


A woman with blonde hair, wearing a light-colored cowboy hat and a bright blue long-sleeved shirt, is smiling and riding a brown horse. The horse has a white blaze on its face and is wearing a decorative halter. The background is a soft-focus green field with a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

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*On The Air
with
Kelly
Kraegel*

How this former television host and Miss Rodeo California juggles the responsibilities of motherhood, running her own business, working a string of 25 show horses, and keeping up one of the happiest and most successful groups of customers in the business.


By Abbie Trexler



If you know Kelly Kraegel from a distance you may think talent and good looks. When you get to chat with her in person, you think charisma and positive attitude. In a two-hour interview about a laundry list of topics Kelly is cheerful and interesting, and moves the conversation along as if she is the one asking the questions. Not so surprising with her background in public relations and televised interviews. We talk about her childhood, her accomplishments outside of the show ring, her training philosophies. By the time we say goodbye, I realize what her customers all know: her enthusiasm for every aspect of life is infectious.

Kelly came from easy beginnings. Her riding career started at the age of seven when her family bought her riding lessons at the local barn, Serrano Creek Ranch, in Lake Forest, California. Her love of horses was immediate, and she showed Quarter Horses and Paints on the open circuit for the first few years. When her parents moved to a property with enough land to keep horses, they took in a boarder who introduced the Kraegels to Morgans. Kelly's first Morgan was a bit of a handful, but she soon sold him and moved on to a six-year-old chestnut gelding named Kern's Endeavor GCH. He was fairly unknown at the time, but the then 12-year-old Kelly worked him at home all winter, teaching him showmanship as a fall-back division, since she'd had to do that with her previous horse. After a winter of diligence, the two debuted to an undefeated show at Diamond Jubilee, even winning the showmanship class. They won big at the Medallion in August, and by the time the Morgan Grand National rolled around in October of 1992, the two were ready to take on the world. "I won every class I showed him in at Nationals," she remembers. The two left the arena with their first set of roses, a partnership that jump-started a long career for the both of them. Kelly's parents sold Kern after he won the 13 & Under Western Pleasure World Championship that year, and he went on to win many, many more with a variety of riders.

In the meantime, with thoughts of "Kern" in her head, Kelly rode other Morgans to many championships, eventually easing in to a pattern of buying a horse in the fall, working it and showing it for a year, and then selling it after Nationals. It was a great way for a teenager to make a little money and to gain experience. "It actually helped build my training business because it really showed that I was doing well with a lot of different horses," Kelly remembered.



Left page: Kelly with Kern's Endeavor GCH in the meadow at Cottonwood Creek Ranch

Main images © Steve Thornton

Kelly's wardrobe is courtesy of Cruel Girl ~ Hats courtesy of Justin Hats & Larry Mahan Hats

As Kelly gained exposure in the show ring, she was steadily building her training toolkit through working her horses at home. She learned to ride all three seats, taking lessons and tips from Mary Leudtke. “Anytime I needed help or got stuck, or was having problems, I’d go see her,” she laughed. “Mary taught me about patterns, and was a set of eyes from the outside. She was forever patient!”

“Training horses is the perfect job for me: I’m such a busybody, I like to have things going on, I always have ideas. When I was a late teenager showing, it was that way with the horses. I didn’t have as many horses, so the ones I did have, they were all dead broke because I rode them all the time, I trail rode, and I drove them.” As Kelly moved through horses in her teenage years, she purchased Mey-Lena’s Night Rhythm as a project. At the end of two years, he not only knew Western pleasure and showmanship, but also how to bow and lay down. Because of Kelly’s insatiable urge to try new things, she decided that Night Rhythm and she should try something new.

“I went on the hunt for a sidesaddle, and bought one, determined to teach him how to ride sidesaddle. I had never ridden sidesaddle before, and I had never met anybody that knew anything about the discipline, so I basically winged it. And he turned out really well and was great at it! I had a lot of fun, and I got a lot of funny looks, too,” Kelly laughs, remembering.

After teaching her horse to bow, lay down, and ride sidesaddle, Kelly needed a new challenge.

“I wasn’t sure what to do next. I saw a flier at our local tack store for a rodeo queen competition, you could win a saddle and a belt buckle, and I thought, ‘That is for me!’ I went to the first meeting, found out I had to give a speech and I almost quit, because the thought of it scared me to death,” she said. “But I went along with it, and I learned a lot, and I didn’t win the saddle or the belt buckle. I just kept studying the rodeo and its history, and learned how to do the modeling and about the clothing styles. Participating in those pageants really taught me a lot that benefits me now in my business. Talking to people, giving my lessons. I ended up running for Miss Rodeo California, and I had to run a couple of times before I finally won in 2002. As the winner of the competition, your job is to be a public relations representative for professional rodeo and our Western heritage. I spent the year traveling to rodeos and schools and doing radio and TV spots, and convincing the public to attend rodeos. I met with sponsors to get money for communities and their rodeos. A lot of people are several generations removed from the farm, and they don’t understand about horses and livestock, how our country has been built on agriculture. Most people don’t understand about rodeo, they don’t understand the concept of a bucking strap, so I would explain different aspects of the sport.

“When I competed in Miss Rodeo America, I was first runner up. I lost by one point and it was so close that they held up their coronation so they could do a recount!” Kelly’s judged many pageants and led a lot of clinics for pageants, along with some modeling for small fashion companies, but with the way her business has grown, she’s detached a bit from the pageant and modeling life.

“One of the many times I was competing for Miss Rodeo California, there was a camera crew there from The Outdoor Channel filming the pageant. After it was over, they called me and told me they really liked me—they were starting a new show and wondered if I would be interested in hosting it. I was trying to play it cool, so I said, ‘Yeah, that’d be fun.’ So they said they’d call back the following week and I could come in for an interview. The next day they called me back and said there had been a change of plans—they wanted to send me out immediately to interview Aaron Tippin, a country music artist who was really hot at that time. They said, ‘If it goes well, you can have the job.’ So I got off the phone and bounced through the house, screaming about how fun this was going to be! So thank goodness I’d had that rodeo queen experience and had become good at talking with people and covering up my nerves. I went to interview him, and it turns out he likes to fly, as I do (Kelly has her pilot’s license), and we were able to talk airplanes. He was just a really nice guy. He made me look great, and I got the job,” she went on. “So every week I got to go and interview a new country music artist, like The Bellamy Brothers, Merle Haggard, Tracy Lawrence, Tracy Byrd, and Colin Ray. I would go in the studio in the morning and introduce music videos, like what you’d see on Country Music Television, and then they would play a section of my interview with the different artists. It ran once a week for three seasons.”

Kelly had been training Morgans the whole time she was filming the show, but soon moved to Oklahoma and started to grow her business. The self-proclaimed master of time management reflects that was before she had 30 horses in training, six hours of lessons a day and a three-year-old to raise.

Kelly’s daughter Emmy was born in January of 2009. On motherhood: “So she is three this year, which is much older than any of my houseplants, so I’m doing it well,” she joked. How has being a mom changed her life? It’s definitely improved her sense of humor, she says. “She makes me laugh every day. I love talking to her, asking her questions and showing her things, just to see what she’s going to say, because you just don’t know. Her take on the world is so different, and I think that’s really neat. It’s helped me relate better to other parents, to the people I meet along the way, and the kids that I teach. I think there’s something that comes from being a mom that you don’t understand unless you are a mom.”

As Kelly continued in her training career, she always kept tabs on her first world champion, Kern’s Endeavor GCH. “Every year I would see him show and it would make me so sad that I would cry, even as a grown up trainer! He was my first love,” she reflected. “So eventually, Mary Carlton came to me one year at Nationals and said he was for sale. I bought him back when he was 18, he’s 26 now. Now he gets to make other kids dreams come true.”

Even in her junior exhibitor years, Kelly’s charisma was evident every time the gate opened and she jogged in. She was beautifully turned out, and always perfectly attired. Interestingly, her clothes weren’t purchased from a clothier, they were made at home by her mom.



*Kelly riding SSLC
On Demand at
home in a pasture*

Photo © Steve Thornton

"I have the best mom in the whole world!" Kelly's so enthusiastic when she talks about her mom, Ann. "She helps me with Emmy, and when I need guidance she's always there. She is the most incredible seamstress in the entire world! She made all of my rodeo queen clothes when I was doing my pageants, and she sewed all of my show clothes, as well." The designs are often a collaboration of their ideas, sometimes based off a rhinestone they favor, or a trim they like. "We'll watch award shows, or ice skating competitions for inspiration. Some of the stuff I have now are show clothes renderings of my queen clothes. My peacock jacket that I show in—I had an entire peacock dress that was all leather and peacock feathered for Miss Rodeo America, and it was a real similar design. It had a lot of fringe, so my mom took that idea, modernized it up, and whacked the fringe off, and made me a jacket similar to that." But even though her skill was apparent to everyone who watched a beautifully outfitted Kelly shine in the ring, it took a long time for Ann to build up the confidence to create jackets for other people. It takes a lot of courage to sew leather—if you have to rip out a seam it leaves holes in the material. "She likes to get her clothing perfect and is very detail-oriented in her work. She agreed to make clothes for Lauren Little, and now she sews for a lot of different people in my barn. She knows how show clothing is supposed to fit. And she knows what she likes, and what I like, and what each rider likes. She takes it all into consideration. She makes their outfit fit their personality, and she does a great job of matching colors to skin tone, along with their horse's color. She's gotten really popular, and they (the customers) keep her really busy, which I am thankful for because whenever my people look good, I feel that it's a good reflection on me. I don't get near as many fancy new clothes as I used to," mused Kelly, "But it's so much better because I get to watch them go around in the arena!"

Outfitting tips from Kelly? "The number one most important thing for any seat and any outfit is that it's got to fit, and it's got to fit tight. It'll make your figure look better. The material just lays better if it's fit to your body and not too baggy," she divulged. "I keep my equitation riders in traditional equitation suits; a one color monochromatic look. For the equitation I think it makes a cleaner line, it doesn't break the rider up. A lot of our adults wear black chaps and a white hat. We still wear the tuxedo shirts under our jackets with a tie, and although ties aren't required anymore, I think it looks more finished and pulls the outfit together. We do get a little more wild in our hunt seat attire, we stretch our colors a little more in the jackets. Because you see the same black boots, black hat in every rider in that ring. So we try to change up the color of the jacket a little bit. But again, those are all fitted. Even jackets that fit you off the rack are probably going to need the sleeves taken in, because they just make those too big."

Ryne Swope is one of the few male riders that Kelly has put in the show ring at the National level. Partnered with Evil Knieval GCH, he left the arena in 2011 with roses in both Western equitation and pleasure. Outfitting a young man for equitation and Western pleasure can present a challenge. "Ryne's shirts were off the rack, then Ann fitted them. With a man showing, you want them to look masculine. That was our task with attiring Ryne." She continued, "We needed to make him look equitation appropriate, but not make him look feminine. We chose black chaps for

him that Ann made out of a heavy, black suede leather. We kept with mainly black to keep with that monochromatic look for equitation, we had a little bit going on in the yolk of his shirt, to keep it interesting and to bring your eye more up to his face. We found a tuxedo jacket that Ann took in and shortened up, and that's what Ryne showed in for his pleasure championship. It was a bit more formal, but very fitted, and still western."

A day in the life of Kelly is a crazy day, she laughs. A normal day during the week goes like this: "I get up about 4:30 a.m., I go down to the barn, the two girls that work for me meet me down there and we start working horses. At about 7 a.m., I run up to the house and get Emmy up and take her to daycare, and the girls get ahead of me—they get more horses saddled, put up what I've ridden already. I come back and finish riding the horses—we usually finish around 11:30 a.m., and then I drive back to town to pick up Emmy, we have lunch together, I drop Emmy off at the babysitter's and then I give lessons from 2 p.m. until around 7 p.m. It makes me breathless just listening to her talk about it. "The lessons run back to back, and they're all scheduled in perfectly. I have a few group lessons, but I do mostly 30-minute private lessons. At 7 p.m. I run back to pick Emmy up from the babysitter, and we come home, we eat dinner, and we talk about Tinker Bell and Minnie Mouse and SpongeBob, and why we should really eat our dinner. And Emmy goes to bed, and I do paperwork. And that's a day here at Cottonwood Creek."

"On Saturdays, we get up early and work all of the horses, and then I have a huge ten o'clock group lesson which includes all of my show riders. So there can be between ten and fifteen riders in that group! I try to be done by noon." Kelly catches up on her sleep on her days off, hangs out with Emmy, and does the managerial work for her business that needs tending to, such as trips to the feed store and invoicing.

With 25 horses in training and a large lesson horse string, Kelly works about 33 horses a day, and gives 50 lessons a week. Kelly's lessons are primarily her show riders, but she still has a few beginning riders in her program, as well.

Cottonwood Creek has a booming lesson program that's run by Mandy Highsaw. Kelly and Mandy actively promote the lesson program through the website (www.cottonwoodcreekmorgans.com), and print advertising, along with signage.

"I think it's really important to get new people into horses, into the Morgan breed, and new people around livestock and animals in general," says Kelly, who still maintains her love for educating people about Western heritage. "So we do have a very busy lesson program. We have signs that we give to different families, and they put them out in front of their house on their street. We did the Groupon, which was really wonderful, and got over 150 new riders from that. About 75% of those have bought more lessons. We do birthday parties—if one of our lesson kids has a birthday party and they bring ten kids, five of those kids might start taking lessons. We also do summer camps, and the kids love those. It's worked out really well for making the lesson program explode!"

Cottonwood Creek is nestled on almost eleven acres. Two large pastures, one smaller, and a few small turnout make up the



*Kelly posts to Intrepid On
Parade's voluminous trot*

Photo © Steve Thornton

outskirts. The main barn has 23 stalls, a viewing area and staff housing, tack room, wash rack, and a bathroom. A second barn houses a shop and 14 stalls in it. A third barn adds four stalls to the count. The majority of the lesson horses live in the pasture, with a few boarder's horses, and the barn is mainly all show horses. A big indoor arena is in the main barn, and Kelly has a huge outdoor ring.

Kelly's horses are incredibly steady and well-made in the show ring. They are well-matched with their riders, and everyone seems happy. "I mainly ride my horses. I do a lot of saddle work. I think if you want a horse to be broke under saddle, you've got to ride them. If you want your kids and amateurs to be able to ride them, you need to ride their horses so that they know what to do when their amateurs might not. I try to match every horse to every rider, so when I pick them, I try to get them to complement each other. And I work them that way, too. If I know that one of my amateurs is really heavy handed, I work the horse so that if a rider takes a big hold of their bridle the horse won't be reactionary. If the rider is aggressive, I need the horse to be responsive to it. If the rider is timid, the horse needs to be a little slower and not scare his rider. I try to adjust them that way," she said. "In that regard, I do spend a lot of time in the saddle.

"With my hunt and Western horses, I do a lot of biting and lunging. I have an 72 foot, eight horse Exerciser machine that looks like a hotwalker, but instead of being attached with a rope, they're actually free. It will walk, trot, canter and reverse them.

"My assistants are so important to my program. They are so organized, professional and excellent with the people and the horses. They keep my barn and my life running smoothly and I couldn't do it without them. Summer White, Valerie Eshleman, Mandy Highsaw and Karen Laubach—I can do what I do because of the support you give me."The assistants bit and lunge, but Kelly rides her own horses.

On teaming horses with riders: "I would love to go buy the customers the most incredible horse ever, but you have to work within a budget. So I try to get the best horse I can at the best price," she tells me. "A young rider needs a horse with some experience behind them. You don't want to put them on a green horse who's still learning about life, needing to have mistakes corrected. You need a solid horse for a green rider. And I'm okay with an older horse for that—they have so much training and experience behind them. If you are looking for an equitation mount for rider you just don't have time to start a young horse from scratch, your rider would be done with equitation. On a rider that's looking to move up to a more competitive horse, maybe wants to win an amateur world title, it'd be good to find one that's maybe less trained, and then turn them into that fabulous world champion. I would prefer to start all of my own horses, because I like how I start them, I know what I have, I know what they're going to turn out like. That way, I'm not dealing with other issues and mistakes, bad habits."

Across the board, Kelly's horses all work similarly in that they'll move off your legs really well. Each is tailored to the individual rider. "You could ride them on just their curb, or just their snaffle, and they'd be okay with that. They're going to look best if you know how to balance those, but their all around training is really similar."

Kelly starts eight to ten young horses a year. She's a big believer

in letting the horse determine on their own what their discipline is instead of forcing them into something they hate. "I love being a horse trainer, but I would be totally miserable if you stuck me in a room and made me be an accountant. It's the same with the horses."

Consistency is one of the common denominators in Kelly's training program. "You have go out to the barn and do your work. Me and all my riders, everyone who works for me—we're all hard workers and very determined, and we're very consistent and fair with the horses. My riders show up for their lessons every week, and I teach them how to ride their horses. I show up for work every day, and I teach these horses to do their jobs as best I can, and I think you see that when they go into the show arena, that the horses know their jobs and they enjoy doing it. My horses know what to expect and know I am fair and consistent with them. And the riders know how to make the horses do their jobs. If they feel an issue arising, they're able to resolve it without it turning into a big deal. I think that consistency is key," she confirms. "Most of my riders ride twice a week, sometimes more. I like to see them in a private 30 minute lesson so we can work one on one with their horse, and we can really talk about why things are happening the way they are, what they are supposed to look like, whether it looks right or doesn't. And then I like them to come to a big group lesson, because it helps both the horse and the rider learn how to negotiate the large classes. Traffic doesn't frazzle my horses or my riders, because they're used to it. They know how to get their horses seen, they can look ahead and avoid problems by not passing on the rail and not circling in the middle of the ring in a hand galloping 20-horse class at the Grand National. They probably made the mistake at home, saw the outcome wasn't good, and know not to do it in the show arena. I think that experience and the education that they carry to the arena is what keeps them so consistent."

On any given Saturday morning at the ranch, or at any show, you'll find Kelly's customers smiling and having fun. They socialize during the adults only Wine & Cheese Group Lesson, enjoy time at their lake houses together, and have big barn parties at shows and at Christmas. The Saturday morning lessons are a social event of sorts, as well. Kelly has logoed shirts and jackets, and sends out a newsletter and updates on Facebook.

"I have wonderful people! In order to keep your customers happy, to have a good barn with good attitude and good sportsmanship, you really have to expect that from yourself, as well. I couldn't be mean and grouchy and non-supportive, and then turn around and tell my customers not to act that way." Kelly leads by example. "I expect myself to be positive, to be happy and be a good sport, and by doing so I show them that I expect the same."

Kelly enthusiastically tells me about the infamous pink elephant necklace—a mardi gras necklace that she keeps in the barn. "It's a hideous thing with large plastic squeaky pink elephants on it. If someone is being pouty or having a bad day, we assign them the pink elephant necklace. You can't wear a pink elephant necklace and not smile! I've had to wear it myself," she giggles. "It's a fun and serious way to remind people to maintain a fun attitude, and to keep our happy place happy." ■



1. Kelly in 1991 on her first Morgan, Desiderata Select; 2. Kern's Endeavor & Kelly in 1993; 3. Kelly and Mey-Lena's Night Rhythm. She taught him side saddle, too!; 4. Kelly with Alana Little and Bell South in 2009; 5. Cowboys & Indians Cowboy Decor ad; 6. Signing autographs for The Outdoor Channel; 7. Miss Rodeo California, 2002; 8. Sky Diving; 9. Kelly with her mom, Ann, and daughter, Emmy, in 2009; 10. Kelly and Emmy, 2012; 11. Kelly, Mallory Stacy and EV Santa Fe Special, 2011 World Champion Western Pleasure; 12. Kelly with Ryne Swope, 2010; 13. Kelly and some of her riders at Red River Classic; 14. Kelly with Austin Oplotnik and DVF Kingsway, 2010.

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Background photo © Steve Thornton