

On The Cart With Compton: Troy's In-Depth Interview With Steve Heckaman

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A long time ago, I read a story in the Quarter Horse News called "Loping Into The Limelight." It started out something like, "A young trainer walks into the show pen and he stares at the likes of Steve Heckaman, Gil Galyean and Troy Compton..." At that moment I remember thinking, 'I've made it!' Just to see my name listed in the same context with people like Gil and Steve was a feather in my hat and I'll always remember that as a turning point in my horse training and showing career.

Steve Heckaman has always been someone I've admired throughout my career. Steve is someone I've always wanted to beat...badly. He is someone who I've envied at times. Yet, he's also someone I've always enjoyed doing business with and someone I've been happy to see succeed. After he tragically lost his wife Mary Carole in 1997, he is someone, at times, that I have felt so much sorrow for that I didn't know if even I could take it. Steve Heckaman is a true member of the horse trainer "brotherhood" with a really interesting story to tell, and it is for all of these reasons that I wanted to interview him.

SH: So Troy, tell me a little bit about how one of these goes. I mean, I've read all the "On The Carts" you've already done so I kind of know what to expect. But, are we just sitting here talking or...what's the drill?

TC: Leave it to you, Steve, to have done all your homework before we start this thing. You've always been a stickler for detail.

SH: Yeah, well I've always felt that...

TC: (interrupts) Hold on man, we'll get to all that later. The basic premise of one of these things is that we're just sitting here talking. You know, about the easy things. Stuff like politics, religion and love. (laughs) No, we'll just talk horses, tell old war stories. It's not a big deal.

SH: (laughs) Okay well, I'm ready when you are.

TC: I will warn you, I've made just about everyone I've interviewed cry. I'm not sure why, but Karen Hornick cried, JR (Reichert) teared up talking about his father, there wasn't a dry eye in the room when I interviewed Betty Wells and I made Shirley Roth bawl.

SH: Well, I'm not too worried about that. In fact, I'll tell ya, not too long ago I went to a Christian counseling place in Dallas. The reason I went is that I figured out that every year I was kind of in the same spot. I hadn't really moved forward. I was tired of looking backward and I wanted to look forward with my life. I just figured that obviously I'm not finding the solution by myself and I wanted to seek advice from someone who was an expert in this area. Just like if somebody has a problem with their horse they come ask you, Troy, or they ask me.

TC: So how'd it go?

SH: Well, I drove down there every day for two weeks. One of the exercises I had to do was to pick a girl in the class to play the part of Mary Carole. We had to pull our chairs into the middle and everybody else would gather around in a circle. They wanted me to pretend that Mary Carole could come back from the dead for 30 minutes and what would I say to her? What would you want say to somebody years after they had been gone? I wrote an outline of some things that I would ask. When it was all over, everybody in the whole room was bawling expect for me. I don't know, they still haven't figured out my deal, I guess. But basically, I'm not a big crier.

TC: Did it help?

SH: Yeah, I think just being able to talk about it in a room full of strangers that didn't know me and just being able to verbalize my feelings probably helped a lot.

TC: So you let out a lot of stuff that you had bottled up?

SH: I think I was probably subconsciously afraid that in some way people were going to be judgmental of my feelings. I think I tend to internalize those things so I didn't expose that side of myself, even to people who I was real close to.

TC: Do you still think about the accident every day?

SH: Not as much now, Troy, as I did the first several years. It is with me every day just from the physical changes and stuff that I go through. Every time I look in the mirror, there's a daily reminder.

TC: So when you were lying in the hospital bed, you knew you were going to ride horses again even though the doctors had told you that you wouldn't?

SH: They told me that I would never show again.

TC: When you came back so quick, a lot of people thought that maybe you should have mourned a little longer and have more sorrow than you did. Then there was the other group that was proud of you for getting back on the horse so quick.

SH: I think a lot of people kind of forgot that I also had an eight month old son to consider. I wasn't just coming back for me, I was coming back for him. Without his mother, I was going to be the sole provider and the sole caregiver. Fortunately I had my mother and Mary Carole's mother. But it was more about 'He's depending on me to figure this out.' It wasn't just getting through it for myself, it was getting through it for him.

TC: How old is he now?

SH: He's 13 and he was eight months when the accident happened.

TC: Yeah, I remember there was just so much for you to go through. It was just a huge plate of crap, I mean, it was just a tough deal. It was really tough for me. (voice breaks up) It was very emotional for all of us.

SH: Well, it's one of those things that honestly, at the time it happened, I wouldn't have thought that even ten people would notice to tell you the truth. That's not to say that I have a low opinion of horse people.

TC: Actually, you got quite the opposite reaction.

SH: Yes, I was really surprised by that. It's amazing and it still amazes me how people reacted.



TC: Your accident brought us together. There was a group of us that were in Texas and Oklahoma who took a lot of pride in our horse trainer heritage and it really forced us to come together. It was really the first true test of our generation of horse trainers. I remember being in Gilmer, Texas (Mary Carol's hometown) and sitting in that big church during the services and praying for you. We had lost Mary Carole, and later we lost Guy Stoops, and they both broke our hearts when they left. But I feel like we got you back from the edge. You were that close, dude.

SH: Yeah. Yeah, I know. I didn't realize how close I came to dying at the time. It makes sense now when I see the time line. You know, they didn't fix stuff right away. They let me go for a couple of weeks with my arm broken and my leg broken and my face messed up. And they didn't fix it right away and I asked them 'Why don't you guys get on that?' And they would kind of tell me stuff, but what they basically meant was, 'Well, we're not going to spend good resources trying to save you if you're not going to make it.' I know it's the harsh reality and they have to make those types of decisions every day.

TC: We all knew you were going to ride again. Everybody was pulling for you.

SH: I don't know whether the doctor who told me I'd never show again really thought that, or if she said that to motivate me. I spent enough time with her that maybe she had enough insight into my personality but by her saying, 'You're never going to do your life's work,' I am just bullheaded and stubborn enough that I said, 'Well, if you think that, then watch this!' The accident was in April and I was all through with the hospital stuff by July. I got on my first horse at The Southern Belle in late July and just walked and jogged around. Then I showed at Waco at the Lone Star in September. The moment of truth was when I went to the Nebraska Futurity and won the 3 Year Old. I bought an extra copy of the win picture and I sent it to that doctor with no note or anything. I don't know if her intention was to inspire me or what but...

TC: (interrupts) You proved her wrong.

SH: Yeah. Regardless, it was probably the best thing she could have said.

TC: Well, you're a hell of a lot nicer to show against in the pen these days than you used to be! (laughs)

SH: Yeah, if I don't run into you because I couldn't see you!

TC: I know which side is your good side. (both laughing) You've managed to maintain a good sense of humor about it all.

SH: Well, I think you kind of have to, ya' know?

TC: Okay, so GoHorseShow.com held the Trainer Bowl back in December and people voted you all the way to the finals. Are you surprised by your popularity?

SH: I guess so because there are a lot of other trainers who I went up against who do a really good job. It seems like the horse business is a little fickle and everybody gets to take their turn at being flavor of the month. Honestly, I was surprised that I still have as many friends out there as I guess I do.

TC: Do you have a lot of friends?

SH: I have a lot of acquaintances, but very few people who I would really say are my close friends.

TC: Who are they?

SH: One would be Cleve (Wells). He was at my wedding, he was there when my son was born and he spoke at my wife's funeral. The people that you can count on, the people that are there through thick or thin.

TC: Cleve tackled the toughest job anyone could do and that was speaking at Mary Carole's funeral.

SH: I was still in the hospital for that, but I would have loved to see a copy of the video.

TC: It was awesome. It was worth the drive just to hear Cleve talk at the funeral.

SH: Yeah, he gave me the notes that he used so I could see what he said.

TC: It was really inspiring. We weren't even sure you were going to make it at that point, Steve. It was a scary time because you were doing what we were all doing – pushing harder than the next guy and driving long distances to get those horses shown and doing what that customer told us to do and still trying to get home. I think all of us really pushed too hard back then but we were doing it because we were trying to make a living.

SH: It's all about choices and it has made me think about my choices a little bit differently. It was a good thing, I think, that it happened at a point in my career where I already had a program established and loyal customer base. I was fortunate that it happened when I already had things figured out. If I was a young guy struggling with a hypothesis about training and didn't have a clientele established, it would have been catastrophic.



TC: Speaking of the young guys, there was a big group of us back then and we were hungry. There has been some trickling down, but there's also been a big lull lately. Do you see a lack of young, up-and-coming talent?

SH: Yeah, I do. You have a guy like Andy Cochran who is really talented who takes great care of his horses and Donnie Recchiuti, but I don't see a lot of young guys who are pushing us older guys out, like Cleve, Gil and you and I. I can remember when we were young, we wanted to push the older guys out. We didn't have the Limited to show in, we had to show in the Open. We had to show against (Doug) Lilly, Tommy (Mannion) and Jody (Galyean) and if you were going to make it, you had to show in the deep water.

TC: Who did you feel like you had to beat to get your name on the map?

SH: It had to be Jody (Galyean). I remember one year at the Congress, back when there were 18 cuts in the two year olds. Jody was showing Interest Only and I was showing Zippo Jack Bar and I won the first go and he got second. Then he won the next round and I was second. In the finals, we're loping to the left and John Dean passed me on the little white legged mare. Jack Bar just reached over and went to take a bite out of her like "Chomp!" Jody ended up beating me but I remember that was the first time I had Jody Galyean on the ropes at one of the big shows.

TC: So, why do you think there's such a lack of young talent now?

SH: I think for the same reason that overall show numbers are going down and overall participation is going down. I'm not sure what the solution is. The kids are going to come if they feel that they can make this their life's work. If it can provide enough income, then they will come.

TC: Is it because being a horse trainer is really hard? I mean, I'm scared to death a lot.

SH: It's hard and at least in the pleasure, except for the Reichert and the Masters, the carrot isn't big enough to lure the young talent. A lot of the young guys think that if they have a white Western Hauler and a black cowboy hat that they're in the club. However, you and I both know there's still no substitute for hard work and paying your dues.

TC: That's true. We all worked hard and we all still clean our own stalls. You know, another thing that's changed from when we were coming up was that we both had to fit halter horses. You couldn't get a job in our day if you couldn't fit a halter horse.

SH: I think that's a great point. I think the one thing that our generation learned that we have not passed on to the younger generation is about conformation. I don't think I could take any of the young assistants who have worked for me and take them out into the pasture and ask them to tell me which is the best horse. I don't think we have stressed conformation enough to the young people.

TC: Right. And a lot of that conformation knowledge comes from some of the great people we had mentoring us. I think we both agree that some of that has been lost and it's affected the next generation with the lack of that knowledge that we had.

SH: I guess a lot has changed from when we were started to where we're at today.

TC: Do you like today's pleasure horse?

SH: Yeah, I do.

TC: Do you think we are too slow?

SH: I see that whenever we get places like the Tom Powers and the Reichert, the places where the reward is bigger, they put a lot of pressure on the horses for pace and position. Unfortunately, even though NSBA and AQHA preach that it's okay to pass, at this level, if you pass it's still looked down on. I don't know if the judges are always following through on what the Associations are preaching.

TC: I think that we need to have our horses broke enough so we can show that we can pass if we need to get around a horse that isn't moving cleanly. We have lost a lot of our guide. If you don't pass, how can you show that your horse has those capabilities?

SH: I think it kind of depends on your geography, and I hate to point the finger, but I think the people up in the northern part of the Midwest, like Ohio, is where a lot of the negative trends have gotten started. They have big classes, big horse shows, medium-sized indoor arenas and they'll put 25 head in that pen and expect them to show. I think those people figured out that they can push their horse's hip way over and can still go slow on a loose rein and not have to give up their spot on the rail. I would show a lot in Texas and win and would get up to the Tom Powers and think 'Oh my God, I'm about three clicks too fast!'

TC: I totally agree with what you're saying.

SH: I think it really comes down to this. I think people are trying to set themselves apart from the rest to the judge. We show collectively but we are judged individually. And I think over time, there have been a lot of guys who went to an extreme to get themselves noticed and I think the extreme is what starts the negative trends that have given the pleasure industry a black eye.

TC: That's a great way of putting that. I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about being a breeder. I have to gauge off of you because you're older than me (laughs), but there aren't as many guys who trained horses and were a great breeder as well. The breeding game is a whole different game. People think of you as having a big influence on breeding and the breeding industry overall.

SH: I never hear that. Not at all. Nobody ever acknowledges that to me.

TC: Are you serious? I can't name four guys who have put their own money into a young stud and actually hit. You don't think that you rank up there?

SH: I don't see it like that. I kind of feel like it's our responsibility as horsemen to leave the industry a little bit better than when we got here. That's our contribution to what we're doing.

TC: So is your contribution through the breeding?

SH: That could be the most long-lived contribution...possibly. I know what I like. I breed types to types and I use knowledge and information from breeders who I really respect, like Mary Kay Steyskal and Carol McWhirter and people who have a tried and true track record. People who have good philosophical advice. Mary Kay always told me to breed to families. If you see one that you like and you can't breed to it, go find its full sister because families will breed similar. Stuff like that is information I've picked up that's carried over into some of my own ideology about breeding. I pick families that are going to cross and body styles that are going to cross.

TC: Is there one horse that you bred that sticks out to you as the crown jewel?

SH: Potential Investment is who I'd have to say. I bought his daddy (Principle Investment) as a yearling, I bought his mother (Hot Little Treasure) as a two year old and I bought them because I liked them as show prospects. Potential has wound up being a sire of sires. Potential sired Certain Potential, Potential Career, Investing Wisely and Gotta Lotta Potential who is Lazy Loper's sire. That has all carried down from Potential.

TC: How about on the broodmare side?

SH: Miss Surely Bars. She is Certain's mother as well as Presidential Order's mother and a great mare.

TC: You were the best guy to buy off of because you'd always wind up telling me which one to buy. You knew which trainers would work with which horse and that's a true horseman right there.

SH: Well, thank you.

TC: You want to talk about the CEM deal? That really affected you and the whole breeding thing last year.

SH: I didn't even know anything about CEM until I found out that one of my horses had it. There's probably a lot more widespread lack of knowledge, people thought it was more of a death sentence than it really was. It was pretty benign and easy to take care of but the costs monetarily and also to the horse's reputation and somewhat to my reputation and trying to restore the public's confidence that it was not going to be an on-going problem. I had to call every customer who bred a horse to every stud and tell them that they were going to get a call from the USDA. Once I explained it, some of them handled it well and some of them freaked out. I had lots of calls from concerned customers throughout the whole thing. It resolved itself in a fairly short amount of time and it's one of those things that I wish hadn't happened but it was out of my control and I just had to deal with it and move on.



TC: Yeah and you did, kind of like everything else. So, you won the Congress a lot of times but it took you a long time to win the World. You were a reserve SOB for a long time! (laughs) Did you ever think you were going to win the World?

SH: The first time I was Reserve at the World Show was in 1980 and I was Reserve seven or nine times until I finally won with Majestic Scotch in 2002. So it took me 22 years to win! I kind of had decided that the World Show was not going to be the barometer of the success of my career. (laughs)

TC: But you did take a big deep breath after you won, right?

SH: Oh yeah! Winning the World was definitely something I wanted to do. I think I've won the Congress over 15 times and I'd hate for them to say "Yeah, but he never won the World!" (laughs) I'm not too sure that it wasn't in God's design to keep me motivated to get me out of bed every day. I still had that looming over my head.

TC: What still keeps you getting out of bed now?

SH: I guess it's still the pursuit of excellence. Doing well at the Congress. That's probably the biggest sense of self-accomplishment. Even if nobody else likes it, feeling like I got it shown or it was prepared right, that's where it's at for me today.

TC: What is the best horse you ever showed?

SH: Oh, let me think about that. I'd say it was probably Wesley's Playboy. I have only had three rides in my whole life where when I lined up, I thought I had gotten it all and there was no more left to get.

TC: What were those three rides?

SH: Wesleys Playboy at the World Show, Potential at the World Show and one other at a little weekend show.

TC: And you didn't win, at least at those World Shows.

TC: What's your greatest strength as a horseman?

SH: I think it's that I try to keep my standard of excellence high, the standard of quality high.



TC: Who taught you how high the bar should be?

SH: Larry Sullivant. I worked for him for nine years. Larry was big on quality instead of quantity which I think he got from George Tyler. I think if you keep your standard of excellence high and the standard of quality that you're willing to accept high enough, then your chance of success is going to be high. Everything is a reflection on your level of care. You can tell a lot about a guy by the way he takes care of his pickup truck. You show me somebody who has food wrappers and stuff on the back seat and I will show you someone who isn't going to get your horse wormed on schedule and won't take care of your horse's feet.

TC: Your place is always immaculate.

SH: Yeah, the younger guys all think I'm anal. They don't understand the necessity for that saying, 'The devil's in the details.' When you miss the details, sooner or later the devil is going to jump up, usually when you least expect it. That's a good saying. A lot of them don't see the necessity for detail. I spent time with Dave Page and he was a stickler, you know that Troy.

TC: I never would have understood this business if I hadn't gone to work for Dave Page. I've always thought that you've taken the artist approach to horse training but we were starving artists, weren't we? I made \$400 a month when I worked for Dave Page.

SH: When I worked for Larry, after I paid my utilities, food and gas for my truck, and if I watched my money really, really tight, at the end of the month I could afford to buy one new pair of blue jeans.

C: What are the biggest changes in the horse industry in the last 20 years?

SH: I think things run in cycles and I saw the beginning of the change in the cycle in 1999 when the horse business started to slow down. We had been selling horses for \$300,000 and then that year at the Congress there was one that sold for \$150,000 and then the next year maybe it was only \$100,000 and now if one sells for \$100,000, now it's front page news.

TC: Yeah but I think our prices are getting more realistic now. It was getting more about money than the horses.

SH: It was and I think we're still seeing the downward part of the cycle. But it will swing back the other way I think.

TC: Yeah, the industry goes through ups and downs just like all of us do as professionals. One of your downs was your suspension by AQHA. I've been suspended and it can really mess with you mentally but you seemed to handle yours very well, publicly. How did it affect you?

SH: It affected me a lot more than people realized. Losing my judge's card after 19 years, just one year away from my 20 year pin was tough. I got my card when I was young, like 25, and I enjoyed judging horse shows and I tried to do a good job.

TC: Do you think your suspension was fair?

SH: I guess I try to look at it from their standpoint and they have rules. Having been an Association president, sometimes you have to do bad things to good people and that's unfortunately the way it is. That might have been the situation with me as far as AQHA was concerned.

TC: Were you proud of the way you handled it?

SH: Of the reporting of it, I think I did that okay. If I could go back and change some things, I would go back and change some things for sure. I would change a lot of the choices I made that probably helped lead up to that.

TC: You wish you could have prevented it from happening?

SH: If I say much more, I'm going to implicate somebody that nobody else has any idea was even involved. So far I've kept that person's name out of it completely. I listened to some bad advice which was a bad choice on my part and if I had it to do over again, I would have done it differently and done what was right.

TC: Are you scared the show is ever going to go on without you?

SH: I used to be, but I'm not any more. Really, I'm just not any more. I looked at the Congress program this year and thought to myself 'You know, I could really stand to just go the second week and not even go the first week this year.'

TC: Do you feel like your accomplishments have helped ease that feeling? I still see a lot of guys out there who never won that gold buckle and I gotta' believe they have some self doubt. Hell, we're all cowboys and it's all about the gold buckle and that's how you measure accomplishment. Do you feel like you've gotten to that point in your life to where you've reached the goals you set for yourself as a kid in Indiana setting out?

SH: There are a lot of goals that I set that I have accomplished, but I keep adding to the list because if you raise the bar and you get to it, you have to raise the bar higher and keep raising it to keep yourself motivated.

TC: What's the next challenge?

SH: I'd like to win the Kentucky Derby.

TC: Seriously?

SH: You know, I don't know if I want to be a Thoroughbred trainer. I think I'd like to trade Thoroughbred prospects and use some of my knowledge from the Quarter Horse industry but I think there's a lot of opportunities in the Thoroughbreds and I don't know where it's going to lead. I might not be happy being a behind the scenes guy. I might have to be there on the front lines.

TC: You still need that limelight a little bit?

SH: Maybe, although if I'm making enough money I could be a behind the scenes guy. I don't mind promoting someone else, even with the show horse I wouldn't have to be the front guy anymore if there was somebody who had the talent and work ethic and had all the ingredients to be a new superstar in the show horses. I would be totally content to be a mentor. Use some of my knowledge to mentor somebody along.

TC: Do you have a plan in place to get there?

SH: I did have a plan to get into the Thoroughbreds and then the bump with the economy delayed the time frame where I felt a comfort level in being able to take the plunge.

TC: So do you want to change gears because you are tired of this industry?

SH: I'm just looking for a new challenge. Looking back at past history there aren't many guys who have been really competitive in the pleasure once they've hit 50. There's a few, but by in large it seems like the toll that it takes on your body and the young guys coming up, I just need to be inspired. Not that the pleasure horses don't inspire me because I still love to ride a good one, but I also have to be a realist that five years from now when I'm 55, things are going to be a lot different. I'm still in good physical shape now and I work at it. I kind of think once I hit 50, I was just about out of do-overs and if I was going to do something, right now was the time. So I lost 15 pounds after my birthday by eating better and staying in better physical shape. I think I just need to be inspired.

TC: Are you inspired right now?

SH: By the pleasure horses?

TC: Yeah. (long pause) It's okay to say 'No' because we've all been there.

SH: I think I go through phases when I am. Honestly, with the economy being in a slump and it's harder to make a profit, sometimes I think I should be devoting the same energy that I'm devoting to the show horses right now to the Thoroughbreds. The guys that I talk to tell me that for every \$100 I make in the Quarter Horse industry, that I could make \$1,000 with a Thoroughbred. I think about the time I have left as a productive person in the horse industry and I think I need to be capitalizing and making good choices now with the time I have left.

TC: Changing gears here, what about your love life?

SH: (laughs) Things are looking up. Things are looking up dramatically.

TC: Dude, you're blushing. You got somebody serious?

SH: Yeah, pretty serious. Her name is Erin Peery and she's from Kansas City. She lives in Pilot Point now.

TC: Are you happy?

SH: I'm real happy. Real happy. There are certain qualities that stand out that are important to me and Mary Carole had those qualities and Erin has them as well. She is genuinely nice and there's just no front. What you see is exactly who she is.

TC: You pulled off being a bachelor longer than most of us.

SH: I told her recently, 'I'm 50 years old and I've been a bachelor 46 ½ years (laughs) so that's kind of the odds you're up against. If you're ready to take that on, then come on.'

TC: Good for you. Let's wrap this up. What's the one thing that you feel is your single greatest accomplishment?

SH: Well, this is an area that is up for debate, but I would say that being a good dad. I think it's hard in today's world to be a single parent. I think what I will be the most proud of is if my son turns out to be the kind of young man that I hope he turns out to be. I feel like my job would be well done.

TC: Is he your true love in life?

SH: Yes, definitely!

TC: I have one last question. The very first thing you mentioned today was being at the counseling place in Dallas and role playing the conversation with Mary Carole. Do you mind sharing with us one thing that you said that day?

SH: (long pause) I guess if you knew what the future was going to bring (deep breath) and you could only say a few things to somebody who you could never see again (fighting back tears), you think about what is really important. That was pretty tough, you know? What do you say to somebody that you will never see again who had that big of a role in your life? I guess I just hope, (tearing up) I guess I just hope that she would think I'm doing a good job with her son. Because I know that was the most important thing to her. I just hope she thought I was doing a good job.

TC: And you have, Steve.

SH: Isn't this ironic? Here we started the interview talking about how I never cried, and now look at me! (laughs)

TC: I knew I'd get ya'! (both laugh) But in all seriousness, Steve, thanks for talking today.