

A man who knows his horses and tells of them in drawings

By LARRY ROBINSON

NORTH SALEM — Although horses have been the love of his life and the essence of his career as an artist, Sam Savitt admits owning the four-footed fellows has had its trying moments.

Sam once owned a black horse that flooded the barn by turning on the faucets. He also turned on lights, opened doors and let the other animals loose, generally making his equine presence felt.

"Once I was installing a new latch on his door," Sam Savitt remembers, "and the horse kept trying to look over my shoulder. You know, I actually began to think he was trying to figure out how the latch worked."

Mr. Savitt said neighbors complained the horse spent so much time watching them make repairs, they expected the animal to show up one day with a hammer and other tools.

The horse was sold, but recurrent problem of being too attached to other horses caught up with him. His new owner solved this, Sam said, by buying the horse a donkey of his own.

"This way, the horse always had the donkey to come home to. You know, he caused me some trouble, but he was a good horse. He was just too bright."

This understanding of horses has given Mr. Savitt a long career as an artist and book illustrator. His newest tome, co-written with Bill Steinkraus, is "Great Horses of the United States Equestrian Team."

It was published recently by Dodd Mead & Company, with half the potential royal-

ties going to help support the team. Mr. Savitt's cover illustration may be used as a Christmas card, he said.

The book details the careers of 22 horses, with comments by their riders. Mr. Steinkraus is a former captain of the team and is president of its parent organization. He was the first American to win an individual Olympic gold medal in an equestrian sport, at the 1968 Individual Grand Prix in Mexico.

Mr. Savitt is the official artist of the team and chose to do the book in pen and inks. Some of the horses he depicts include "Snowbound," "Tomboy," "Untouchable," "Bally Cor" and "Sinjon."

For comments on horses not ridden by Mr. Steinkraus, there are descriptions by riders like Mary Chapot, Hilda Gurney, Tad Coffin, Bill Haggard, Mike Page and Kathy Kusner.

Here's Ms. Kusner on "Untouchable": "Untouchable was a beautiful horse to look at with a fabulous jumping technique and the most beautiful form — I have never seen another horse that could round his back so perfectly over a fence or keep jumping well even when he was mentally pretty wild, which not many horses can do."

Since the horses in the book are all jumpers, Sam Savitt said, "I went for variety, like showing them jumping different kinds of fences. In drawing a litter horse, for example, I'd use a big fence."

In depicting "Sinjon," Mr. Savitt capitalized on the horse's habit of crossing his hind legs, and, in the case of Kadett, he opted for a standing portrait.

It took Mr. Savitt four months to do the book, which "is a short time for me. I usually sweat over everything I do, sometimes to the point where my wife (Bette) will tell me I'm trying too hard."

He said he finds book work challenging, but straight portrait work is "bloody boring, although it is lucrative. One time I had a horse whose mane kept flopping over, so that's the way I painted him. Well, the owner made me fix the mane so it was perfect."

Of the horses in the new book, Mr. Savitt said he's seen half of them actually ridden. The others he has seen in pictures submitted to him by their owners. In 1969 he accompanied the American team to the Mexico City Olympic Games. A book resulted: "The Equestrian Olympics Sketchbook."

He also wrote a book about Midnight, the most famous rodeo bucking horse to ever drop a cowboy on his bones. (This reporter lived in Montana and encountered men who remembered Midnight very well. The saying, "Never a horse that couldn't be rode or a cowboy couldn't be thrown," is attributed to the first unfortunate rider who mounted the animal.)

Mr. Savitt said when he began writing, "I bought a book on how to write. When my editor saw it, she told me to throw it away and just write simply. She said she'd chop out the stuff that shouldn't be there."

His newest project is to cover the Tevis Endurance Ride, pitting horses and riders against some of the toughest scenery in California:

"A rider goes from Tahoe, right down into valleys where it's 120 degrees. The top 10 riders can make it in 11 hours. Most people just enter the darned thing just to say they've done it."

Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Mr. Savitt lived near a riding academy. He studied art at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and the Art Students League in New York.

"When I started out, I did some pulp westerns," he said. He noted one of his favorite movies is John Ford's 1939 classic, "Stagecoach."

The Dingle Ridge Road resident is working on a book of short stories about various animals. He likes doing his own writing because when he works with a script by another author, "I sometimes find the guy has put in impossible stuff. I write with the pictures in my mind."

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