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Raising One Strong, Independent Mare is Difficult Enough. Try Having Triplets.

by *Catie Staszak*



The old adage says, 'Third time's the charm,' but when Carol Rosenstein bred her star mare SRF Dragonfly to the Holsteiner stallion Quinar, she got it right on the first try - and came away with triplets.

Triplet mares April Moon, Akuna Mattata (best name ever, am I right?), and Abbey Road are the result of a single breeding and were born via embryo transfer in 2008.

All three have now competed successfully up to at least 1.35m under the tutelage of show jumper Nicki Shahinian-Simpson. But it's 'the runt' of the bunch that has emerged as the brightest star - the effervescent Akuna Mattata, affectionately (and appropriately, staying consistent with the theme here) known as "Nahla," is shining at the 1.60m level, recently finishing fourth in the CSI 4* Upperville Jumper Classic Grand Prix and as the runner-up in the CSI 4* Idle Dice Open Speed Stake at the Devon Horse Show.



Akuna Mattata at Balmoral.

"Even when we're not there and [we're] watching on TV, we're mentally jumping every jump and whooping and hollering," Carol says. She still owns all three mares as Silver Raven Farms. "I love the sport...and to see her at this level is just an unbelievable thrill and joy. Nicki rides her so well and beautifully, and the horse is consistent. She is fast, she doesn't like to touch [the jumps], and she likes dirt, grass, anything. It's just very exciting to go in and feel like, whatever it is, you've got a shot at it. It's an amazing feeling to know that she's capable of winning [at that level]."

Carol, based in Malibu, CA, never set out to be a breeder, but she learned through various ownership endeavors that when she found herself in possession of an exceptional talent, she needed to cultivate it to the best of her ability. SRF Dragonfly, a Belgium-bred mare by Landwind, possessed that kind of ability. Originally the junior/amateur-owner mount of Carol's daughter Katie, Dragonfly was turned over to Nicki when Katie, now the designer of the luxury clothing line Houghton NYC, turned her focus toward college and her career. Dragonfly went on to achieve her own success with Nicki in the irons; the duo was second overall in the Olympic selection trials in 2008.

"So often, you buy a horse, and you have these great expectations, and a lot of times you're met with disappointment," Rosenstein said. "I've been lucky to have a few that have exceeded expectations, and [Dragonfly] certainly did. She was small, and she was all heart and all passion. She just wanted to do it. She had such an amazing heart that we just thought, 'Okay, they just don't come around like that.'"

A Fertile Endeavor

Rosenstein campaigned SRF Dragonfly to be sold, but before she let the mare go, she decided to try breeding her and holding on to some of her good genes. At Pollyrich Farms in Solvang, CA, Dragonfly was bred to the great Quidam de Revel, but the mare did not take with the frozen semen. Pollyrich owner Buffy Oas then suggested fresh semen from a son of Quidam, named Quinar Z.

"We looked up Quinar, and he was absolutely everything we wanted," Rosenstein recalled. "He'd already been an extremely successful stallion. So, we gave Dragonfly some follicle-stimulating hormone. She was super fit and getting ready to go back to work, and it's hard to get an athletic, lean mare like her—all muscle, in that condition—pregnant. But Buffy called me, and she said she stopped counting on 28 follicles. It turned out that she was very fertile!"

So fertile, in fact, that when the mare was later washed out, she had produced *four* embryos. She's a baby-makin' machine. Way to go, mama.

"[Oas] said she'd never had it happen before in 28 years," Rosenstein said. "I asked her, 'Do you even have four recipient mares that are in the right place in their cycle?'"

And she said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Well, go ahead and put them in, and maybe we'll get lucky and get one.' A lot of people breed and don't get anything. We waited 30 days and ultrasounded the four recipient mares, and there were three pregnancies."



Nahla as a foal.

April Moon, Akuna Mattata, and Abbey Road were born healthy fillies in 2008, and the trio kept Nicki busy in the 5-, 6-, and 7-year-old young jumper divisions. In Carol's words, they "took turns beating each other." At the 2015 Winter Equestrian Festival, in a class of 30, Carol's beloved triplets swept the podium in the 7-year-old Young Jumpers, with April Moon first, Akuna Mattata second, and Abbey Road third.

Making Her Presence Known–In and Out of the Ring

Like Akuna Mattata, April Moon is competing at the grand prix level, currently with Angel Karolyi in the irons, while Abbey Road, in the process of returning from minor injury, is a successful speed horse at the 1.40m and 1.45m levels.

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Nahla is now the furthest along of the group, but that wasn't always the case. Early in her training, the pretty bay exhibited behavioral issues that puzzled her connections. Nicki sent her back to Rosenstein's farm for evaluation, and she was found to have ulcers and abnormal hormonal values. If there's anything that'll throw a lady off her game, it's a hormonal imbalance. There's no playing around when it comes to hormonal mood swings, my friends. A year of treatment, R&R, and dressage training took Nahla back to basics, but the time paid off. Despite being a year behind her sisters, Nahla joined them in the 6-year-old Young Jumper Championships Midwestern League Finals in 2014, finishing third overall.

"It's funny because she went into that final having barely jumped any 6-year-old classes, and she was so careful that you had to be [aware of that]" Nicki recalls. "From that point, there was no turning back. She went from jumping low schooling jumpers to jumping the 6-year-old Finals, and just went up from there."

In her quick ascent up the ranks, Nahla has made her presence known. She has developed a reputation for her big personality - dancing, prancing, and side-passing her way through the in-gate before a Grand Prix. When encountering new surroundings, she explores, and has developed a knack for using automatic waterers for personal entertainment. She also once let herself out of her stall in FEI stabling and took a stroll to meet the stable security guard for a pow wow. According to her

connections, the quick-witted mare knows when it's Grand Prix day versus a schooling day, and at home, the bay rarely ever jumps.



April Moon competing at the Winter Equestrian Festival.

"She's a real show horse," says Nicki. "[My barn manager] Beto Gutierrez rides her at home, and he can ride her bareback with a halter on. A couple shows ago, she was not showing, but she was with us, and he was sitting on her bareback with a halter at the grand prix ring. She knew she wasn't showing and was just hanging out. It was quite funny! She's way too smart."

"Out of all horses I've ever had, she definitely has the most character in that sense," she adds. "She keeps us laughing all the time. Everyone knows her at the rings. The stewards all know her; they see all her antics in the schooling area. She's well known for many reasons!"

Her "go-go" attitude and athletic ability are becoming Nahla's greatest trademarks. In the ring, the mare can appear strong, but Nicki says she actually quite manageable, thanks in part to equipping her bridle with a hackamore.

"She's very balanced behind and always up underneath herself. I can leave out a stride and could add two strides if I had to. She has a lot of rideability in that sense," she explains.

"It looks like I have no control, but I actually do! I actually worry about having too much control. It's better if I can just balance off the hackamore. She's too sensitive with a bit—she gets too bouncy and too hard to rate. Depending on rings, I just vary the hackamore between the curb chain, how much wrapping goes on it or not."

Trust and Respect

The results are quickly stacking up, as Nahla is tackling every call and new "first" with aplomb. In the mare's five-star debut at Spruce Meadows in June, Nahla again flashed her brilliance, finishing second in the Friends of the Meadows Cup at the Pan American Tournament. Shahinian-Simpson mentioned two factors that have contributed most to the mare's—along with her siblings'—success: trust and respect.

"She's a real, real spirit and character," she says. "I would say, we both go off of a lot of trust for each other. The one thing that I've never done with any of [the triplets], all being mares and having the quality that they have, I never tried to make them conform in a way that would take their spirit away. I think that's what's really made them. They're very strong personalities. They're very much show horses and competitors and have been from the get-go. There's not a whole lot of conventional training. They're very positive and sure of themselves and go the way they go, and they love what they do. It's really been a fun journey."

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Just as her breeding would suggest, Nahla is truly one-of-a-kind. Carol is well aware that the circumstances surrounding her triplets are a type of lightning that won't strike twice.

"Breeding is the ultimate act of optimism," she says. "If you go to Europe and look at how many are bred, or if you look at the number of Thoroughbreds that are bred every year—and there's only one [Kentucky] Derby winner—you realize how rare it is to get a Grand Prix horse, much less two and a speed horse! For three out of the three

to be super exceptional horses, I just feel like...it just doesn't turn out that way. I'm very respectful of the fact that I've had a lot of beginner's luck. A lot of people breed a lot and are not fortunate enough to get horses at this level."

"To see [Nicki and Nahla] at that level, I just can't explain the feeling. There have been ups and downs; I bred her, brought her along, went through setbacks, and now it's all working. As exciting as it is to buy and own one - I've had lovely horses that I've bought, and it was a thrill when they won - but when you bred the horse yourself, it adds something else that's hard to explain."

Feature photo by Kate Morrison. Other photos courtesy of Carol Rosenstein.

Written by Catie Staszak

Catie Staszak can typically be found doing one of three things: talking about horses, writing about horses, or riding horses. A broadcast analyst and journalist at FEI competitions, she spends her time traveling to shows and getting behind the microphone to break down courses and get people excited about equestrian sport. Normally spotted with her dog Omaha nearby, she's grateful to be able to combine her greatest passions into a career she loves.

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