

Bill Duffy:

# “I am obsessed With Dutch Harness Horses”

As the lucky owner of KWPN Stallion Show harness horse champion Macho, who was recently approved as the Harness horse stallion with the highest marks ever, Bill Duffy could not be happier. “I never dreamed in my wildest dreams that he would get the scores he did.” But why does this American like such a specific Dutch show horse? How did he get involved with them and what are his plans with Macho?

*Text: Karin Karlas - Images: Sandra Nieuwendijk E.A.*

**T**his January a year ago, Bill Duffy and his fiancé Erin Shea flew to the Netherlands to attend the KWPN Stallion Show in Den Bosch, for the first time in their lives. Not only to enjoy all the quality horses that were coming to the selection and were shown in presentations, but also with the hope to find their ultimate harness horse. And they found him: Macho, a son of former KWPN Stallion Show champion Indiana, out of the mare Emone ster (by Unieko), bred by Jacob Arends from Garmerwolde, the Netherlands.

## It takes a brain

Bill tells: "I guess it was last summer that I started looking around in the Netherlands. We were interested in another stallion, but that did not work out in the end. At that point, I had already planned to come to Den Bosch. We always said that we were not going over there buying just A stallion, we are going there to buy THE stallion: we are not going to settle for just anything. Frankly, by the time we got to Den Bosch I was thinking: I'll enjoy the show, it's not going to happen, as far as buying a stallion. Then Macho came into the ring and I was like: 'who is that!' I was actually sitting next to Wim Cazemier who is friends with Klaas (Buist, edit), who was part owner of the horse. Wim called Klaas and we worked out the deal right there in Den Bosch, pending the vetting of course."

What was it that attracted Bill and Erin to Macho immediately? "The biggest thing that sold me to him, besides his conformation and movement of course, is the way he handled the environment in Den Bosch. He has this kind of a calm, cool attitude about him and the noise of the crowd got his withers to come up, that neck came up... There was no nervousness, no tension or fear. He kind of puffed up and said: 'Look at me'. He really looked like he was having fun. To make a horse stack up scores like he did, it takes more than a good conformation and movement, it takes a brain."

## Absolutely surreal

After buying Macho, Billy sent him to Robbie and Chantal van Dijk in preparation for his performance test this fall. "I was almost as nervous to send him there as I was to send him to the test centre, because they really know what a good horse is. But Robbie and Chantal liked him from the get-go. It was obviously exciting to see they think so highly of him, when they have so many great ones to compare him to."

The test in Ermelo took three weeks, the longest weeks of Bill's life. On October 31st, it was exam day. Macho ended up getting the highest scores of all times for his test, with only 9's and 9,5's. "I was up in the morning at 2 and could not sleep, I was so nervous. My brother and his wife, one of my friends, my parents, Erin and I were all up, watching the exam. When I heard the scores, it was absolutely surreal. I knew Cizandro had the highest scores and I knew what they were. So I knew instantly that he had broken a record. I never dreamed in my wildest dreams that he would get these scores, but I am happy he did. I was joking: 'I learned all my Dutch numbers for the test, and I only had to know 9!'"

"It still hasn't sunk in. He is so far away, I haven't seen him for so long now. I am so grateful to all the people who made it happen. Robbie and Chantal, his breeders, Klaas and Harald (Dekker, edit) for selling him, Wim Cazemier for introducing me to them, Scot (Tolman, edit) for giving me a seat at his ringside table in Den Bosch. There's just a lot of people who made this happen, I was the least of it, to be honest. I

remember going to the Netherlands and seeing Cizandro, seeing Atleet, these horses that I've been looking at for all those years, it was like meeting a celebrity. To have a horse that could be in that kind of realm is just unbelievable."



## Life mission

Harness horses are, with about 550 to 600 foals a year in the Netherlands, not the biggest breeding direction of the KWPN and also the show sport is a relatively small branch, unique to the Netherlands. So how is it that a guy from the States gets interested in this type of horse? Bill: "I grew up with driving horses. We started with Morgan Horses, and worked our way up to Hackney horses. We did some pleasure shows in the past but I was not really competing. My dad did a lot of commercial work like weddings and funerals and parades and that sort of thing. My dad liked to work for a paycheck, not a ribbon", he laughs. "I think it was '05, '06, maybe '07, when harness horse stallion Opgenoort got imported to the US. I remember my dad having a calendar down in the basement and it had a picture of him in it. That was the one horse that struck me, and I wanted to find out more about these horses. I feel like you don't really appreciate harness horses until you stand next to a really nice one, there is nothing like it. There is this presence and power to them, they are

just the most spectacular horses. These horses just barefoot like to show and they are bred to do it.”

Bill continues: “It was 2010 after I started up my horseshoeing business, and was saving as much money as I could. It was sort of my life mission to own one of these horses. I bought my first harness horse mare in 2010. It was a nine-year-old mare named Unora, a Patijn x Koblenz mare. She was bred to Opgenoort and I bought her a couple of months before Opgenoort died. She had a colt that I thought the world of. I really enjoyed this horse and he was my first experience with showing these horses. Unfortunately, we lost him to colic in 2006, he was only 6 years old. I had been looking for a stallion ever since. I’ve always liked the idea of standing stallions, presenting stallions and that sort of thing. We tried to breed one, but we kept having fillies. Then I bought some young prospects that just did not work out, and I think it was last year, we bred all of our mares and none of them were in foal. Then I said: ‘Forget it, I am buying one’.”

## Lifelong passion

Ever since Bill’s passion for harness horses caught fire, he is always gathering information, reading and watching videos online. “I am always on the KWPN Database looking at pedigrees. Ask anybody that knows me, and they will say that I am obsessed. It is so great that both Erin and I enjoy them. Anybody else would get sick of me, talking about them all the time”, he laughs. “If you talk about driving horses, they are the ultimate driving horse. I just don’t see any other horse that comes close. I am sure this will be a lifelong passion. Den Bosch was the first time I had ever gone to the Netherlands, and to see all these horses and these people and places I’ve been watching online on videos for 15 years was just unbelievable.”

Bill continues: “It is very hard to get information about harness horses in the States. If I could just go over to spend a month there, I could learn in a month what took me over 10 years over here. At every barn I go, I am looking at what they are using for tack and how they have things set up. Wim has been helpful to learn from in the U.S. and of course when we went over to the Netherlands, he was my tour guide. He took me over to Marcel Ritsma’s, Henk Hammers, Harry van Middelaar’s and Klaas Buist’s stables. Over here, there’s probably half a dozen people who can teach me about harness horses, and all of them are 6 to 12 hours away. So there are a lot of phone conversations, e-mails, sending videos of what I am doing to people, and a lot of trial and error. I’ve always had that attitude that I don’t know anything, so I’m always asking questions. I never want to be the guy that has all the answers. I’ve always tried to find people that I respect, people that do things I want to do myself and ask them how they do it, it is as simple as that. A lot is self-taught. I had a mare this year that just was not going right, and I was staring at the ceiling all night just thinking: ‘What can I change?’ “Keeping an open mind and recalling my experiences, I was able to come up with a solution and get the mare on the right path.”

## Grand Finale Farm

Bill and Erin own 'Grand Finale Farm' in Ashby, Massachusetts, where they breed, show and sell horses. "We have about 10 horses of our own. It's a hobby for me, Erin is a stay at home mom and a dressage trainer. All of our ten horses are harness horses, except for our son's pony", he laughs. "Erin grew up riding dressage bred horses. Once I got into harness horses, she took to them herself and that's all she wants to ride now. She competes with them in dressage. I want to let the horses do what they excel at. So if we have one that is more of a driving horse, we drive them, and if it's one that is more a dressage horse, we ride them." Bill is enjoying training the horses in harness, and takes on every opportunity to show them, not without success. "I won the Fine Harness Cup with Jovialidee GFF, a Waldemar daughter, a couple of years ago. I've got a sister of the same mare that I'm really enjoying this year, she's just a three year old. She's probably the best mare that I've produced as of yet. It will be exciting to get her out there next year, when she will be doing her IBOP."

Breeding his own young prospects is the goal for Bill. "I started out breeding horses, because I couldn't afford the horses that I wanted to drive. That is still kind of what I am doing. It's always been my ultimate goal, to breed a top show horse. Of course that does not always work out. That is where Erin is so important, she can take these horses that don't quite have that show type movement or conformation and those tend to be very good riding horses."

The access to semen of good harness horse stallions is more limited in the US than in the Netherlands, but still there are options and it takes a creative and forward way of thinking to breed. "We have some frozen from Cizandro, from Atleet, Manno, but I do try to think about the whole inbreeding problem. There is a horse named Hightanium here that is an interesting outcross. I have got a filly by him and I've got another mare in foal to him. We all want to breed top- sport horses, but at the same time, I want to keep trying to breed something useful as an outcross. We've only bred two mares this year, and we've got a lot of young horses. I've always wanted to have a few of the best horses and not a lot of decent horses. I always feel that there is a market for exceptional horses, at least in this country it is harder to move the marginal quality horses. Our best mares, we're not selling. Jovialidee is bred right now to Hightanium. The other is a keur mare, Tidee by Jonker, who was actually bred by Wim Cazemier's parents, she is bred to Waldemar."

## Promoting Harness Horses

Bill is so passionate about harness horses, that he is trying to get more attention for the breed and takes on every opportunity to show them. "There's limited options to show our horses. Aaron Jay Fisher of Rocky Ridge Stables, who just imported the stallion Delviro, is a good friend of ours. He is such a dedicated, passionate Dutch Harness horse guy. When you get him and I together, it's non-stop talking about

harness horses. Aaron Jay and I are actively trying to get more harness horses sanctioned shows in this country. It is hard to find judges, that is our first priority. To find somebody that is knowledgeable enough, but not in the business so that they can objectively judge is hard. There have been some Friesian shows here, that allow us to show at their shows, some Morgan and Saddlebred shows. It is all to get exposure for the horses. And of course the keurings. They are kind of the big ones. I see all the other shows as a warm up to the keuring, those are the opinions that I really value. When Viggon (van Beest, edit) and whoever comes over from the Netherlands judge the horses, those are the opinions that I want. Our friend Scot Tolman just bought Jaleet (a harness horse stallion bred by Wim Cazemier, edit), to breed with dressage horses. I am hoping that is an avenue we can get in.”

Bill continues: “Aaron Jay and I are just in the beginning stages of getting more shows



for harness horses. A lot of our time is taken up just promoting our horses, not even really showing them. We go to the Land Rover Kentucky Three-Day Event, a huge 3 day international event, which is a 16 hours drive. Everyone is always blown away and super impressed with our harness horses, but they feel like they are maybe not for them. A lot of people want an easy amateur horse for driving. The overall level of horsemanship in the Netherlands is higher than here. The KWPN-NA has helped with some of our promotional demonstrations. Aaron Jay and I are working with them now to have some KWPN-NA certified shows. We are just starting this process in hopes to have it going next year.”

## The future of Macho

Back to Macho and the question that is on everybody's mind: what are Bill's plans with him? "I do feel some sort of obligation to the horse to leave him there, but I do want my horse", he laughs. "So that is what I am struggling with. I have committed that he will be in the Netherlands in spring 2021 to breed, we probably will show him a bit in the summer. Whether he stays longer than that, I don't know. There is a part of me that feels guilty bringing him here. There is a lot more for him to prove over there than here. When you bring him over here and he wins some Friesian show, or a little class here and there, great. But he can't win the Manno Trofee, the Oregon Trofee, etc. Especially, COVID-19 makes it tough. If I could go over there every 6 weeks and hang out with him, drive with him, that would make it a lot easier. I haven't seen my horse since February first 2020, you know. So again, if things open up and I can get over there I would be a little bit more likely to leave him there. I am sure Robbie would enjoy showing him too. I got Robbie on the phone only once, so I knew it must be important. He said: 'The thing with Macho is, he is such a big, young horse. The best thing is to not ask for more right now, because he has more. How old is Moneymaker?' I said: 'He's got to be almost 30?.' And Robbie said: 'Yeah, he is still sound because I took my time when he was Macho's age.' We always want to do what is best for the horse, and what's right for the horse is not doing too much with him right now", Bill concludes.