



Horse Of A Lifetime: Charade

Groom Nick Bishop has cared for the charismatic hunter for 22 years, from winning at the best shows to quiet grazing in the greenest pastures.

BY MOLLY SORGE



“I will warn you, you called Grandpa to ask about his favorite grandkid. I might not stop talking,” said Nick Bishop, chuckling in the slightly Southern accent he’s layered over his voice after years in Tennessee.

It’s true: Bishop’s got a lot to say about Charade. But he can be forgiven his grandfatherly pride; after all, he’s taken care of the flashy chestnut gelding for 22 years. They started their days together at the top shows on the East Coast, as Bishop groomed Charade for owner and rider Neely Bates Bryan. Now they’ve settled into a peaceable, slower pace.

Charade, 29, has the run of the property at the Bates family’s Shady Side Farm in Eads, Tenn. The flashy chestnut gelding—still glossy and spry—ambles around the farm like a retired general, keeping things in order.

“He has a bit of arthritis, which doesn’t bother him too much; he’s just not as rambunctious as he used to be. He wanders around and talks to other horses. When new boarders come, we have to introduce them to him,” Bishop said. “This literally is his farm.”

When Bryan, who rode Charade to many junior and amateur-owner hunter championships in the ’90s,

Nick Bishop has cared for Charade for 22 years. “He’s spent years training me, and he’s finally gotten me the way he wants me,” Bishop joked.



Charade and Neely Bates Bryan jumped to countless junior and amateur-owner hunter blues with Nick Bishop standing at the in-gate. O'NEILLS PHOTO

moved back home to Tennessee last year after more than a decade in New York City, she was thrilled to see Charade still going strong and was amused at the lengths Bishop has gone to in meeting the horse's needs.

"Nick lives and breathes for Charade. I've never seen anything like it. He spoils that horse rotten," Bryan said. "I looked in his stall, and the front door has all this padding on it because Charade bangs at the door until you give him treats. So, Nick padded his door, so he didn't hurt himself doing it. Someone told me that he put an air conditioner in Charade's stall one really hot summer; I don't know if that's true or not, but it wouldn't surprise me!"

Bishop has no shame at his complete compliance to Charade's every demand. "We've decided that the best way to describe the relationship between me and Charade is that we're like Leonard and Sheldon on 'The Big Bang Theory' television show," Bishop said. "He's Sheldon, and I'm Leonard; he has a roommate contract like you wouldn't believe that I have to follow.

"Charade might be Neely Bates Bryan's horse, but I am his human," Bishop added. "He's spent years training me, and he's finally gotten me the way he wants me."

At age 28 in 2013, Charade looked like he could walk into the show ring as he played with Neely Bates Bryan.

Joining The Circus

Bishop first laid eyes on Charade's kind face with a wide white blaze in 1992. Well, Dec. 18, 1992, to be exact. Bishop remembers the date.

Charade, an appendix Quarter Horse, had been a successful second year green horse with rider Peg Seals and trainer Nardeen Henderson, capping their time with a reserve championship at the 1992 Washington International Horse Show (D.C.).

"They handed us two pages of instructions," Bishop recalled. "He was the first horse I ever saw who came with an instruction manual. It told you every detail of what he needed. But once we knew his routine, he was a pretty straightforward horse."

Bishop worked for the Holmberg family, who bought Charade for their daughter, Helen, to show in the junior division. Bishop drove to Virginia from their Fox Knoll Farm in Southern Pines, N.C., to pick up Charade. Little did he know he was driving home his destiny.

Charade, Bishop, trainer Don Stewart and Holmberg were a winning combination throughout 1993, but in the spring of 1994, Holmberg was injured in a fall and had to give up riding.

In early 1995, Bryan bought Charade, and it seemed as if the horse's life and Bishop's were diverging for good. "Just by coincidence, the last thing I did while working at Fox Knoll Farm was to help prepare Charade for Neely to try him," Bishop said. "Then I left because my mother was terminally ill. I





was basically retiring at that point. I moved back to Ohio and was going to do other things.”

Through much of 1995, Bryan and Charade forged their own winning partnership, but whenever they were in Ohio for a show, Bishop would come to visit Charade. “We knew he missed Charade,” Bryan said. “We asked Nick to come work for us because we had to have those two together again. He’s been with us ever since. We wouldn’t know what to do without Nick.”

With his mother gone and the lure of the show circuit calling, Bishop jumped at the chance. “I told everybody when I left Ohio, ‘I’m running away to join the circus!’ I went back to Ohio to try to be a responsible adult, but I kept slipping away to horse shows. When the Bateses called with their offer, I jumped at it. I couldn’t stay away,” he said.

Nick and Charade were reunited in

December 1995, and Bishop and Bryan headed to the Florida circuit in 1996 with not only Charade, but also All Mine and Awesome, a trio of phenomenal junior hunters. With trainer Bill Schaub at the helm, they started quite a record of wins over the next few years.

It Was His World

Charade made his mark not only in the junior and amateur divisions with Bryan, but also in the regular working classes with Scott Hofstetter. “He was a pretty straightforward horse to prepare, and once you had him ready, if the rider didn’t make a mistake, you were going to get a ribbon,” Bishop said.

Getting Charade ready to show wasn’t so much a matter of getting him worn out—it was just letting him get comfortable. “We’d get there a few days before a show, and Bill would get on him and school him a bit, Neely would ride him

Nick Bishop took Charade to the ring for six years and has overseen his care for more than a decade after his retirement.

a bit, and that’s all it took,” Bishop said. “Once he was comfortable on the grounds, it was his world, and he could do anything, no problem.

“He had Wellington [Fla.] wired,” added Bishop. “He had a charge account at the coffee stand; he was addicted to Rice Krispie treats. Every morning, we’d go by there and stop, and they would hand him his Rice Krispie treat.”

Bryan showed in 1995 and ’96 as a junior, then moved to the amateur-owner, 18-35, division in 1997, ’98 and ’99. Each time she went in the ring with Charade, Bishop stood at the in-gate with his towel in hand and his pride overflowing.

“He’s all about the best thing for the horse,” Bryan said about Bishop. “He’s so devoted to them. He’s well known for taking good care of horses; he’s an old-fashioned horseman. He’s been a rock in my life, as well, through a lot of ups and downs.”

“I’m pretty happy to watch him go roll in the mud and get dirty.”

—NICK BISHOP

Bishop worked with a lot of good horses in his more than 40 years in the show world, but something stood out to him about Charade. “The talent he’d show—he was just such an athlete and such a character. Watching him jump was fantastic. You could see him come

to a jump and measure it and get there perfect," he said.

"Once in a while, he'd go in that ring and just be a bit wild. If he shook his head after the first fence, you could sell tickets to watch the rest of the ride," Bishop said with a chuckle. "Neely would ride him so great and so fluidly that she never had to bother him. If he got there a tiny bit tight, that's when you got the spectacular jumps. He could jump her out of the saddle."

Throughout 1998, it seemed like Bryan and Charade couldn't lose, as they collected tricolor after tricolor and topped the WCHR Amateur-Owner Challenge at the Capital Challenge (Md.). They finished the year with the win in the stake class at Madison Square Garden in the National Horse Show (N.Y.). "He always won the stake class for some reason. Somehow he knew when money was involved!" Bishop joked.

After the winter circuit of 1999, however, Charade strained a ligament in a hind leg. Bishop did all the rehabilitation on him but couldn't get him quite back to his old self, even though Charade came sound.

Charade still likes to keep Nick Bishop busy with grooming sessions! NICK BISHOP PHOTO



Happy To Watch Him Get Dirty

"Neely said, 'He doesn't deserve to go out this way. We have to retire him.' He's been living the life of Riley ever since," Bishop said.

"I cannot have more respect for that family. In 1998, there were some people offering a lot of money to them for Charade, and they said no. And then in July of 1999 I had to call Mr. Bates and tell him, 'I'm sorry, we're going to have to retire him,'" Bishop said. "I've been in this business long enough; I know there were at least half a dozen trainers who would have been glad to have a client buy him, give him a little of this or a little of that, and he could do the 3'. But that was never a possibility. They've been so loyal to their horses and to me."

Charade and Bishop made their way off the show circuit and to Tennessee together. "I left him the first time, but when I came back to him, I kind of accepted that this was where I'd stay," Bishop said. "I have to be sure he's going to be OK. I never really thought he'd live to be 29! He's 29 and I'm 69, and the two of us managed to luck into it pretty OK. My life is comfortable, and I buy lottery tickets, so I'm set!"

For Bishop, continuing his commitment to Charade's care beyond the show ring was simple. "It's not a big, noble

thing. It's not like I could be doing something exotic. I've reached the point where I'm pretty happy to watch him go roll in the mud and get dirty. I've accepted the fact that horses is what I do. I became very good at a job that doesn't pay very well, but I am so happy," he continued.

Bishop lives at Shady Side and manages the farm, overseeing Charade and a barn full of boarders. "Charade is the last of the show horses," Bishop said. "We have some boarders with young horses and a few older horses. It's a nice mix. Right now, Charade goes out with two other chestnut geldings, and they are the three amigos."

Before his grooming days, Bishop had been a trainer and ran his own barn in Ohio. He'd found the job with the Holmbergs through an ad in the *Chronicle*. While he's more known for his care in the barn, Bishop knows his way around a saddle.

"Occasionally I'll get on a horse, which causes tremendous uproar," he joked. "You'll hear screams, 'He's RIDING!' and all the camera-phones come out, and it's all over the Internet."

Bryan kept riding for a bit after Charade retired, but her heart wasn't in it. "I was kind of ready to do other things," she said. "After everything Charade and I did together, I had kind of done everything I needed to do."

Bryan moved to New York City and married but returned to Tennessee last year. She makes time to visit with Charade, grooming him and going for the occasional ride. "He gets so excited when he sees me. He definitely remembers me. I'll get on him and take him for walks, and he's just full of himself," she said.

And while not much is slowing Charade down at the moment, Bishop knows an inevitable decision awaits. He's prepared, and he acknowledges that it's part of his devotion to the horse.

"Other than the sudden traumatic things, the situation that will end his life is the arthritis is going to get to the point where he can't be comfortable," he said. "I know him as well as anybody can know a horse, and I want to be here so I can tell when he gets to that point. When I can see that he's not happy or enjoying his life, I'll make that call. I signed on for the long haul. I feel like I have to see it to the end." 🐾