

Feb. 28, 1986

SAVITT IS A TRUE AFICIONADO

Nancy T. Maar

When it comes to horsemanship, the Spanish would honor Sam Savitt with the appellation *aficionado*. *Aficion* means passion, and Sam Savitt is a man with a passion for all aspects of horse sports, and for all of the seasons and conditions in the lives of horses. As one of America's foremost artists in the area of horses and horse sports, Savitt has combined his passion with his profession.

Savitt didn't grow up riding. As a teenager, in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., he owned a car, "a jalopy it was, and I'd drive a group of girls to a stable. In return for driving them, I got to ride." He grinned and added, "I wasn't very good; it was a long time before I really got the training I needed."

After high school, Savitt worked for a year as a window dresser in a dress shop. Aside from doing the window displays, he ran the elevator, waited on customers and served as janitor. A year of this and he was ready to take the advice of his high school teachers who had encouraged him to attend Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, N.Y., and become an artist.

After graduating from Pratt, Savitt went to Burma with the U.S. Army and spent four years with the engineers building the Ledo Road to China.

It was not until the early '50s that Savitt met Gordon Wright, who trained several United States Equestrian Team riders. Savitt was commissioned to illustrate Wright's book, *Learning To Ride, Hunt And Show*. Since Wright could talk better on horseback than sitting in a chair, he invited Savitt to go riding with him at Secor Stables in White Plains, N.Y. While gathering information for his illustrations, Savitt's education as a horseman

began. Working with Wright he trained a number of horses.

In the late '50s, Savitt and his lovely wife, Bette, moved to their present home in the midst of the northern Westchester County hunt country. Savitt's studio overlooks rolling pastures. From his drawing board, he can see his Thoroughbred hunter McClaurey and pony companion ambling from field to field, grazing. Bette Savitt runs her own business, Black Horse Press, from the other end of the studio.

Horses At Home

Savitt hunts regularly with the nearby Golden's Bridge Hounds. His horse, a 16.2-hand, 13-year-old Thoroughbred chestnut gelding, had been a second-level dressage horse. McClaurey was a new horse for Sam. "Getting a horse of 13 is great! Most, if not all of his problems, were solved before I got him," Savitt said smiling.

The horse Savitt had before McClaurey was a dangerously spirited Thoroughbred mare. "She was so thin when we bought her, but as soon as she put on a little weight, well, we just couldn't get the track out of her," Savitt said. After 28 years of taking care of horses, Savitt decided maybe he'd had enough. Plenty of people in the area had horses for him to ride. He said the only difficulty was "you really can get clobbered. People usually want you to ride their problems."

Savitt described a horse who wouldn't hold still to be mounted unless faced into a corner. One day Savitt thought he'd try to mount in the open. Just as he got his foot in the stirrup, the horse bolted. The

stirrup caught for a second and Savitt ended up with a badly twisted knee.

When someone told him about McClaurey, Savitt couldn't resist taking a look. He rode the horse and liked his manners and his way of going. "And, Bette liked him too. That was the clincher."

Bette is a fine horsewoman in her own right and has done a lot of hunting and showing. They take turns riding to keep McClaurey fit. Savitt's delight in having a problem-free horse is obvious. "He'll walk when the other horses in the hunt field are galloping if I decide the terrain is dangerous, or the footing bad. And, if I decide to call it a day before the hunt's over, he goes quietly home, never tries to break and run back to the others," Savitt explained happily.

Horses On Paper

Savitt has illustrated 150 or more books (he's lost track), and has illustrated and written another 16. He had not thought of writing until he presented for publication a series of sketches chronicling the growth of a foal from birth to weaning. "The mare and foal were just down the road. I went to see them when the foal was born and kept drawing her. The editor asked me to write a short piece to go with each drawing. That was my first writing," Savitt explained. The book was, *Step-A-Bit—Story Of A Foal*.

His second book was a big research job. *Midnight, Champion Bucking Horse* told the story of a black horse who had never been ridden for the 10 seconds allotted by the rodeo rules. The horse had died in 1934 but Savitt tracked down his former owner and riders, wrote and illustrated the book. Savitt did not fictionalize the story of *Midnight* as had some who had written about him, but told the tale from the points of view of people who really



Although his face is not well known, Sam Savitt's works are recognized by horsemen everywhere.

the cowboy is bucked off and lands heavily in the dust. A recent sketch shows several horses converging at a fence in a steeplechase. At the last moment, they are cut off by a riderless renegade. Savitt caught them at the brink of disaster.

Savitt's portraits of people and their horses capture moments to be remembered: a day in the hunt field; a moody girl relaxing with her horse; a boy with his best friend, his pony. There are charming portraits of families riding together. He has painted the Firestones, the Lawfords, the Busches and the Appletons.

Many favorite horses are remembered in Savitt's paintings. Particularly representative is a painting of Jere Lord, former MFH of Golden's Bridge, riding his beloved hunter, Claude. Claude died some years ago, but will be remembered at his best, vital and happy, in Savitt's painting.

Savitt also creates memorable and exciting posters. A huge stunning poster for the National Horse Show hangs in the study of the Savitt home. Over the mantlepiece is his painting of a Lipizzan stallion of the Spanish Riding School. The painting was both poster and program cover for the American tour of the white stallions of Vienna.

Annually, Savitt creates a poster for the program cover of the American Cancer Society's benefit show at Old Salem Farm, North Salem, N.Y. The poster is run off as limited edition prints and sold to raise money for the charity. Savitt also donates "An Evening With Sam Savitt's to the Cancer Society Show's fundraising effort. He spends an evening talking and sketching horses for an



A Game Pony.

enthusiastic audience. Later, the sketches are auctioned off for the charity.

Savitt's work is mounted in galleries, museums, and in many distinguished private collections all over the country. His work can be characterized by its diversity, energy and sensitivity. His energy seems boundless.

Sam Savitt seems pleased with his success, but his real pleasure is combining his profession and passion, living and creating in the hills of northern Westchester with Bette close by and horses in the pasture.



A Desperate Try.

knew the horse. The book won the Boy's Clubs of America Award.

Savitt's wide range of subjects and media reflects his diverse interests. He has drawn and painted everything from bucking rodeo broncs to draft horses to collisions on the polo field. He's painted hunters, jumpers and steeplechasers, scenes from the great Thoroughbred sales to the races.

The dynamics of his work are breathtaking—one can "feel" the pain of a polo player as he clashes with two members of the opposing team; and "hear" the thud as



The Drop Jump.