

AERC Hall of Fame Award 2003

VALERIE KANAVY

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by Genie Stewart-Spears

Valerie Kanavy's credentials speak for themselves: 1994 and 1998 World Endurance gold medalist, 1996 World Endurance silver medalist (her daughter Danielle was the gold medalist), 2003 World Champion Master, six IAHA (now AHA) 100-mile and one 50-mile championship wins and four 100-mile reserve championships, seven Race of Champions in the top ten (including one first and one second), 1999 AHSA Horseman of the Year, Virginia's 1999 Horsewoman of the Year, USET Whitney Stone Award and more than 15,000 career endurance miles, just to name a few of her accomplishments.

While many view the 58-year-old petite blonde as a superstar, along with the horses she takes to higher levels of competition, it hasn't been easy, no matter how it appears to outsiders. It has taken dedication and hard work, both of which Valerie doesn't slack off on, no matter what she has accomplished.

What separates her from the field is her constant search for a better way to accomplish her goals while working to improve her riding abilities and all the while asking herself and others what she can do to make a great horse better. She has doubted herself in the past and at times she still questions her abilities.

Riding instructor Donna Snyder-Smith has known and worked with Valerie since 1992. "My admiration for this exceptional woman has grown with each passing year. She has shown me repeatedly that while she is indeed a fierce competitor, she is, in equal amounts, generous. She shares her knowledge with both fellow competitors and beginners in the sport.

"And," continued Snyder-Smith, "like other great athletes such as Tiger Woods, Valerie Kanavy's life reveals her deepest motivation to be altruism, more than any need for fame. Wrestling with and subduing her ego on a regular basis, she continues to succeed because she daily continues to learn and improve; in this as well, she bears the mark of a true champion."



Valerie Kanavy and Shahdon at the 2003 Spook Run ride. The team were first and BC in the 100 mile ride.

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Dr. Robert Beecher stated, "Valerie is no doubt a world-class horsewoman. She is successful because her mind is always working; she is constantly looking for the 'racer's edge.'

"Many times," said Beecher, who has been her veterinarian and consultant since 1998, "Valerie is not any better mounted than anyone else. But, she knows what she and her horse are capable of, and she makes the right moves at the right times."

At age 12, Valerie bought a horse with money she earned babysitting and delivering newspapers after the family moved to Wichita, Kansas from her native California. Kansas is also where she eventually met and then married Larry Kanavy. She and Larry moved to West Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1967.

In the beginning of her "horse addiction," as she calls it, she owned Quarter Horses, doing mostly pleasure riding, along with a little showing in western pleasure and barrel racing. After marrying Larry, Valerie was introduced to fox hunting and purchased her first Arabian, Jameel Abyad (who later became the dam of the 1992 bronze medalist, Ramegwa Kanavyann, and Ramegwa Rhodora, the 1993 top endurance horse in Europe).

Preparing her horse for foxhunting was the beginning of Valerie's education in conditioning horses for long days of work. In 1972, Valerie did her first competitive trail ride and won. However, it was Larry who began competing in endurance with Valerie training the horses. Although Valerie competed some, she mostly crewed for Larry at the events.

But, in 1982, Larry started up his business, Trevdan Building Supply, and he said, "It became apparent that Val was capable of competing at a higher level than I had time for, so she took over these really good horses."

In the early 1980s, with their three children—Trevon, Danielle and Tim—approaching their pre-teen years (Trevon and Danielle were both born on April 1, one year apart!), Valerie began competing more, with Larry crewing for her.

"What made me happy, and still makes me happy, is to take a horse, train it, mold it, and make it successful," she said. "Then, I want the next challenge."

One of the numerous horses that Valerie trained was Ramegwa Tomano, better known as Jet, which she co-owned with Maggy Price. In 1980, Valerie campaigned this gelding and won the Northeast regional championship (her husband Larry was reserve champion on Charge Cindy), and was rated eighteenth in the National Top 25 Senior Division. Jet went on to stardom in ride & tie after Ralph Wadsworth of Utah bought him.

"I really didn't have fun attaining the Northeast Region championship," said Valerie. "I felt a lot of pressure. In order to keep up the points, there were a few times I'd go to a race when I didn't think the horse should necessarily go. I didn't feel satisfied or good about it and decided not to do that again."

In the meantime, she said, "After going to the Old Dominion Ride in Leesburg, Virginia, Larry and I decided that someday we would have a farm and retire to that beautiful state. When the Old Dominion Ride moved to the Shenandoah Valley, we discovered Fort Valley and the George Washington National Forest. Then, when suburbia starting taking over our riding and training trails in Pennsylvania, I realized how important it was to be close to government land if I wanted to continue riding and training out my back door. That cemented our decision to buy land and move to Fort Valley."

In 1992, after coasting along for many years on various horses, a major career move was about to take place. Encouraged by her husband, Valerie decided to try for a position on USA squad for the 1994 World Championship. But, at that time, she didn't have a long enough and consistent record on

any one horse, which would be necessary if she was to be considered for international competition.

And, she confessed, "I had a fear of failure. If I didn't do well, I wouldn't be as good as I thought I was. As it was, I was a big fish in a little pond [Northeast Region]. But, if the pond were bigger, maybe I wouldn't be such a big fish. So why go there? You can't fail if you don't try.

"I really thought I could be more helpful to the team as a coach than as a competitor. But Larry suggested I try for the team first and then, if I didn't make it, I could coach.

"As I was trying to decide which horse to nominate and campaign for the team," she said, "I had a visit from some people from Italy who were looking for endurance horses. I made the decision that I would sell one of the two horses, Ramegwa Rhodora (Dory for short) or Pieraz (better known as Cash). They chose Dory and that sale left Cash for me to ride." (Within six months Dory was the number one endurance horse in Europe.)

With a little more than a year to prove herself on one horse, she began planning her strategy and preparing Cash. He had carried her to an eighth-place finish at the 1992 Race of Champions, and ran in the top 10 in 100-milers for her in prior years, but she'd never asked for his maximum output. However, she and Cash were selected to compete in the North American Championship in 1993, in Calgary, a step toward being considered.

"I figured I had to finish in the top six in order to be selected for the World Championship," Valerie said. "Cash caught a cold on the trip out to Calgary. He was on antibiotics, but had to be taken off the medicine five days prior to the event because of the drug rules. I was lucky he was able to start.

"We went out with the leaders but it took Cash 15 minutes to recover at the first vet check. That was a big 'whoops,' and I pulled back and used my competitive trail skills to put my horse back together. People fell out in front of us and we finished sixth. However, due to cold wind and taking so long to get the final vet exam [Valerie left her rider card a mile away at the finish line], Cash cramped and trotted out lame.

"I was devastated. I even started thinking, 'This sport is too hard; I'm not going to do it anymore.' And, even though Cash was sound on the way home, I still was in a funk.

"Larry talked me into giving international one more try," she explained. "He believed in Cash and me, even when I didn't. He said he would devote the next year to taking us wherever we needed to compete, in an effort to make the team. He stressed that I had to stop riding just to finish and, instead, ride to win.

"Now that was pressure!" laughed Valerie.

So, in October, she went to the IAHA competition, came in fifth and Cash got best condition. "That was when I thought, 'Well, maybe we can do it.' I took Larry's challenge and asked more of Cash. We went on to win seven out of eight 100-mile rides and placed second in the eighth ride.

"That year of preparation taught me a lot," she said. "It gave me information about my horse's ability that nobody else had about their horses."

At the 1994 World Endurance Championship in The Hague, Holland, Valerie used all her knowledge and skill to earn the individual gold medal with Cash. [Author's note: If you ever have the chance, you should watch the professionally produced video, "1994 World Equestrian Games," of the endurance event. The final leg of the race, over cobblestone streets, will give you goosebumps!]

In 1996, Danielle, riding Cash, edged her mother Valerie out of the gold medal at the World Championship in Kansas by a nose.

Valerie says her most thrilling ride, though, was the 1998 World Championship in Dubai, UAE, on

High Winds Jedi. This ride is recorded in the Guinness Book of Records as the largest international equine event ever held.

“It was tremendously satisfying because it had the largest representation of competitors that was or ever has been from throughout the world,” she said. “There were 50-some countries and nearly 180 starters. To be able to compete with such caliber and numbers of competitors was a real thrill. It was the greatest test for me.”

Her worst ride, and Larry agrees, was the Big Horn in 1995. That was where TK Sonador, better known as Sonny (the horse Danielle had been training to ride in her first ROC), was gravely injured. It happened when someone’s horse got loose at base camp and took out the Kanavy’s electrified fence, setting her horses loose in a terrified flight into the night.

Sonny fell off a cliff.

“His left hind leg was broken at the hock,” said Larry, still feeling the emotion of the loss. “He was down at the bottom of an eight-foot wide canyon, screaming in pain. I couldn’t wait for a vet to euthanize him; I had to shoot him immediately.

“That was hard enough, but then I had to telephone Danielle and tell her. I cried for two days. We were completely devastated.”

“Sometimes things go wrong,” says Valerie. “You work through the problems because there’s always another ride. But what happened to Sonny was a permanent situation. It is a horrible memory.”

Cash had also gotten loose that tragic night, but he didn’t go far and returned to camp on his own. Although she was emotionally distraught over the loss of Sonny, with encouragement and support from Larry, she rode the Race of Champions the following weekend. She and Cash won. “We did it for Sonny and Danielle,” she said.

Valerie has competed in every region of the United States (in 35 states) and Canada, and in over 20 countries. She has trained and competed more than 25 horses in 100-mile events, 20 of which were 100-mile winners. And, despite the high risk of top-level competition, not one of the horses was ever in serious metabolic distress that demanded treatment.

She has served on many endurance committees, including USET, AHSA and IAHA (now AHA). She gives lectures all over the world and frequently hosts foreign riders at her home in Fort Valley, Virginia. Inadvertently, she’s become AERC’s most influential diplomat, spreading goodwill and instructing endurance riders around the world. Her induction into the AERC Hall of Fame is well deserved.