

Drawing on experience

With paintbrush in hand, equine artist Sam Savitt discovers the grandeur and excitement of the horse.

It was his wife Bette's idea. "I was sitting down, making a jumping painting of the Grand National," recalls legendary equine artist Sam Savitt, "when I said, 'I wish I could see what was behind that fence.'"

Bette quickly made the offer, Sam just as quickly accepted, and soon the two were on their way to Liverpool, England, to experience and capture on canvas what Savitt says was one of the most exciting events of his career.

The inspiration behind Savitt's vocation, and he'll assure you, his avocation, traces far from the gleaming, high-strung Thoroughbreds and the breathtaking action on the Aintree course. The first horse in the artist's life was the one that pulled the milkman's wagon through the Pennsylvania coal-mining town where Savitt grew up. As the horse went from house to house, traipsing along the delivery route without any guidance, Savitt would follow along. "Some kids get stuck on airplanes, boats, cars," says Savitt. "I got stuck on horses. They've been with me my whole life and shaped my career."

Although the artist's equestrian interests span the spectrum of breeds and activities—including draft horses, polo ponies, rodeo broncs, and eventing and fox hunting mounts—his first jobs after graduating from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute were illustrating Western magazines and comic books. A four-year stint in the U.S. Army temporarily put his career on hold, but it was the last time he ever went for any period without brush in hand. Upon his discharge, Savitt began painting with what seemed to be a vengeance, depicting all manner of equestrian competition from the Cheyenne rodeo to the Olympics. His work can be seen in an array of books as well as many issues of EQUUS, beginning with "Savitt Paints In Kentucky" (EQUUS 14) and including "The Extra Senses" (EQUUS 126) and, more recently, depicting "Starting Power, Stopping Power" for the cover of last August's issue.

As readers of this month's "The Grand National" will note, words flow as easily from Savitt's hand as do his characteristic sketches. "There were so many books that I illustrated," he says, "where the author didn't know anything about horses. He would have them doing impossible things." As a result, Savitt began writing as well. To date, he has some 15 books to his sole credit, including *Around The World With Horses*, *Sam Savitt's True Horse Stories* and *Midnight, Champion Bucking Horse*.

Showing no signs of slowing down, Savitt currently is working on a rodeo chart to add to his series of educational posters, as well as illustrations of Black Beauty for the Franklin Mint. As one of the founders of the American Academy of Equine Art, Savitt also helps aspiring equestrian artists hone their skills with annual courses at the Scottsdale Art School in Arizona every spring and at the Kentucky Horse Park in September. And then there are his own art shows and exhibits.

In between it all, he spends time at his North Salem, New York, home with his own two horses, who continue to teach him more and more about *Equus caballus*. "I've had falls, been bucked off, stepped on, gotten kicked," he laughs. "But it's a never-ending thing. You never know too much about a subject. Your point of view changes and you get more critical of things."

Despite the many adventures he has experienced researching the subjects he paints, Savitt says his trip to the Grand National last year was one of the highlights of his life. From his vantage point at the course's infamous Becher's Brook, Savitt was right in the middle of the action. "You see 40 horses coming at you," he says, "and the ground's reverberating and you hear the yell of the jockeys and their flashing colors, and you hear this crashing through the brush and the shouting. It was really something to see." —Karen Kopp Du Teil □



Six-foot-tall artist Sam Savitt inspects the Becher's Brook obstacle, which has ended many competitors' hopes of Grand National glory.