple of years. That's where we learned how to do the embryo transplants."

In 1994, the Cudmores returned to Omaha and purchased the 25-acre Heartland Farms. With a spending limit of \$150,000, Blair traveled across the country to various Holsteiner breeders and bought 10 fillies, then bred each one at age 2 or 3. After the foals arrived, he and Karen began training the mares.

"I felt they would all make good grand prix horses, which they did," Blair said. "All but two of them made it into the big ring."

The Cudmores also lucked out with a Thoroughbred mare named Miss Chiclero (Chiclero—Honey Sails, Blue Sails), a great-granddaughter of super-sire Nasrullah. "No matter whom you bred her to," Blair said, "the baby would become a grand prix horse."

Her offspring included Thriller and Thrilling—both successfully campaigned (in post-racetrack careers) by international show jumper Todd Minikus, a good friend of the Cudmores. Minikus also owned the Miss Chiclero show jumping champions More Thrills and Thrilled, who were both sired by Caracas.

In the mid-1990s, the Cudmores produced two babies of the human sort. Brooke, now 19, competes at the grand prix level. She also rode on the bronze-medal junior show jumping team at the 2011 Adequan FEI North American Junior and Young Riders Championships (Ky.), on Ocelot (Ocean II—Miss Loving), a Holsteiner purchased by the Cudmores as a yearling in California.

Kiley, 17, is a high school senior who also rides but prefers footlights to arena lights. An actress who's already appeared in several commercials, Kiley has her sights set on a career in the performing arts—although she's a willing helper at the horse shows.

In 2000, when her daughters were still very young, Karen—whose star

▶ Battling The Effects Of A Weak Economy: Q&A With The Cudmores

European competition, a struggling U.S. economy, frequent droughts, the rising cost of feed, and the time and money required to develop a foal into a riding horse have combined to cause many North American breeders to reduce the number of horses bred or simply quit the business. As a result, will we see a lack of young horse inventory in this continent during the next decade or so?

Blair: Yes, for sure. All the money that used to stay circulating in our business is now circulating overseas. It's no different than everything being made in China, except that these are horses and not merchandise. Just think what it would be like if more American horse people actually kept the money circulating in this country. The revenue generated by the horse business in Florida alone is in the billions.

Karen: The young horse classes in Europe have 60 to 150 6-year-olds. We could have those here, too. But horse shows here are so expensive. If they weren't, I'd be taking more horses to shows and selling more horses; therefore I'd be hiring more people and paying show managers more money. It would all work. I'm not saying we don't go to Europe and buy horses, too. We can't help ourselves: If we go over there and see a nice young horse that we like, we will buy it. But we create quality here, too, and I don't feel the need to spend another dime in Europe with the quality of horses we've bred here.

If current trends create a diminished supply of young horses in North America, do you predict that the resulting demand will drive up prices for U.S. breeders who can afford to weather the storm?

Blair: Any breeders I know of who are still in business just want quality.



"Our personal dream of being able to sponsor ourselves is working, but we created it at such a high level that it's hard to maintain it," said Karen Cudmore, shown here on home-bred Shea.

MOLLY SORGE PHOTO

They won't just take any mare; it has to be something special. I got rid of 50 broodmares last year, and now I'm watching them go in the children's and amateur jumpers at the shows. Their owners could be showing younger ones and doing far better. They could have spent \$20,000 on a high-quality young one, instead of paying \$5,000 for a mare that I was mucking out a year ago. But that's the economy and the way it goes in this country. And at least those mares are doing something; they have a life. But things are getting to a point where everyone except the very rich has left the game.

How has the present economy affected your own breeding business?

Blair: In the last five years, we've gone from selling 100 horses a year to selling 10 to 20 horses a year. That means we're feeding 80 more, so my business is becoming unaffordable. That's going to make me get rid of any mare that's not in foal and to just downsize in general. I have to; I have no choice. We've realized that if we're no longer selling 100 a year, then we don't need to be breeding 100 a year. At this rate, the price of feed has gotten ridiculous. I used to be able to produce my own hay with all the land we have, but now, with so many horses, I need that land for pasture, so I have to buy all my hay. It's

pretty bad when you're buying \$400,000-\$500,000 worth of hay every year, and suddenly hay prices double or triple.

Karen: Basically, we have a great breeding business. Blair has a good feel for what to do. But it's really an expensive sport. If more people would buy American-bred horses, we'd be fine. But so many sales go to Europe. And that makes sense, because you can go over to Europe and buy a 5- or 6-year-old with a lot of mileage, whereas my 5- and 6-year-olds don't have as much mileage, but they're probably the same price. Mileage is what is so expensive [to produce]. If it weren't, I'd be showing 20 horses at every show. And now a trend is that people will buy horses in Europe, then leave them there for a couple of years to be trained, because the shows there are so affordable. And that's just killing the breeders in North America. It's the same in Canada as it is in the U.S. Our personal dream of being able to sponsor ourselves is working, but we created it at such a high level that it's hard to maintain it. We're proud of the horses that we've created and that I ride. I'm always competing on quality jumpers; there's no question about that. But many of our horses slip through the cracks because they end up getting older without getting to the ring.



had rapidly risen in equestrian circles since her respective years with Mearns, Foster and Allen—was the second-ranked Canadian show jumping rider (and 11th in the United States) based on prize money won, all on Heartland Farms horses. She made her foray into international show jumping in 2001, when she competed as a member of the Canadian Developing Riders Tour. As Karen's profile grew, so did the recognition level of Heartland Farms—and of Blair, who in 2002 was named the Jump Canada Owner of the Year based on prize money won by Heartland Farms horses.

"The business just got bigger than we intended," Karen admitted, "because we kept [producing and buying] such amazing horses."

Layered Results

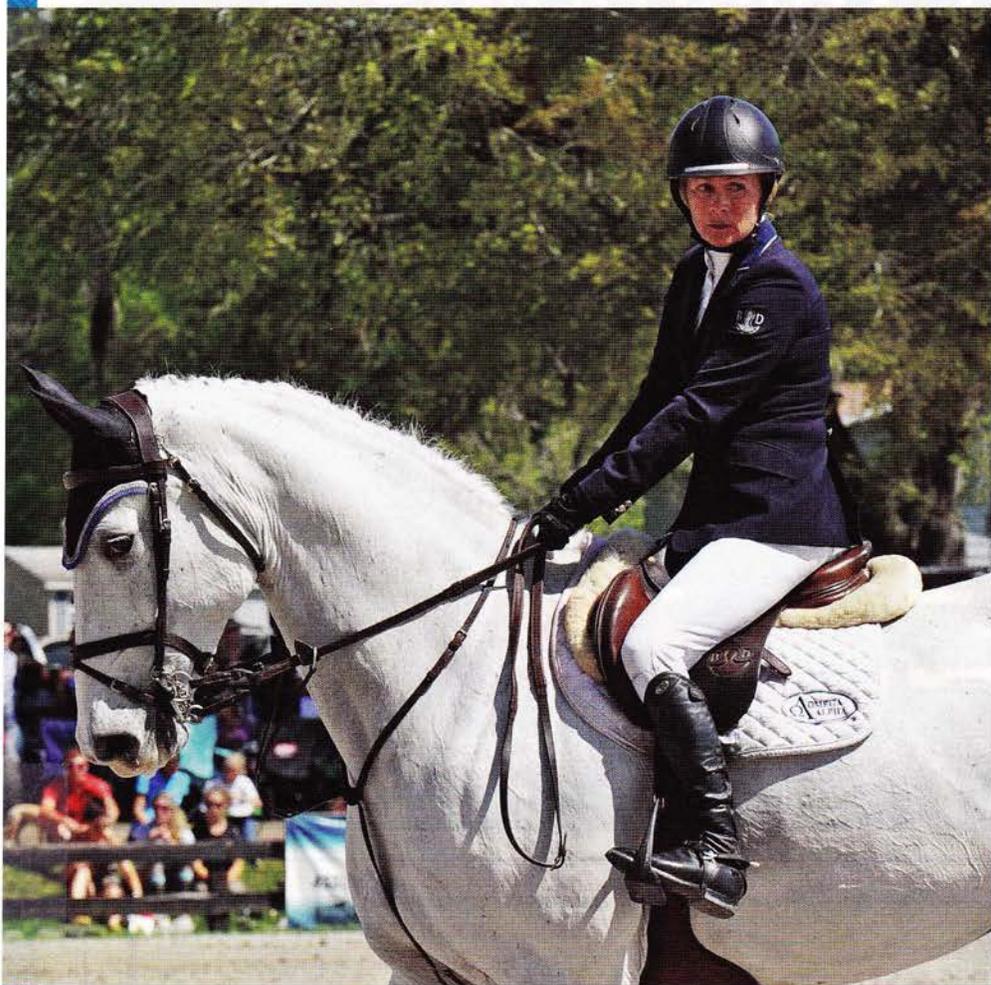
One of Heartland Farms' leading stallions was Conejo (Calando I—Peidra, Mephisto), a Holsteiner they bought in 1995 at age 2 from comedienne Joan Rivers, former mother-in-law of California trainer John Endicott. Conejo was chosen by longtime Cudmore friend and renowned horseman Buck Brannaman. He was an accomplished grand prix horse who went on to sire multiple show jumping champions before his death in 2008. Aboard Conejo, Karen represented Canada at the 2002 FEI World Equestrian Games in Jerez, Spain; the 2003 FEI World Cup Final in Las Vegas; and the 2003 Pan American Games in the Dominican Republic.

Among Conejo's successful offspring

Karen Cudmore is the face of Heartland Farms in the show ring, riding horses like Southern Pride in the 2010 Rolex FEI World Cup Final in Geneva. MOLLIE BAILEY PHOTO

is the Heartland Farms homebred mare Shea, on whom Karen won the 2012 \$100,000 Sullivan GMC Truck Grand Prix at the HITS Ocala Winter Celebration (Fla).

Southern Pride (South Pacific—Blanke, Caretino) is another standout in the Cudmores' grand prix string. Karen went to the 2007 Pan American Games in Rio de Janeiro as an alternate with the Holsteiner stallion, whom they purchased as a 2-year-old from The Oaks Farm in California. In 2010, the pair represented Canada in a Nations Cup in Belgium and at the Rolex FEI World Cup Final in Geneva.



"Going to the shows and circulating our horses is like driving new cars around. People see them, and they're going to want one," said Karen Cudmore.

MOLLY SORGE PHOTO

Typically, they show at the FTI Winter Equestrian Festival (Fla.) in the winter, and during the rest of the year, they'll go to Colorado, Missouri, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Texas and Iowa.

Patience Pays Off

To prepare Heartland Farms horses for the show ring, the Cudmores bring in the 2-year-olds and free jump them to evaluate them.

"We break them at 2, then we put them back out and bring them back in at 3, when we start them in a bit of a program," said Karen.

Some years they might start as many as 125 colts and fillies.

Young Mexican students traveling on short-term work visas frequently assist during those crucial early phases. "They're amazing," Karen declared. "They come from great farms in Mexico. They get the young horses to the point where they're ready to start hopping over jumps, and then our group takes over. But [the students] are back home in school, for now. They come during breaks."

Most buyers who come to the farm are seeking horses aged 6 to 7, but some come to look at 3-year-olds, too. They also get people who are already showing older siblings in the big jumpers, looking for a deal in a younger brother or sister.

Grand prix rider Devin Ryan, owner of River Run Stables in Long Valley, N.J., frequently purchases from Heartland.

Ryan rode Calissandro (Conejo—Nairobi, Caracas), a 9-year-old gelding co-owned by Barbara Drake, to win the 2011 Midwestern 7/8-Year-Old Young Jumper Championships Final (Ky.), and the \$35,000 CWD Grand Prix (Miss.) this March.

"It's good to buy American-bred horses to keep the money in our country," said Ryan. "The Cudmores offer European bloodlines on American soil. Why pay the shipping fee? They have so many young horses, but not a lot of people have the confidence, ability or patience to take on unbroken, very green horses and be willing to train

A Giant Operation

Heartland Farms is spread out over a half dozen properties. "We have so many horses [including about 100 foals], we didn't have enough room at one place for all of them," Blair said. "It's just gotten too big now; we need to downsize."

The main facility is the 25-acre farm in Omaha, home to the Cudmore family and more than 100 horses in training. About 30 miles away 150 Heartland broodmares and about 10 active stallions reside at a 350-acre farm in Missouri Valley, Iowa. (The vast majority of breeding at Heartland Farms is conducted using artificial insemination.)

"We also own a few small properties scattered around where we can keep 20 or so horses at a time," Blair explained. His parents have lived on the nearby Iowa farm since 2011, when their own Glencarry Stables was washed out in a Missouri River flood. The elder Cudmores oversee the broodmare band,

which grew in 2011 when Blair and Karen took on more than 100 mares from The Oaks in California after owner Joan Irvine Smith decided to get out of the breeding business.

A small full-time staff, including Jimmy Prchal and Alexis "Cody" Weverstad (who trade off going to the shows and training the young horses at home, along with Brooke) tend to the farm when the Cudmores are at shows. Bill McConnell helps with the breeding program and acts as a ground person at some of the shows.

"We have about 20 show horses that we rotate around," Karen said. "There's room for more to move up, but showing is expensive, so we rotate. I don't show as much as I used to; I try to spend time at home to catch up with everything."

Added Blair: "We take eight to 10 horses to every show, and we'd better do very well in the grand prix or we're writing a check for \$8,000-\$10,000 each week. So we can only take just so many."

them and bring them along. But for me, building my business as a young professional, it's been economical to buy horses in this country that have really good breeding, then take that raw talent and develop it.

"It makes it affordable for my clients, too," Ryan continued. "While it requires money to take that horse from age 2 to 8, they don't have to shell out that amount all at once to buy a made 7- or 8-year-old. And it's exciting for owners to buy a young, high-quality prospect and watch it develop."

Ryan credits Heartland Farms horses with possessing good temperaments and good brains, and he's paired many of them with his junior riders.

As much as the Cudmores lament the trend toward buying European horses and/or importing frozen European semen, they don't completely block foreign influences from their herd. Blair recently brought over three babies by Belgian stallion Kashmir Van Schuttershof and a young Cassini I stallion that he wanted to introduce to his line. "So we've got some new blood," Karen said.

A lot of their buyers (which sometimes even include Europeans) want to see the young Heartland Farms horses. "They want to buy the dream," Karen explained. "Going to the shows and circulating our horses is like driving new cars around. People see them, and they're going to want one."

But Blair bemoans the current state of breeding in North America, which he proclaims to be "in sad decline. In the major leagues, there are no more backyard breeders."

Karen is a bit more optimistic. "If we all did business amongst ourselves, it would greatly help our industry, all the way around," she said. "I just think people need to take a second look at horses in this country before they head over to Europe. But Blair and I must have been somewhat successful, because our business has kept me in the ring all these years. I'm 54, and I still have four going grand prix horses. We still go to the shows, and we've paid for all our farms.

"People *can* do this," Karen concluded, "and they *can* make a living at it. It's been a great life for us." ●
