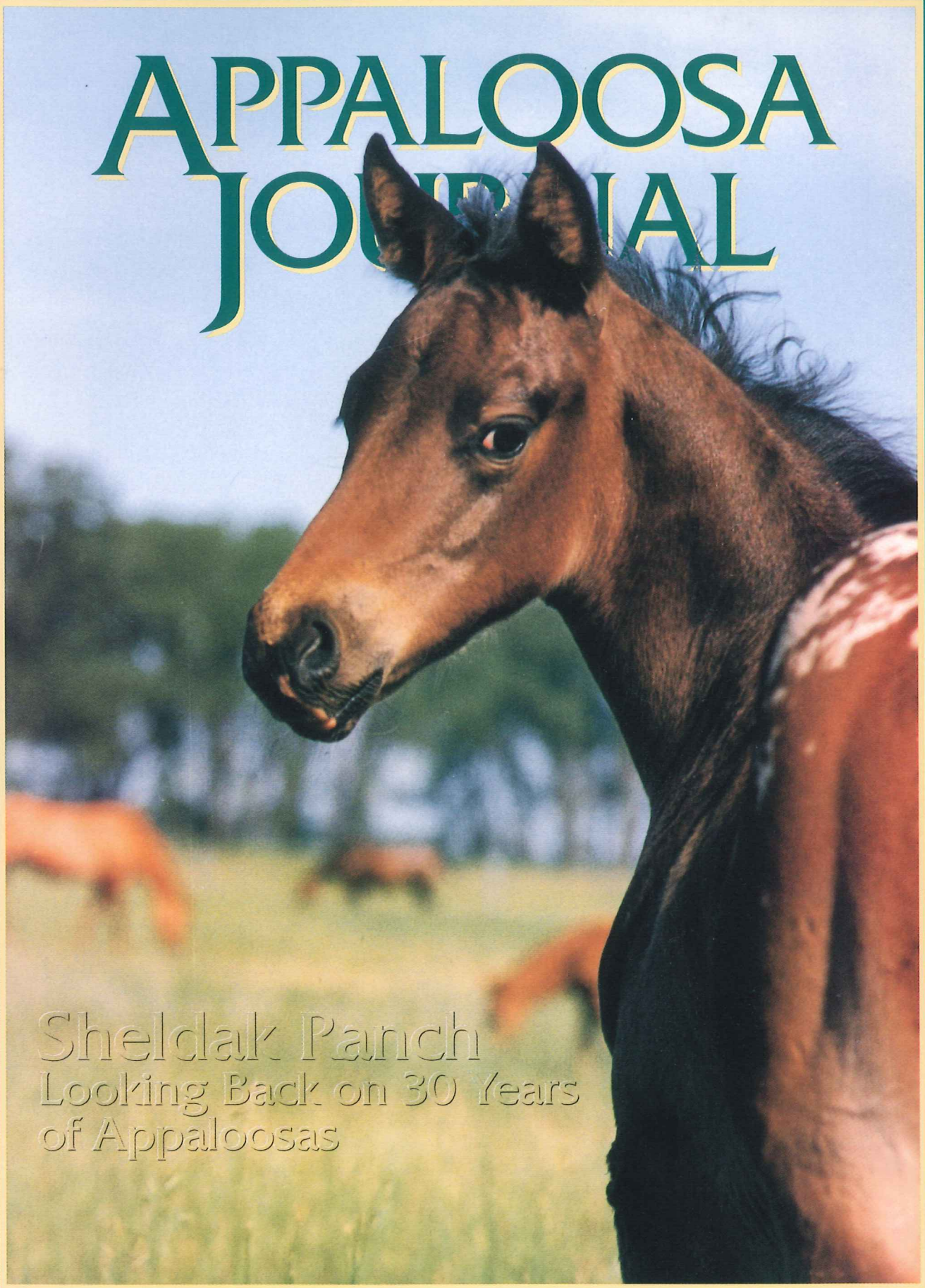


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APPALOOSA JOURNAL



Sheldak Panch
Looking Back on 30 Years
of Appaloosas

WEANLING SELECTION • AMY MATULEWICZ • KIDS' BITS

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Dave and Kim Utke began with a dream and built their business and breeding operation at Sheldak Ranch in Sheldon, N.D., on a solid foundation of the best bloodlines, business sense and a lot of elbow grease.

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Injuries, accidents and a deadly illness couldn't keep Amy Matulewicz from realizing her dream of making it to a National Championship Show.

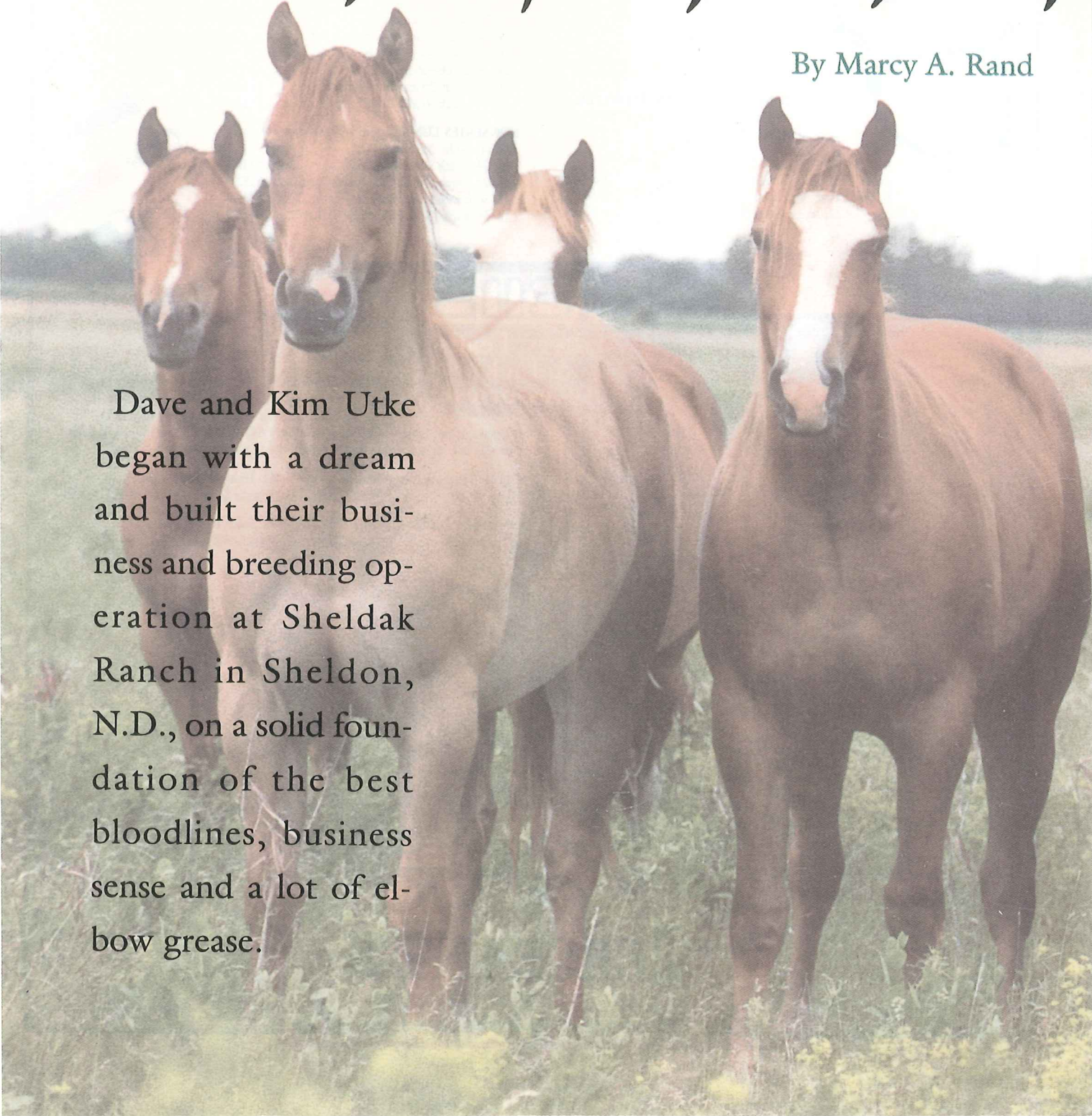
STORY AND PHOTOS BY A.J. MANGUM

COVER: Tims Top Gun is one of almost 1,000 Appaloosa foals to be bred and foaled over the last 30 years at North Dakota's Sheldak Ranch. Photo by Kim Utke.

FOUND



By Marcy A. Rand



Dave and Kim Utke began with a dream and built their business and breeding operation at Sheldak Ranch in Sheldon, N.D., on a solid foundation of the best bloodlines, business sense and a lot of elbow grease.

ACTIONS



Photos by Kim Utke and Jim Sagvold



Walk into Dave and Kim Utke's living room, and you're more likely to see registration papers and reprints of foal pictures than coffee tables and conversation pieces.

If you stay for a while in their converted office, Kim can show you album after album filled with articles she's clipped over the years on the Old Fred line and the countless champions it has produced.

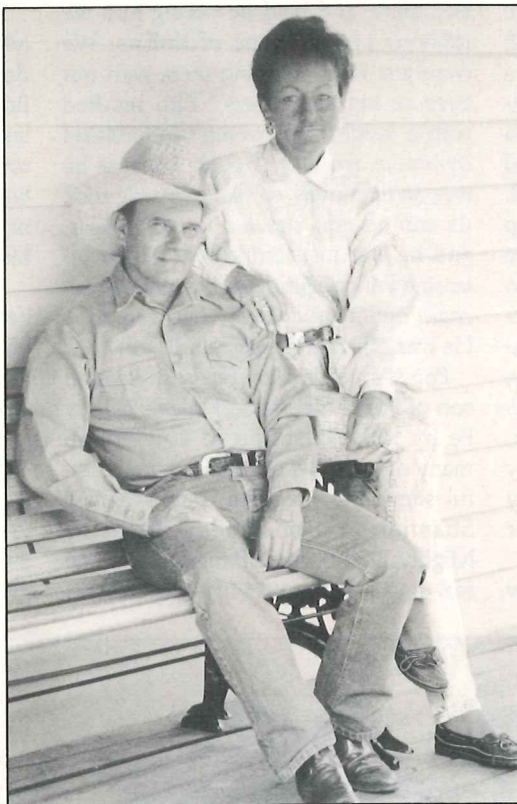
"What we've strived for is to have everything in our breeding program – Appaloosa and Quarter Horse – carry back to the Old Fred line," Kim explained, referring to an early Coke Roberds horse whose heritage is unknown, but whose influence can be seen far back in the unconfirmed pedigrees of many superior Appaloosas, Quarter Horses and Paints, including Prince Plaudit and Bright Eyes Brother. "We figured if it worked for Carl Miles and Hank Wiescamp, it'd work for us. And, it has. That's what our goal has always been, and we've stuck closely to it."

Sheldon, N.D., may not be on most road atlases, but many successful Appaloosa owners have found Sheldak Ranch with nothing but a good eye for conformation and pedigree. Over the years, a lot of customers have looked to the 880-acre ranch tucked in the southeastern corner of North Dakota for champion foals by late greats like Mighty Tim, Prince's Jim, Prince David, Spittin Image and Mr. Exclusive, who all carried the blood of earlier superior Appaloosa stallions like Prince Plaudit and Bright Eyes Brother as well as

strong Quarter Horses like Skipper W, Leo and Three Bars. These original Utke stallions were bred by the likes of Lane Hudson, Carl Miles and Cecil Dobbin, and not even the Utkes know how many championships they and their get have produced all together.

The Utkes now use four stallions: 1976 stallion King David, a National and World champion sire, by Prince David by Prince Plaudit; 1978 stallion DF Big Image, by Prince's Image by Prince Plaudit; 1977 stallion Dee Bar O.J., a new Lane Hudson-owned-and-bred purchase out of Bright Delight by Bright Eyes Brother; Jack To A King, and Mr. Barretta, a bald-faced, blanketed, three-year-old grulla colt by Mr. Exclusive by Bright Eyes Brother and out of Baretta Bright by Mighty Bright by Bright Eyes Brother. Through these horses and the majority of their 45 broodmares, they're carrying on the bloodlines of that first generation of great Sheldak stallions.

Breeding these champion horses with superior bloodlines is the realization of a dream that began to take shape in 1959 when the Utkes met at the North Dakota State Fair at Fargo. Kim, from about 50 miles away in



Dave and Kim Utke have been raising Appaloosas for almost 30 years.

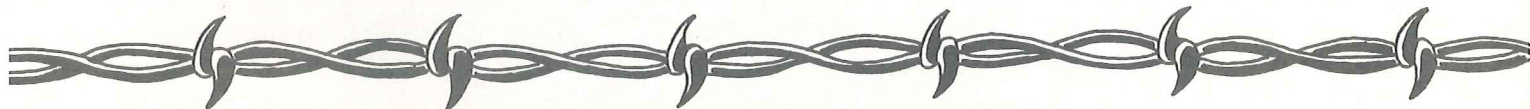
and replanting them elsewhere, tearing down fences and rebuilding them and replacing or building whatever else they would need.

out in the field without ever going to bed. He would work one place all day long, then drive down and work the other place all night. It was during this hectic period that they encountered Rebel Red Hawk, a stock-type leopard Appaloosa sired by HW Little Hawk who turned their heads from Quarter Horses to the spotted breed.

"We really fell in love with his disposition and color pattern. It was a love-at-first-sight sort of thing because he was better in terms of conformation than most horses we'd seen up until that point. He definitely helped convince us to make the switch by giving us the first taste of Appaloosa character traits that we would see over and over again in the years to come," Kim said.

Rebel was their stallion for a few years until they purchased Go Meyer Jim, by Spotted Jim and out of Go Meyers. After a year, Go Meyer Jim was replaced when the Utkes successfully purchased Mighty Tim by Mighty Bright by Bright Eyes Brother, who they'd had their eyes on for quite a while in the *Appaloosa News*.

They had to finance their initial 400 acres and the three 160-acre outlying pastures they purchased as they were

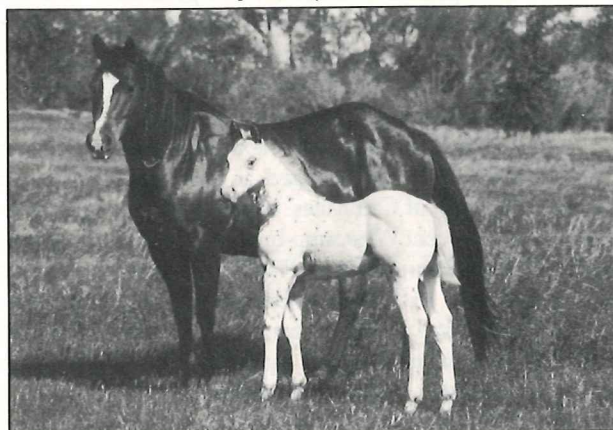


Detroit Lakes, Minn., was showing a palomino Quarter Horse mare and Dave, a Fargo native, a Quarter Horse gelding. The pair, who had both been active in 4-H and showing since they were young kids, hit it off and began conducting a long-distance romance through letters and occasional visits before getting married in 1963.

The pursuit of their dream had begun.

First, the young Utkes found a 400-acre place about 50 miles southwest of Fargo they could afford. It needed a lot of work since no one had lived on the place for many years, so they set about pulling out trees where they wanted to build

From 1964 to 1969, the couple lived in Fargo on Dave's dad's place and worked both that ranch and their own. Dave sometimes spent day and night working



With his doll head and Prince Plaudit blood from both his sire, DF Big Image, and his dam's sire, King David, this Sheldak colt is full of promise.

able to expand. Hard work and outstanding stallions like Mighty Tim and those that followed paid for that and all the improvements and out-buildings they've added to the place, which Kim modestly describes as, "fairly basic, suitable and serviceable compared to some of those fancy show ranches."

With the purchase of Mighty Tim, by Mighty Bright and out of Cherry Cordial (AQHA), the Utkes were well on their way to building their Appaloosa empire and earning a reputation as premier Appaloosa breeders of horses with superior halter ability who were also capable of succeeding in pleasure classes.

This 1967 stallion was one of

the top ten halter and performance horses in the nation in 1971 and 1972, and every horse in his pedigree is a National champion or National champion producer. He went on to become a leading sire, producing 263 registered foals, many of which became National, World and GEAR champions and top ten performers who went on to produce another generation of champions who continue to succeed and produce champions. Some of those top, award-winning offspring include Tim's Foxy Lady, Tim's Mighty Bar, Jokers Mighty Paul, Cherry Maiden, Showdown Tim, Mighty Timon, Tim's Charmer, Mighty Norske, Mighty Ambrose and Mighty Matthew. Mighty Tim died last October after 19 years on the Sheldak ranch.

"We wanted him because his show record was pretty flawless (he won nine different events, including jumping), he was out of one of our favorite lines (Mighty Bright) and his disposition was

just fabulous. He was also one hunk of a horse; he stood 15.2 hands and weighed 1,450 lbs," Kim said. "He was totally massive, but he was the smoothest-gaited

horse you've ever ridden on. It was amazing that a horse as bulky and massive as he was could also be so smooth. You could sit sideways and bareback on him and jog and canter and your body would not move.

As the Utke's recall it, the next milestone on the road to success was a stop at Carl Miles' ranch in Abilene, Texas.

"Carl Miles was really a great person. I remember the time we went down to his place to look at stud colts when we were just starting out on the opposite end of the financial scale from him. We got down there early in the morning and he took us right into his office. He had many, many interruptions in regards to oil wells he was drilling here

and there, and he'd be talking into the millions and millions of dollars. We were just kind of sitting there with our eyes as big as saucers," Kim recalled with a laugh. "We weren't intimidated by him in any way, though, because he was an extremely cordial man. He took us around and showed us the horses, and he was just terrific! We ended up leasing Prince's Jim from him with a purchase option, and we did later buy him. He was our first Prince Plaudit son."

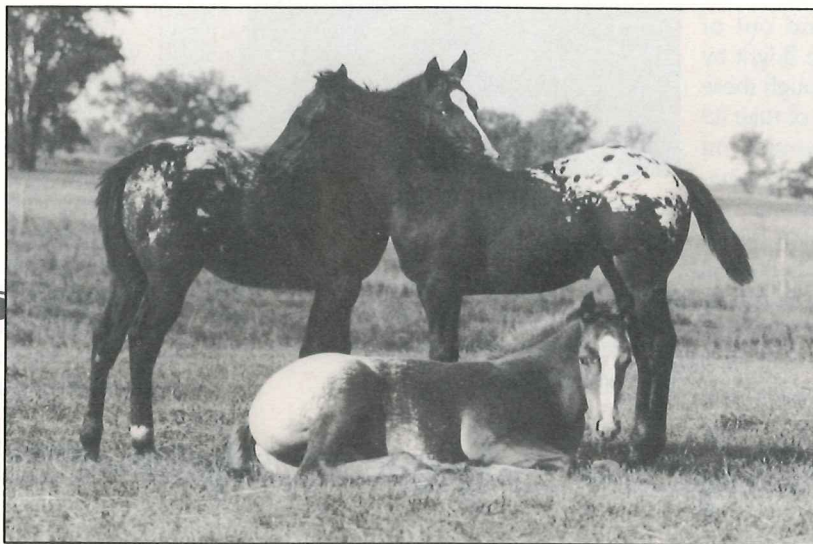
Prince's Jim, a 1969 few-spot leopard son of Prince Plaudit and Joker's Mindy Fe by Joker B produced 201 babies, many of which went on to very successful show and breeding careers. Prince Shannon (out of Barretta Bright by Mighty Bright), from Prince's Jim's first foal crop, was the 1975 National Reserve

Spittin Image, a 1966 stallion by Mighty Bright and out of a Peavy Bimbo daughter, and Mr. Exclusive, a 1968 Bright Eyes Brother son who spent his last four years on the Sheldak ranch, round out the list of major, older stallions who originally infused the Utke's breeding program with the superior bloodlines they were seeking.

"We specifically picked those stallions because the bloodlines they carry produce superior halter ability with the talent to go on and show pleasure the same year they're showing at halter. They're just extremely versatile horses," Kim said. "The number-one reason we've ended up loving every horse with these lines, though, has got to be their disposition. I don't know of any other line of horses that can match the disposition of the

Bright Eyes Brother and Prince Plaudit horses. They're just outstanding.

"Our daughter, Lori, learned to ride horses on our stallions when they were



Kim has a talent for capturing Sheldak foals (these fillies are by Mighty Tim) in cute poses.

Champion Jr. Stallion, and has gone on to produce 268 registered foals of his own. Bronze medallion winners Mighty Prince and Prince Mork were two other successful sons, among many others.

Prince David was the next addition to Sheldak ranch, snagged at the forced dispersal of Carl Miles' MV Ranch. The 100 percent Wiescamp-bred, 1972 sorrel leopard son of Prince Plaudit and String Mount (AQHA) by Bar Mount was successful in the show ring and also went on to produce many successful youngsters out of his 82 registered foals. King David, one of the Utke's current stallions, is one such superior son who inherited his sire's size, muscling and elegance in halter and pleasure classes.

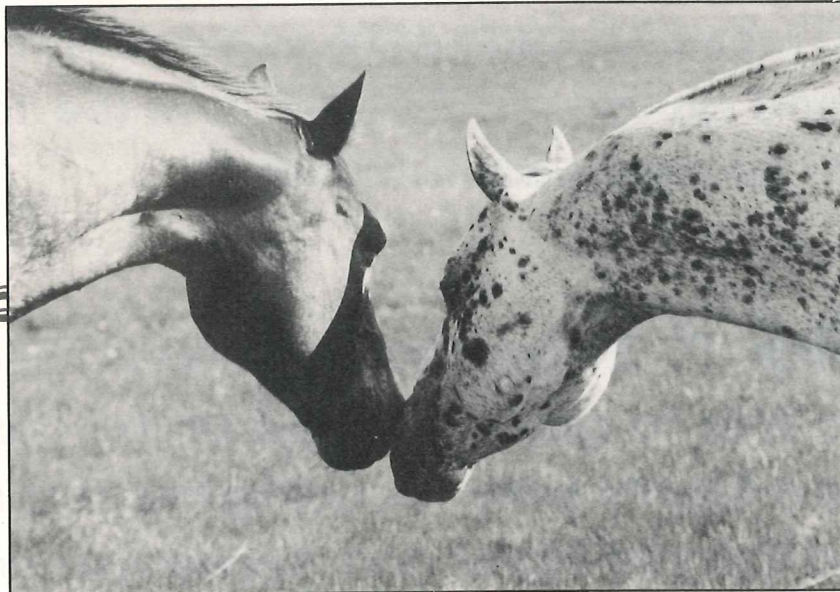
out with their bands of mares. That was bareback with a halter and two lead ropes. The mares would try to come up and pester the studs, and the studs wouldn't let the mares come up to them if the kids were on their back. I think that's pretty amazing."

The Utke's are quick to point out one misconception people sometimes have when they review the pedigrees of their older stallions and their get. They have a lot of Quarter Horses close up, but those paper pedigrees can be misleading.

"Many of those fourth generation horses with (AQHA) after their names were actually Appaloosas picked for superior conformation to start the Quarter Horse registry. The largest amount of Quarter Horses registered off single ranches to start the AQHA were actually off some of the top Appaloosa ranches like Coke Roberds' and the Peavy's,"

Kim pointed out. "They didn't pick the leopards and they didn't pick a lot of the loud, blanketed ones, but they picked the roans with superior conformation in spite of the fact they had other Appaloosa characteristics. Their offspring are registered Quarter Horses, and maybe even another generation after that, then the next generation cropped up with a coat pattern. That's where Mighty Tim and Spittin Image through Bright Eyes Brother came from. That's what our horses go back to — the superior Appaloosas chosen to found the Quarter Horse registry.

That's not to say the Sheldak Ranch breeding program hasn't included Quarter Horses. The Utke's started out with mostly Quarter Horse mares plus two of only five Appaloosa daughters sired by Three Bars (AQHA), Three Bars Queen and Miss Kay Bars, as well as excellent producer Scoops Bunny (AQHA), also a descendant of Three Bars.



Sheldak stallion DF Big Image checks out Wapetta (by Wapiti), one of the broodmares in the band he runs with.

About 80 percent of the 45 broodmares the Utkes now use are Appaloosas, however. The last few years, they've kept about 10 of the last daughters of their deceased stallions to build and

preserve their own bloodlines, and some of those daughters are actually better producers than their original excellent broodmare mothers were. Outstanding Appaloosa champion mares and producers of champions have included Call Me Mighty; Barretta Bright (now deceased), Buzz On By, Scoops Bunny and her daughter, Cherry Bunny. Cherry Bunny's daughter, Golina, produced Brightest Dream, the 1992 National Champion weanling colt.

After this season, the Utkes probably won't retain so many fillies each year. It's costly for them because not only do they give up some of their older, proven

broodmares, but they give up the foals they carry too. Since the Utkes don't stand stallions to outside mares, the only income they have is from selling their 30-45 foals each year.

"It's kind of hard having income only once a year, but we've never had an income from any other source. I guess we're used to it, and it's definitely incentive to work very hard to get those babies sold. I guess that's been another one of our keys to success — hard work. Dave works hard out in the field all day and I bend over backwards to have pictures ready to send out and work as late as possible to get every letter answered in the next day's mail. I guess we're pretty much workaholics," Kim said, adding that only about 30 percent of their foals are sold right now (mostly to repeat customers on their mailing list), but the rest

will all sell after their big ad runs. All their foals must be priced to sell, because they live off that income and can't afford to hold on to any more than the 50 horses their acreage can support.

The Utkes don't stand their stallions to outside mares because they pasture breed for 60 days in the late spring and early summer to control foal birth dates, and they want to make sure all their own mares get covered during that time.

"We only pasture breed with our stallions, because it's the easiest and the best way to get mares in foal. There are also a lot of risks in hand breeding

these stallions that you put so much money into. Out in the pasture, we've never had a horse get injured," Kim said. "Out in the pasture, the mares tease the stallions in order to get covered, while in a hand-breeding situation, the stud teases the mare. The way we do it provides a more natural setting for our stallions.

"It doesn't matter what walk of life these stallions come from, they all behave the same. We take off their halters in the pasture and they just go to grazing and don't even pay attention to the mares until they get teased into breeding them. So, I think once the fence is taken away and the halter's taken off, it just gets down to the basics. They get along so much better; the stallion doesn't run around the pasture putting on a show and looking for mares to take care of. They just quietly graze by themselves or with the group. You know, we've taken people out to the pastures to see the

horses when the stallions are out running with their bands, and had them get back to the house and ask where we keep our stallions."

This method has always worked well for the Utkes. Spittin Image, who was

blind when they got him and Mr. Exclusive, who they purchased severely foundered, are the only two stallions the couple has ever had to hand breed.

"We did have to hand breed with Spittin Image because he was totally blind, but it was mostly done verbally. We would tease the two-year-old fillies over the fence and when it was time to bring them into his gate, we would tell him to go get in the other corner of his pen, and he would," recalled Kim. "When he heard the click on the halter, he knew it was time. In spite of being blind, he never once got kicked. Just like

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a ballet dancer, he would just dodge right away from those fillies if they were inclined to kick for some reason. I have no idea how he did it without seeing. It was pretty amazing."

The Utkes have found that some folks are surprised by their method of running stallions out with their bands of broodmares, even though they've never had a problem getting their mares in foal. Just recently, they took two horses they wanted to keep and ride to be gelded. The vet is a reproductive specialist, and works with some big farms. He was surprised to hear they pasture bred, and stunned to hear you could turn out a colt like Mr. Barretta for the first time and have him know what to do with all those mares.

"I'd never really considered that to be unusual or any sort of problem, but he couldn't believe it. I just don't think you need to

teach those fellows what to do. They figure it out pretty well on their own," Kim said. "Dave and I got a pretty good laugh out of that one."

People are also often surprised by the Utkes' method of raising Appaloosas, but it seems to suit the environment they live in and produce rugged, healthy, well-muscled horses. The Sheldak horses are pastured in the summer and run in the grain fields during the winter. The free-choice ration they're fed through out the winter is grown on roughly 400 acres of the Utkes' farmland. The yearlings have access to straw and shelter to ward away the extreme temperatures that characterize the flat to gently rolling hills of their part of North Dakota. Kim said the horses are really fat come spring, but the heat and insects really pull the weight down on them when summer comes. A stock pond, an artesian well and a windmill

and pump take care of watering in the different pastures.

"I think October is everyone's favorite time of year. The horses and the people like it because it's cooler and the insects aren't so bad, and the horses enjoy it most of all because we start them on the free choice," Kim said. "I wish we could leave the stallions out in the pasture all summer like we do the mares, but we don't have enough room to keep them separate from the mares and we want the foals born during a certain period. They come home to large corrals on the ranch



Kim says Mighty Tim was the best babysitter you could ever want. When Lori or Shannon were on his back, he never let the broodmares come near him.

and have access to stalls where their grain is. They aren't shut in, though. They're free to come and go. Still, it would be nice to leave them out in the pastures."

The Utkes contend that all it would take to convince a potential customer that the Appaloosa breed is the one for them is to take them out into the pastures and show them firsthand what loving, curious dispositions their Appaloosa stallions, mares and foals have.

"Our pastures aren't adjoining, so some of our horses are five miles away from home and people aren't with them a lot, but they're gentle, loving and laid back. You can go into any one of our pastures with a stallion and his mares in it, boost three or four kids up on his back and not have a single problem. If that doesn't win people over to the Appaloosa breed, I guess they should go somewhere else," Kim said. "I just don't think the Appaloosa disposition can be beaten. I think they could sell almost anyone on horses in general because of their personalities," she added. "And, I'll tell you, the terrific dispositions of our stallions have been passed on to their offspring. It's an Appaloosa trait. They're willing to do anything to please people and they're great to learn on. What more could anyone ask for?"

The Utkes are firm advocates of the positive effects horses can have on kids. Their daughter, Lori, who recently

got married and lives in West Fargo, N.D., with new husband, Duane, still keeps two horses on her parents' place. She was very active and successful in youth classes as a kid. Their son, Shannon, who lives and works about 35 miles away with his wife and two sons, didn't get into Appaloosas too much because he "mostly saw the pitchfork end of the operation," but Kim believes both their kids benefited from growing up on the clean lifestyle and the hard, outside work. And, one thing's for sure, horses like Mighty Tim were a part of their family growing up.

Kim and Dave have really enjoyed raising Appaloosas, and they're full of advice for others who might be interested in starting out in the industry.

"An economical and effective way to approach it is to start out with a colored, older proven stallion with top bloodlines and conformation who's past his prime

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but still has a few more good years in him. He'll be less expensive. Then, build your broodmare band with the best solid fillies (they're less expensive) you can afford. This way, you're minimizing your expenses but still getting the color and getting your program off to a great start so you can begin selling babies and saving for more top studs," Kim advised. "Remember, and this has been one of the keys to our success, don't buy just for conformation or just for pedigree. There are enough good horses with both those characteristics that there's no excuse for overlooking one for the other. It doesn't cost any more to feed a good horse than it does to feed a bad one. Be smart, and always purchase the most superior horses you can afford."

The Utkes hope to see more quality people enter the breeding aspect of the industry in the next few years, because they believe the breed has advanced more in the last decades than any other breed, largely due to upgrading through

smart crosses. The only negative aspect they see in the Appaloosa industry is the reduction in the number of colored horses in recent years.

"I really think we need to get the color back into the industry. The CPO program caused the market to fall right out and, frankly, it's been a disaster for breeders. We gained nothing and lost a lot as individuals and as an industry. We lost a lot of quality breeders and vital public interest. When the public comes to an Appaloosa show expecting to see spots and they see what they could've seen at a Quarter Horse event, their interest isn't piqued and business doesn't grow. We no longer have a unique product," Kim said. "Financially, there's been no change since the CPO program came along. I guess it was supposed to help us breeders by increasing the value of our solid horses, but it hasn't mattered a bit. Solids still sell at a fairly low price, and the value of the colored Appaloosa has dropped because people no longer need color to be eligible for the things they want to do with those horses. It really is a shame."

In spite of their reservations about the CPO program, the Utkes remain positive about the breed that provides their livelihood and the breeding program they developed by trying to combine and carry on the foundation breeding and bloodlines established by such early greats as Cecil Dobbin, Lane Hudson and Carl Miles.

"We don't plan on changing much because it seems to be working. I think there will always be a market for a horse with superior conformation and bloodlines that can halter and perform. That's what a lot of people want, and that's what we'll continue to produce for them. It's sort of the legacy we have to carry on from those earlier breeders of superior Appaloosa stallions," Kim said. "Some of the highest compliments we've received on our breeding program have come from those great, older foundation breeders. When it comes from the masters, it's a real compliment. It makes us feel like we've built a strong operation based on the solid foundation of those who were successful with these lines before us." 

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