

Goodbye to PATRICK SWAYZE

It was early morning on September 15, 2009 when I turned on the radio and heard the bad news: Patrick Swayze had lost his fierce battle against cancer. Sadness struck me and I stopped for a moment. My thoughts flashed back to the summer of 1997 when I was still at university and started to publish articles. The first interview I had ever done in my career as a journalist was with Patrick Swayze and his wife Lisa Niemi. Me being a newcomer at that time, I was very curious how a world-famous Hollywood star would behave. Patrick Swayze turned out to be a genuine Arabian horse enthusiast, grounded, open and talkative – a true gentleman. His charming wife Lisa was his perfect complement.

Following is the interview I did at that time. A conversation with a unique man, thoughts and views of an amazing couple.

■ *by Judith Wich*

Patrick Swayze and Lisa Niemi

Sharing a Dream

*“We breed Arabian horses because we want to continue a legacy
which is hundreds of years old.*

That’s a heritage which deserves to be continued.”



Patrick Swayze and his beloved stallion Tammen. Photo: Javan



Patrick Swayze winning the Amateur Halter Class Grand Championship with Tammen Shah at the Egyptian Event 1996. Photo: Rob Hess

Most of the world thinks of the American Patrick Swayze as a famous actor in films such as “Dirty Dancing”, “Ghost” and the television series “North and South”. Only a few knew that he has been an Arabian horse enthusiast since his childhood.

As a little boy he visited the famous Gleannloch Farms in Texas, USA, and fell in love with the beauty of the Arabian horse. At Gleannloch Farms he also met the experienced horseman Tom McNair, who has been involved with Arabians since 1959. He was trainer and manager at Gleannloch for 30 years. Friends now call Tom a walking encyclopedia of Egyptian Arabian pedigrees, and today Tom is manager of Thistlewood Farms in Texas and a recognised judge worldwide. In 1972 Patrick Swayze married Lisa Niemi, a well-known actress of Finnish descent. She also shares Patrick’s passion for Arabian horses. Some years ago she gave Patrick a very special birthday present – the straight Egyptian stallion Tammen (Abenhetep x Talgana). Tammen is now an important cornerstone for Patrick and Lisa’s breeding program, which is primarily based on straight Egyptian bloodlines.

In my interview with Patrick Swayze and his wife Lisa Niemi, we discussed their Arabian horses and talked about important factors in the handling, rearing and training of their horses.

Judith Wich: *During your youth you both visited the famous Gleannloch Farms in Texas, owned by the Marshall family. What were your impressions?*

Patrick Swayze: *When I was a little boy I always had the vision of a perfect horse who would be like a steed of the gods. I grew up with Quarter horses and Thoroughbreds. At Gleannloch Farms I had the chance to meet the most beautiful horses I had ever seen in my life. Their elegance and intelligence impressed me very much.*

Lisa Niemi: *At this time Tom McNair ran the farm and his children took dancing lessons from Patrick’s mom and Patrick taught them swimming. Patrick elaborates, “That’s how I first met them, and we’ve remained friends ever since. When dignitaries, for example the Egyptian President, Anwar Al Sadat, visited the Marshalls, they put on a horse show and my mother’s dance company performed. That was when I began dreaming about*



Patrick and Lisa
enjoying country life

owning Arabian horses. "Lisa continues, "I first visited Gleannloch Farms with a theatre group when I was 12 years old. They gave us a short horse show and I still remember how deeply I was impressed. It was years later that Patrick and I found out that we had been at the same place during our childhood." Patrick happily recounts, "Furthermore, we both shared the same dream – Arabian horses!" "Yes, and now we do own Arabian horses and Tom McNair is our mentor," Lisa adds.

Judith Wich: Did you see Morafic at Gleannloch Farms?
Patrick Swayze: (fondly) Yes, I did. He is the first Arabian horse I ever saw – he was the reason I fell in love with these horses.



Patrick with Tammen. Photos: Javan

Judith Wich: When did you buy your first Arabian?

Lisa Niemi: Our first Arabian was the gelding BR Ferouk Robert, purchased in 1986. He's a Western Pleasure horse, very well trained and after a little training with him Patrick went Top 5 at our first Regional Show, and then Top 10 at the US Nationals – first year! Patrick commented, "We still have Robert, he's a wonderful horse to ride."

Judith Wich: How many horses do you have at your farm, Rancho Bizarro, in California?

Patrick Swayze: At the moment we have eight, but we would like to bring a few more here to California. We have built a really nice facility including a 16-stall barn, a roundyard and two arenas. Lisa continues, "Although it's very small here, we can take care of the horses properly. We have a lot of acres of the National Forest to ride in right behind the house." Patrick further adds, "Tammen and all our breeding and show horses stay with Tom McNair at Thistlewood Farms in Kerrville, Texas, outside of San Antonio. Lisa and I became aircraft pilots a while back so that we can fly a high performance twin-engine as a team. Now we are able to fly to a horse show a few days earlier and start training the horses. It means so much more to us not to just own these horses, but



Lisa Niemi loves riding Arabian horses



to learn and to show them ourselves. You have to try to really understand the mind of the horse and to learn how to communicate with them. Every horse is different. You have to stay constantly inventive with Arabians because they figure out the system and become bored." Lisa agrees, adding, "They are wonderful to work with – challenging and wonderful, but challenging in a good way." Patrick and Lisa have recently purchased a ranch in New Mexico with large pasture land – "But we don't want to say where!" Lisa exclaimed. They will ultimately move there, but, Patrick explained, "We will always keep our major horses with Tom McNair – he's our guru."

Judith Wich: So Tom McNair has taught you a lot?

Patrick Swayze: Tom has taught us everything over the past twenty years. We've gotten better and better to the extent that we now train our young horses.

Judith Wich: Do you have a favourite horse?

Patrick Swayze: (Musing) That's hard to say, but it has to be Tammen. He's our star and he knows it. Lisa adds, "Tammen loves showing off for people" Patrick further elaborates, "But he also has a kind heart and a real gentle nature which he passes on to his foals. I have dreamed of having a bond with a special horse for all these years and Tammen really is that horse. Moreover, that's the wonderful thing about showing horses because it's really about the horse, not about you and your little ego. It's about how good a job you can do to give this horse the chance to be the best it can be."

Judith Wich: Tell us something about your everyday life. How much time do you spend with your horses?

Lisa Niemi: That varies. Patrick adds, "We have a groom whom we trained in our style, so he's able to keep working with the horses when we are out of town." Lisa chimes in, "Our life is not routine at all, we travel a lot, to the Middle East for example, or for our careers. It's always nice to get back to the horses because they're grounding in their way. After Hollywood premieres and a lot of public appearances we particularly love to be back with our horses again."

Judith Wich: Which moments do you enjoy most with your Arabians?

Patrick Swayze: I think the moments which we enjoy the most are when we learn more from Tom McNair, whom we call our 'Papa Tom'. This man has probably forgotten more than most people will ever know about the Arabian horse. I'm sure every Arabian horse lover knows exactly what I'm talking about – the more you learn about horses, the more you realise what you don't know.

Judith Wich: What motivates you to breed Arabians?

Patrick Swayze: We love the horses, but we don't love the

business. We breed Arabian horses because we want to continue a legacy which is hundreds of years old. That's a heritage which deserves to be continued. Our fear is that horses may disappear from our society because they're no longer absolutely necessary. When something ceases to have a use it usually disappears. Hopefully more and more horse people will stay true to that passion and not let these beautiful creatures disappear from the face of the earth like so many other things have done.

Judith Wich: You like going to Arabian horse shows. Do you prefer halter or performance classes?

Patrick Swayze: Well, that's an interesting question. Halter is very political, but we got involved with horses to get away from the political world of the movie business. That's why we love performance a lot more. Lisa, laughingly adds, "And actually, the people who are showing performance are having a lot more fun than those showing at halter!" Patrick, however, recalls "Although I must admit, that was a really big moment for Tammen and me when we went Grand Champion in Amateur Owner at Scottsdale!"

Judith Wich: Do you prefer certain bloodlines?

Patrick Swayze: We breed straight Egyptians. Sometime ago we did some experiments with breeding our stallion to mares from other horse breeds. It was very interesting, for instance, to see a Tammen foal out of a big Tennessee Walker mare. Lisa adds, "Our personal eye loves the refinement and the beauty, but you have to breed for athleticism and movement as well. By the way, we don't do anything artificial with our horses in order to change their tail carriage or movement. When people look at our horses and see a beautiful tail carriage and beautiful movement I want them to know that our horses have it because it's in their breeding, not because we did something artificial." Patrick further elaborates, "We are not interested in Arabians for the sake of winning, we want to constantly breed a better and more beautiful horse, based on Morafic and Nazeer bloodlines."

Judith Wich: How do you select breeding horses? Which criteria are most important to you?

Patrick Swayze: (Quickly) The first thing that comes to my mind is, does the pedigree of this horse show that it can reproduce what you are hoping to accomplish? For example, when we breed a mare from the Sakr line to Tammen it is not absolutely necessary that she has perfect type because we know that Tammen will usually take care of that. But the bloodlines of this mare say that she should be very, very athletic and have beautiful movement. Sakr (Sultan x Enayat) was famous for these traits. Lisa points out, "The more you learn about breeding Arabians, the more you can foresee which traits may be hereditary."



Patrick with Tammen

Patrick and Tammen during the filming of a TV Special produced for Australian broadcast



Judith Wich: I recently saw an educational video in which you showed a lot of sympathetic understanding for a little foal. Is this gentle manner of dealing with horses a philosophy for you?

Lisa Niemi: Yes, absolutely. We love working with the foals. When your horse reacts in a different manner to what you expect, at first you have to question yourself and not the horse. You have to train yourself at least as much as you train your horse. I think this manner of dealing with horses is very different compared to the methods used by other people.

Judith Wich: Finally, what are your plans for the future?

Lisa Niemi: Have fun and learn more. "And keeping on trying to breed the most beautiful horses we possibly can," Patrick Swayze concludes. □

Postscriptum: Patrick Swayze passed away at his most favourite place, his farm in New Mexico with his wife Lisa being at his side.



Patrick with Melinda Reid and Tom McNair at Thistlewood Farms, Texas



Johnathan O. B.

Patrick with Tammen