

THE YEAR IN WALKING HORSES IS DEDICATED TO

# MARTIN

Cox

BY SADIE FOWLER

There was no way to be at the 2018 Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration and not hear about Martin Cox. He became one of the most talked about headline stories of the show after wrapping up an incredible show season with Lester H. Burns by capturing the Amateur Specialty World Grand Championship.

After earning reserve in their qualifier, spectators roared with excitement as this crowd favorite made their victory pass, demonstrating just how much everyone seemed to be rooting for Cox and celebrating his return to the show ring. Cox, a likeable guy who hadn't been in the show ring in 14-plus years prior to the 2018 season, had made a comeback ride of a lifetime.

Making it all even more special, the interesting thing about Cox and the comeback ride is that Cox hadn't really "gone" anywhere during his so called long absence. Although he hadn't "literally" been in the show ring in many years, Cox has never missed a beat in terms of his involvement and dedication to the breed by way of his ownership of Cottonwood Farms in Corbin, Kentucky.

A quiet and humble man who is far more comfortable behind the scenes than in the spotlight, Cox is most passionate about the future of the industry — whether it be colts or youth riders. His contributions to the industry from his quiet corner in the Bluegrass state are extensive. In fact, they are perhaps far more extensive than some realize as a result of Cox's modest demeanor.

Those who know Cox best would describe him as being in the business for all the right reasons. Quite simply, he genuinely enjoys it and has a special passion for raising colts and seeing them progress throughout their careers. He's just as happy to watch a one night show from the tailgate of a pickup truck than from a fancy box seat.

"Personally, what I love most about it all is starting colts and seeing their progression each week," said Cox, while taking a break from visiting with the many folks passing through his "second barn" in Shelbyville during the weekend of annual banquets last December. "I also love matching the right horse or colt with the right person ... I like



After a 14-year absence from the show ring, Cox came back in 2018 to win the Amateur Specialty World Grand Championship with Lester H. Burns.

## MARTIN COX

the horse stuff because it's a good distraction from the daily grind in life. I find it relaxing."

As a third-generation grocer, Cox actually has a very demanding day job, although if you didn't know that it would not be unreasonable to think his full-time job was simply running Cottonwood. His involvement in the day-to-day activities at the farm is great, but he does it all as more of a hobby. It's what he loves to do when the work at the grocery store is over.

"My grandfather started with one (grocery) store and over the years we've bought existing stores and grown them and in some cases built new stores from the ground up," Cox said, explaining he grew up in the grocery stores and carrying on the family business was an easy and natural choice for Cox all along. "Our stores are relatively small in terms of other grocery chains."

Again, demonstrating his humility, Cox says the focus of their grocery stores is local service; many of the folks who work for the Cox family have been with them for decades. While the idea of small-town charm is at the forefront, there's nothing small about the impact of their grocery stores, which includes the IGA brand, on the local economy.

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They employ about 500 people, and Cox says they pride themselves in their approach — one that's centered around hometown, local service to customers and maintaining good relationships with employees. Many of their employees have started their careers with the family and stayed.

Cox is deeply involved in many aspects of the company's operations and enjoys his "day job," although it remains a very separate aspect of his life compared to his horse hobby.

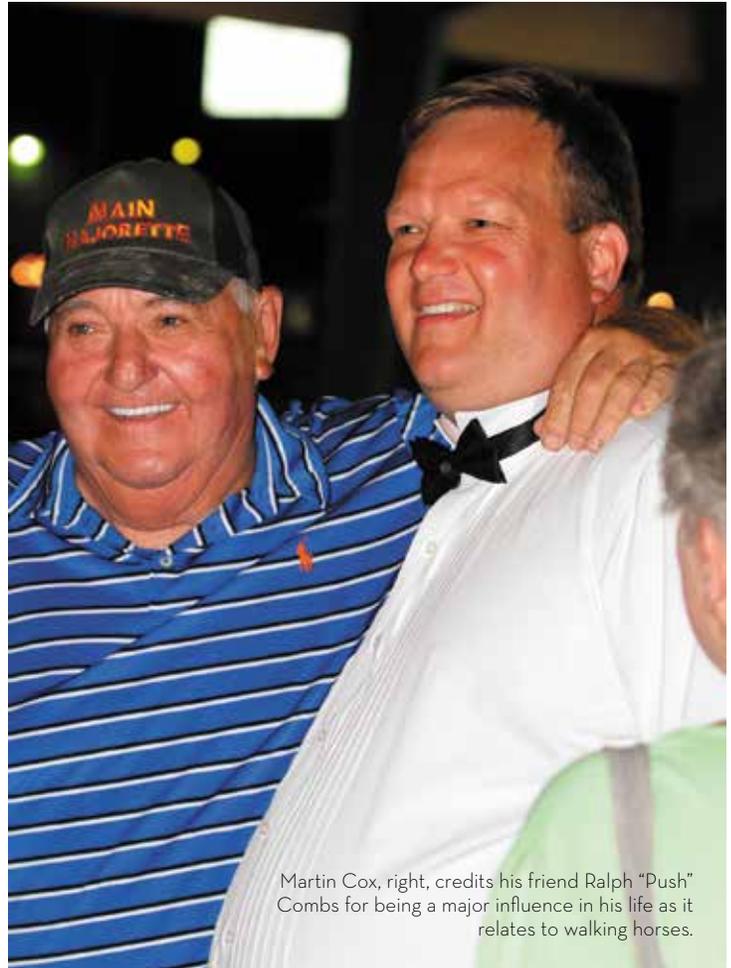
Just like Cox enjoys seeing young horses be developed and progress, he says his favorite part of the grocery business is developing home-grown talent. Many employees are like family to him; his longest serving store manager started out as a carryout boy.

Maintaining a personal relationship with customers matters greatly to Cox and his team and he admits technology and social media have presented challenges over the years, especially the past few. He says their strategy now includes using technology in their favor to find ways to "go back in time and have a personal relationship with customers."

On the plus side, social media and technology have allowed Cox to work remotely more often and he now averages about three to four days a week in the office while spending the rest of his time at the barn. In business and pleasure, Cox credits his success to having the right team and being surrounded by talented people.

"You are only as strong as the people around you," he said. "That's no secret to any business ... The same thing applies to horses."

Just as much as the grocery business had been a natural and fitting component of Cox's life, so were horses. His uncle was a horse trainer and Cox said from early on he had always enjoyed raising mares and colts and fooling with whatever he could.



Martin Cox, right, credits his friend Ralph "Push" Combs for being a major influence in his life as it relates to walking horses.

As fate intervened, Cox had a good friend, Keith Blackburn, who also happened to enjoy fooling with horses and one day they decided they might as well build their own barn. In 2006, Cottonwood Farm came to life and Ryan Blackburn, Keith's son, was the natural choice to lead the tightknit team as trainer.

"Ryan is a super good man," he said. "He and his wife both are super. It's worked out for all of us. Travis Caudill, Robbie Bradley and Jack Davis have also been instrumental in Cottonwood's success."

Since Cottonwood was born, they've had remarkable success by producing and showing many great horses. Over the years, Cox has been involved with several greats, including I Am José, Mayhem, Bourne Legacy, Cottonwood Gin, Popcorn Sutton, Tennessee State Line, Pocket Time, Gotcha José, Mollie Lou Melon, She's The Black Widow, Classic Action, Gin In Everything, Hole In My Pocket, Dialed In, Rammer Jammer, Flirtin's Command and Lt Horatio Cane.

While he loves seeing horses rooted to Cottonwood progress and excel, Cox has a passion for the buying and selling aspect of the horse industry, as indicated by Cottonwood's banner event each year, its colt preview, which takes place each January. About 300 people attend the event each year.

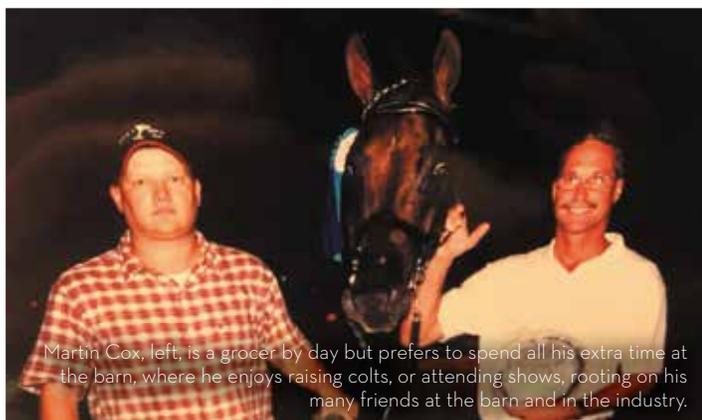
"We started it as a way for people in Kentucky and the Southeast to showcase their up and coming talents," Cox said. "We try to get a nice group of people to come who might not otherwise normally come to Kentucky."

Passionate about Kentucky and its growth, whether related to horses or business, Martin Cox is definitely driven by watching others succeed as opposed to being in the spotlight himself. He is quick to admit that

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Cox was honored at the 2018 Kentucky Walking Horse Association's annual banquet with the President's Award.



Martin Cox, left, is a grocer by day but prefers to spend all his extra time at the barn, where he enjoys raising colts, or attending shows, rooting on his many friends at the barn and in the industry.



Martin Cox is pictured with staff of Cottonwood celebrating the 2015 Celebration win of then Two-Year-Old Amateur World Champion Cottonwood Gin along with longtime owners Brenda and the late Ronnie Corey.

he's not into social events or "high faluting galas." His friends agree that he's not into being on center stage, but they will give him credit where it's deserved — credit he likely wouldn't give himself.

Friends of Cox say he does a lot for this industry behind the scenes that a lot of people don't realize, especially promoting and supporting the Tennessee Walking Horse industry in Kentucky. He is a very generous person and big hearted and is always willing to do what he can.

Most recently, Cox was honored for his dedication to the Kentucky Walking Horse industry when he was given the President's Award at the Kentucky Walking Horse Association's annual banquet for his contributions to the area's youth as well as the association.

Despite his many years happily sitting back and enjoying things behind the scenes, this past year put Cox in a place he's not seen in 14 years — the show ring. Not only did he find himself showing Lester H. Burns after Ryan suggested he give him a try, but he found himself making trip after trip down victory lane. After winning at the Come Unity Cooperative Care's show in London, Kentucky and also at Carter County, they emerged onto the Big Oval for the Amateur Specialty competition and finished their preliminary class as reserve world champions.

When the world grand championship came around, the crowd had caught on to the pair's inviting story and cheered for their victory, which came in full force on championship weekend.

"I really never liked to show horses, to be honest with you," he laughed. "I enjoy watching others show so much more ... But Ryan had shown Lester and had done a great job and he said, 'Why don't you show him?' I didn't think much of it and then one day he said, 'Ride him.' The Celebration was really unexpected. I really only did it just to have fun."

In true form, Cox credits Ryan for the victory, saying he was the one responsible for the happy ending as a result of his hard work on the horse.

Looking ahead, Cox is very optimistic about the horse industry, saying it is in better shape now than it has been in years.

"It's as strong as it has been in the past 10 to 12 years," he said. "The colt market is really good right now. Even during the Celebration, the yearling sale was really good ... Financially, it's making a comeback and owners are becoming more confident. Still, though, we have to get more youth involved in order to have long-term success."

Cox believes the best way to grow the industry, in general, is to promote the classic horse.

"There's no other breed that has a 20-year-old horse in the show ring besides us," he said. "We have done a bad job marketing our classic horse and something has to be done to bring that to light."

In speaking about this year's Year In Walking Horses dedication, Cox's modesty, again, shows up. He says he was surprised and honored to hear the news about it.

"I never even thought twice about ever receiving this," he said. "I was truly honored, and shocked, really."

He's enjoying the moment, but what he's enjoying more during the off-season of 2019 is the colts.

"It's a busy time of year," he said. "And I'm enjoying the heck out of seeing all these colts. It's my favorite time of year."