

# THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Decorated former young rider Kassie Barteau is now breaking stereotypes as head trainer at an Arabian breeding farm

BY ELIZABETH KAYE MCCALL



*NEW DIRECTIONS: Now head trainer at Al-Marah Arabians, Kassie Barteau schools Al-Marah Prince John at the farm in Florida*

**A**fter a privileged and successful youth dressage career—the winningest young rider in USDF history and a USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist by the age of 18—Kassandra “Kassie” Barteau was widely expected to pursue the fast track to the elite ranks of international dressage competition.

Instead, the daughter of the well-known dressage trainers Yvonne and Kim Barteau is forging her own path at a facility whose breed of choice is not known as a top pick for dressage.

For the past two years, Barteau, 27, has been the head trainer at Al-Marah Arabian Horses, which in 2014 relocated from its longtime home in Tucson, AZ, to Clermont, FL, near Orlando. Founded in 1942 by the late Ruth “Bazy” Tankersley, a legend in Arabian breeding, Al-Marah is now owned and operated by her son, Mark Miller.

Although Barteau’s career path may sound unusual, there are actually strong connections between Miller and the Barteau family. The network that led to Barteau’s current job have presented her with a unique opportunity: to bring a “nontraditional” breed into the dressage mainstream.

**T**he story begins with a spotlight—literally—on Arabian horses. For 26 years they were the main attraction at the Arabian Nights dinner theater in Kissimmee, FL, where visitors were entertained by theatrical, costumed equestrian performances. And it was at Arabian Nights that Kassie’s mother, Yvonne, met Kim Barteau, when both were employed by the show as horse trainers. The couple married and Kim became Kassie’s stepfather, and Kassie recalls roaming the hallways of Arabian Nights as a girl.

When Kassie Barteau was 12, her family relocated to Illinois, where Kim and Yvonne Barteau eventually established their current business, KYB Dressage, in Maple Park, west of Chicago. It was around that age that Kassie began riding, according to Yvonne, who says, “Being around horses all the time, I wasn’t going to make any of my kids ride if they didn’t want to.” (In fact, Kassie is not the only sibling who rides; older brother Jamie Lawton is a professional trainer, and younger sister Kayla Barteau is a dressage rider. Older sister Jessica Barteau, while not a rider, manages the farm at KYB.)

By the time Kassie Barteau was in her teens, the horse bug took hold for good.

“I got super serious and started home-schooling and riding eight horses a day, if not more, from the age of about fourteen or fifteen,” Barteau says. “It was not a typical growing up. I didn’t do school dances or any normal functions. I



**DRESSED IN BLUE:** *In open dressage competition, when Barteau showed up, she usually won. She’s pictured aboard Toscano after winning the Prix St. Georges class at the 2010 USEF Dressage Festival of Champions in Gladstone, NJ.*



**IN COMMAND:** *Barteau aboard Al-Marah Chance Command, the second Arabian owner Mark Miller sent to her for training*



ALL IN THE FAMILY: *Al-Marah* owner Mark Miller looks on while Barteau shows some love to her Dutch Warmblood gelding, *Aramo*

was 100 percent dedicated to horses. I started with Young Riders when I was sixteen.”

Barteau amassed a slew of honors as a YR. She made the USDF Region 2 YR team for five consecutive FEI North American Junior and Young Rider Championships, winning one team gold medal (2005), three team silver medals (2006, 2007, and 2009), a YR Individual bronze (2007), and a YR Freestyle gold medal (2009). She was the United States Equestrian Federation national YR champion three years running, from 2007 through 2009. She capped off her YR career in 2009, when she was the US representative at the FEI Young Rider World Cup in Germany, riding the Holsteiner stallion GP Raymeister (who’s now showing Grand Prix under Yvonne Barteau). In 2010, she moved into the open dressage ranks with a USEF Developing Horse reserve national championship title aboard Delano.

The wins came as no surprise to Barteau’s parents. Yvonne Barteau calls her daughter “probably the most naturally talented rider I’ve ever met,” with an innate “feel” that was “way sophisticated beyond her years.”

“I would call Kassie an artist,” she says.

Kim Barteau agrees. “She’s a really intuitive rider. I don’t know anyone who gets along with a wider range of personality types among horses than Kassie does.”

Aware that her winning ways were making her less than popular with her fellow competitors at some shows, Kassie Barteau insisted on doing all the grooming and braiding her-

self, Yvonne Barteau says. The girl explained to her mother: “I want to make sure everyone doesn’t think I’m just getting handed everything,” Yvonne Barteau recalls.

## GOING HER OWN WAY

The first time Kassie Barteau surprised the dressage community was when she decided not to remain with the family business.

“When I was about 22,” Barteau says, “I decided to branch out a little bit, kind of seek my own independence. I wanted to have my own identity, I guess, and see if I could make it on my own for my own self-worth as a rider, a trainer, and a person. I didn’t go to college or anything like that, so I just wanted to see where I was.”

In 2010, Barteau left KYB Dressage for a six-month stint as a working student for Olympian Steffen Peters and wife Shannon in San Diego. Afterward, she returned home to Illinois and “regrouped,” as she puts it, in part because of a family illness. Then a planned winter season in Wellington, FL, was cut short when Barteau broke her foot and had to spend five months on crutches.

After Barteau’s longtime trainer, Cathy Morelli, moved to the Atlanta suburb of Alpharetta, GA, Barteau caught another break—a good one this time. Morelli learned of an available 12-stall facility about 45 minutes away in Villa Rica, GA; and Barteau decided to take the plunge and start



AL-MARAH MOVES EAST: Barteau schools AM Prince John at the farm in Florida, with the barn and house in the background. The farm's gold-and-green color scheme is a nod to that used by owner Mark Miller's late mother, Bazy Tankersley, and her legacy of Arabian breeding.

her own dressage business, calling the opportunity “a soft spot to land with some connections.”

The dressage community was surprised once again when Barteau took the job with Al-Marah.

As he and his mother had planned, Miller took over the Al-Marah operation after her death in 2013. Over the ensuing months, he purchased the farm in Clermont, closed Arabian Nights, and relocated “the best of the best” of the Al-Marah herd, as he puts it, from Arizona to Florida. He had everything he needed to continue his family's legacy—except a trainer.

Longtime friends with Kim Barteau, Miller had kept in touch with the Barteau family and knew of Kassie's whereabouts and career trajectory.

“When my mom died, I wanted people to know we were still in business, so I sent [Kassie] Prince John” for training at her Georgia facility after the horse had a bad experience at a show, Miller says. “I had great confidence that she could fix him.” He later sent two more horses to Barteau for training.

Some months later, at an Arabian show, Miller spotted an impressive-looking gray gelding. “I was thinking, ‘My god, how are we going to beat that horse?’” he recalls. “It turned out to be Prince John and Kassie.”

Although Miller says that Al-Marah's current focus is on dressage, he adds that “I learned at Arabian Nights, you hire the great talent when you can find it. If the person who

walked through the door had been a great reining trainer, I might have hired that person. What I wanted was a great trainer, and I'm willing to take my horses in any direction.” But he admits that “I really wanted to show in dressage because I believe that the finest athletes—both equine and human—in the world are competing in dressage right now.”

Miller asked Barteau to meet with him during that show, and he offered her the head trainer's position at Al-Marah.

Given that “she was doing well, had a barn, and she was winning,” Miller admits, “I honestly did not expect Kassie to say yes.” But the deal he offered was a sweet one. Referring to Barteau's own horse, the Dutch Warmblood Aramo, he told her: “I understand how important ‘Arie’ is in your life. I not only will allow him to be at Al-Marah, but I will be your sponsor. I will pay all show expenses for him while you're working for me, because he will become as important as my horses to your success at Al-Marah. I'm not doing this halfway with you.”

“When Mark offered me the job in Florida, it seemed like a better fit for the age I'm coming into,” says Barteau. “I eventually want to get married and have kids. I worked for myself for a year and a half. I operated a twelve-stall barn, cleaned all the stalls, did all the ordering, trailered horses going to competitions, worked seven days a week. That got tiring. I want a balanced life between riding, competing, and eventually a family. With Mark, I work five days a week,



FULL OF PROMISE: Barteau gets a visit from one of Al-Marah's mares and foals

unless we're busy with competitions, and I train his step-daughter, Keeley Clark, who is wonderful."

Kim Barteau—whom Miller had contacted prior to making Kassie the job offer, in a gesture Yvonne likens to "asking for someone's hand in marriage"—encouraged his daughter to pursue the opportunity.

"Kassie was unsure about whether this was a good idea business-wise," Kim Barteau says. "I said, 'Two things about it are really good. Number one, at your age, if you can get under an umbrella—somewhere where you're not all by yourself—that will give you a chance to focus on what you need for a comfortable career.' The other thing was, I have enough background with the family that I can help her navigate any tough spots. I already know these folks real well, and I've gotten along with them for twenty-five years."

## A NEW CHAPTER FOR AL-MARAH

In just two years, Al-Marah has literally and figuratively changed directions.

First came the move from Bazy Tankersley's beloved Arizona to central Florida. The Arabian breeder bequeathed her Tucson ranch to the University of Arizona, but Miller inherited both the Al-Marah name—an Arabic phrase that loosely translates as "a garden-like oasis"—and the historic herd, which dates to 1815 and is the oldest privately owned band of Arabian horses in the world.

The farm in Clermont occupies 80 acres of lush Florida



CROSSOVER SUCCESS: The Arabian gelding Al-Marah Chose Othello has earned high scores in open dressage on the highly competitive Florida winter circuit

landscape. Barteau lives on the property, a perk that includes waking to views of a lake and fields of Arabian mares and foals.

Although Al-Marah Arabians have a history of competing in numerous disciplines on the open circuit as well as in Arabian breed shows, the hiring of Barteau signaled a departure from breed-centric training.

"We're trying to get the dressage market to see Arabians as a real competition horse, not just in the Arabian world [but] also to show they can be competitive against the warmbloods," Barteau explains.

For the past two seasons in the Wellington, FL, area, Barteau has done just that. She persuaded Miller to give "Welly World" a whirl for the first time in 2014. After Miller got a look at the show scene and watched Barteau earn a score of 68.5 percent at Fourth Level aboard his stallion AM Chance Command, he decided he wanted Al-Marah to be "in the conversation," as he puts it. And in the conversation it has remained: This winter in Wellington, Barteau piloted the gelding AM Chose Othello to a score of 70 percent and a second-place finish in a large First Level class won by a warmblood.

"Working with the Arabians the last couple years has surprised me in every way possible, in a very good way. They're a nice Maserati sports-car kind of ride," Barteau says.

That first Al-Marah Arabian sent to Barteau for training, AM Prince John, was her first success story with the breed. "He was nervous and had a bolting problem," she recalls of the now eight-year-old gelding. "The first year, we were lit-



WALL OF HONOR: Display of ribbons won by Al-Marah horses at the 2015 Arabian Horse Association Region 12 Championship Horse Show in Georgia

erally bouncing from a 58 percent to over 70 percent in two hours, because he wasn't trusting. For a six-month phase, he'd be tense in the morning; then by afternoon he'd relax and kill it!"

Barteau's first win on Prince John, in a 24-strong Arabian Sport Horse class, caught the seasoned competitor off guard. "I started to cry. It was such a big win for us. Now, two years later, he's won everything with me. This year he's been a solid citizen," with dressage scores consistently in the 70s. In May, "Prince" earned three titles at the Arabian Horse Association Region 12 Championship Horse Show in Georgia.

"He's a big, strong, bold-moving horse and has a lot of presence. He's taken longer to come into himself. But a lot of times, the really good ones do," says Barteau. She praises Prince's work ethic, saying, "He has never quit me once."

One of Barteau's proudest moments came this April, when she and Prince won the TheraPlate Award at the Arabian Celebration at Canterbury in Newberry, FL. The award recognizes the horse/rider partnership that epitomizes soundness, fitness, performance, and strength.

"There are certain ribbons and awards that have meaning to me, and I want those in my house. Those are worth more than fifty blue ribbons," Barteau says. And yes, the TheraPlate Award resides inside.

"I love every horse on my string. They all have unique personalities, and I feed on that," says Barteau, who personally grooms, tacks, and braids the horses she trains.

Another of Barteau's charges—affectionately dubbed "little Prince Charming"—is the 14-year-old AM Chance Command, whom Barteau has taken from Second Level to Prix St. Georges in two years. A many-times-over national Arabian champion, Chance Command holds the Arabian Horse Association's elite Legion of Masters and Excellence Awards.

"He melts my heart," Barteau says. Although Chance Command is an active breeding stallion, "You can also have a four-year-old lead him. Al-Marah has bred for personality, and it shines through in all of their horses."

## THE "BREED ISSUE"

Although Barteau is now competing her Dutch Warmblood, Aramo, successfully at Prix St. Georges, "at this point, I work 90 percent with Arabians," she says.

"I really believe in the breed. It's just a different mindset. On a ten-meter circle on an Arabian, you have a lot more time to get around, and he is going to feel a lot lighter and basically less complicated. They're very smart, and that can work for you or against you, depending on a lot of factors. It's hard for me to talk too much about the breed differences, other than the lightness and the quality of your timing. It's really about having to discipline yourself. Dressage is, obviously, a really disciplined sport."

Whatever the breed, "I think a good horse is a good horse, and good training is good training," Barteau says. "They come



TEACHER AND STUDENT: Barteau instructing her “prodigy,” Keeley Clark, stepdaughter of Al-Marah owner Mark Miller, on Clark’s Arabian mare, AM Hey YouStar

in all different sizes, in all different breeds, and in all different packages. I think a lot of it comes with how much work, partnership, and how well you get along. Just because it’s a purebred Arabian horse does not mean it cannot compete against the warmbloods. At Wellington and big CDI competitions, some people go, ‘Oh, I can’t show up on my Quarter Horse, or on my Arabian.’ I think that’s kind of a mental block. Of course, if there’s a horse with ‘9’- or ‘10’-quality gaits and the judges think your Arabian is a 6 or 7, there might be a disadvantage. However, if you do the very best you can and your horse is behaving, I think the judges appreciate that—if you’re doing the movements technically correct, your horse is moving submissively with impulsion, and there’s harmony going on.”

Barteau points out that the Arabian’s smaller size, more moderate price tag, and good temperament may make the breed an attractive choice for amateur riders.

“You can have all the talent in the world, but if the mind of the horse is not letting you activate it, what is the use of having talent, especially for amateurs who want to compete and feel confident?” she says. “You need a well-minded horse. If the horse doesn’t want to play, everybody is going to see you’re making him do it and the quality is not going to be there. They’ve got to want to play the game, and I feel like Al-Marah’s horses want to play the game.”

## SHIFTING GEARS

Barteau praises the Arabian’s versatility—one stallion, Al-Marah Swift, is currently competing in hunters, dressage, and Arabian sport-horse classes with an amateur rider. Barteau’s own vast experience riding different types of horses, coupled with that intuitive “feel” her parents point to with pride, have stood her in good stead in her new position. For one, she has to switch from riding the Arabians to climbing on her own Aramo, who’s 18 hands.

“I’m a bigger, stronger girl”—Barteau is five feet eight—“so getting on Arie and then jumping on, say, Chance Command or Prince John is really just making sure I have that tact and feel and make my aids a little bit lighter. You have to be sensitive with your timing, your feel, and your approach to be in tune mentally with the horses you’re riding. You have to be mentally and emotionally and physically all there, especially with a sensitive horse.”

Barteau is also making the transition to teacher. She calls Keeley Clark, Miller’s stepdaughter, her “prodigy student” and has coached Clark, 18, to her USDF bronze medal.

Clark is “someone I take a lot of pride in,” says Barteau. “She was doing Training, First Level mostly when I started working with her, and is Prix St. Georges now. At Welling-



FRESH AIR: Barteau shares a quiet moment with the stallion AM Chance Command

ton, she showed her Arabian mare [AM Hey YouStar] up against a couple hundred-thousand-dollar warmbloods. For her to do so respectably was wonderful. Sometimes I just take the role of being her cheerleader. We share a really good bond and the same love for horses.”

## à MAGIC KINGDOM

“Sometimes the open competition world is super-competitive, and it’s really intense,” says Barteau. “What I’m doing with Mark and the Arabians—it’s like a breath of fresh air. It’s a nice thing to see: Not just people on your team but in your sport can support each other and be happy with each other’s success. The [Arabian] sport-horse world is a fun, engaging atmosphere.”

Barteau enthuses: “I love working for Mark. He has kind of a Walt Disney approach to his horses—and I mean that in a good way. He’s a visionary. He keeps me highly motivated and interested.” Miller also supports Barteau’s continued involvement with warmbloods, she says.

“Mark makes his horses happy. He wants the best for them, and that’s what’s really important in the horse business,” says Barteau. “Horses come first, whatever the score. Happy horses and happy people make for a more successful competition, anyway. Mark really believes that as much as we need to be serious and competitive, I also need to also have a life outside of horses. He really gives me that freedom to be my own person.”

“I think we are going to have a long and wonderful relationship,” says Miller, “and do some stuff that [will surprise] people.”

And Barteau, as we now know, is full of surprises. ▲

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