

History Repeats at Willow Tree Farm

By Ashley Matchett Woods, The Equestrian's Concierge

Willow Tree Farm has a reputation for turning out excellent riders – even a long list of now-professional trainers. Created and managed by the legendary duo of Graeme “Butch” and Lu Thomas, the business is going through a re-boot led by Guy Thomas and Leslie Wright with its move to the Stanford Red Barn. Not a passing of the baton, but rather a seat at the table for the second generation as the 4-way partnership collaborates to lead the expanding business.

Guy and Leslie are both children of a hunter-jumper legacy and raised in the family business. Guy, grew up in the Thomas system, exemplifying the winning method of the Willow Tree institution. It took him to the highest levels representing the family’s dual citizenship home of New Zealand in the Olympics and the Rolex FEI World Cup Jumping Finals – on Thomas’ home-bred horses.

Leslie, the daughter of Grand Prix rider, Carol Wright, shows off the Melodic Farms method by riding in her first grand prix at 17. *“Leslie was a natural and once she competed at Spruce, she was hooked,”* says Carol. Her national standard GP start was aboard *“the strongest horse I’ve ever ridden,”* says Carol, *“but he loved Leslie. He ran off with her in the very first class they did, but she mastered him.”*

Leslie began work with Willow Tree 2 years ago, following a stint working for Gry McFarlane at Windfall Farm. Hired for 3 weeks at Thermal, but was quickly offered a job. “right away, Leslie was so organized and had things handled so smoothly,” says Guy. Butch agrees, “Leslie was enthusiastic -- she’s a pretty damned good rider – and fit in. Not everyone succeeds when given the direction ‘ride our horses our way.’” Guy and Leslie’s personal partnership grew and 8 months later she joined him at the Woodside training barn and their work partnership flourished – *and history begins to repeat ...*



Guy and Leslie in work mode. © EQ's Photo & Video

What makes this duo work?

Leslie likens the Leslie/Guy partnership to that of Butch & Lu, *“we complement each other – I’m such a soft touch, but Guy can get anything done. We’re a 2 and a 9 on the discipline scale.”* Leslie cites a ride of hers not wanting to go over the water, so Guy gets it done – but, she says, that horse is too sensitive for Guy to ride everyday. *“That’s what is truly unique. We’re partners, but not of the same style. Our technique is very different, so we can make a wider variety of clients happy, we offer more of a range in our approach.”*

Four Sets of Eyes on Every Decision. Guy and Leslie are the trainers at Willow Tree, with Butch and Lu coming in to help on the ground – particularly when Guy and Leslie are in the saddle -- or weigh in on a big decision. They are a resource and wealth of knowledge with unparalleled experience – the ultimate sounding board and competitive edge.

Guy cites the change with Leslie aboard. *“It’s different now, we’re partners – I’m not an employee,”* says Guy, *“big decisions are still discussed with Mom & Dad, but it’s a team effort from the 4 of us,”* says Guy. The pair sees this as a source of confidence as they take the business in a new direction. *“We’re the new thing but with a proven track record.”*

The Willow Winning Ways. In May of this year, Guy



Willow Tree Farm tack room. © EQ's Photo & Video



Stanford Red Barn. © EQ's Photo & Video

and Leslie moved the entire training business to the iconic Stanford Red Barn, igniting the momentum in the Willow Tree re-boot. Earlier this year, they'd grown from 22 to 30 horses, and the move means all of the horses are in one place. They added an assistant, Cody Shank, who will train at home when the couple goes to shows.

The Red Barn is the perfect environment for the Willow Tree culture. *"the team, Vanessa Bartosh and Avery Brown, are fabulous and the crew is top notch. They are a joy to work with,"* says Guy, *"anytime you need something, they're right there."* Leslie adds *"it makes our jobs enjoyable and easier. The horses are happy, and the*

clients feel as if they have a private training facility."

June of this year marked a symbolic public emergence for the "new" Willow Tree, with Guy winning the Paso Robles GP aboard Jonkheer Z (Emily Livermore, owner) with the only clean round. Found by Butch 7 years ago for Karl Cook, "Johnny" was Cook's Junior jumper and became Cook's World Cup ride. Guy and Leslie are thrilled with his homecoming and believe he will make for a top-level horse.

Leslie's win on Adamus (Pinnacle Equine Group LLC, owner) in the \$10,000 Woodside Circuit Opener Grand Prix exhibits the strength of their partnership. She beat Guy on Peterbilt for the win by one tenth of a second. But he was coaching her Leslie explained, *"for the jump off, I watched Guy go and tried to make it look just like that: smooth, efficient, and quick. At first I was just excited to be double clear, then I was excited to see the board say first."*

Furthering the Willow Tree Tradition. The plan is to strengthen the Willow Tree roots, having more well-rounded, talented Juniors to bring to Young Riders. *"I went to Spruce for the first time at 13,"* says Leslie, *"and Willow Tree was where you wanted to be. We want to re-capture that."* Those riders had picture-perfect position and were fighters, they were there to win. Karl Cook, Alec Lawler -- more than 20 talented and tough Young Riders were produced at Willow Tree.

The pair do feel there is a misconception out there -- that Willow Tree is all about the jumpers. *"My mother was a top hunter rider and we have had competitive riders in equitation and medals,"* says Guy, *"we want to build that side of the business too."*

The Willow team can cite numerous wins, championships, and ribbons, but walking through the barn, other successes are



Willow Tree Farm new branded barn wear. © EQ's Photo & Video

evident: there one client who's been with Willow Tree for 30+ years, the majority have been with the barn for 5-10+ years, and there are 6 horses over the age of 18 showing and winning championships.

Most importantly, Guy and Leslie feel strongly that they want clients to work hard and enjoy it. *"We're tough but its fun – I would hate to be screamed at,"* says Guy, who's training style is described as that of a big brother: helping and encouraging, rather than dictating and demanding. *"Some lessons are an hour, sometimes we can get it done in 25 minutes. A little bit of structure but focused more on what is needed."*

Eager to voice support, one client put it, "[my daughter] is truly having fun, more than she's had on a horse in a long time, she's always smiling. Even when something goes wrong, she has a smile on her face and tries again."

The Not-so-Secret Weapons. 2 ½ hours from Stanford lies 90 acres of Willow Tree Farm in Burson where Butch and Lu oversee yet another offering – a purposeful strategy for diversifying the Willow business. They breed racehorses, rehab show horses, raise the bulls, work a flock of sheep with Butch's New Zealand heading dogs, while also raising the young show prospects and keeping the 3 breeding stallions: Peterbilt, Jonkheer Z, and Scout. Guy likes to give his GP horses a break and sends them there for R&R. *"We have our own re-hab facility, and a source for great horses – what other training business has that?"* There is also the 65 acre Willow Tree Farm in Butch's native New Zealand – where they spend several months a year – rounding out the portfolio .

Yes, I said bulls ... Guy considers his hobby to be reining and raising bulls for PBR – Professional Bull Riders. *"Back when I was 6 and 8, we'd show at the Cow Palace and it was a rodeo and livestock show. I'm country – I remember begging my dad for a rope to be like Julio Moreno. Now its come full circle, and Julio and I are partners on the bulls."*

Pat Warren owned many of the top hunters shown by Lu in the 80s, and is now a prominent owner in the reigning world. She invited Guy to show one of her horses at Reigning by The Bay, stirring his passion for Western riding and improving his finesse no matter the saddle. *"Fortunately, Malcom (Starbuck's Finest) is basically a seeing eye dog – he wouldn't let me make the mistake, despite me asking him to."*

The Willow Tree future looks bright – as do the professional riding careers of both Guy and Leslie. Guy would love go to the Olympics again – *"only if I was a threat,"* he says. *"I can't even explain the awe I was in the first time, I wasn't sure if I was going to burst into tears, throw up, or leave the ring."* He feels that Jonkheer Z could do it, but that's 4 more years for a 14-year-old Johnny. Thomas-owned Idagio van Het Nerenhof (Spencer) is 8 years old and the team seems him as a very good championship horse. In his first big class, Guy blames pilot error as his less-than-stellar debut, *"we went 2nd and all of the strides were on the half step and the plan back-fired,"* he jokes.

Leslie wants to go as far as she can on, riding Pinnacle Equine Group's, Adamus, *"I'm in the perfect place to work on my skills and develop as a professional. I'd be lucky to see half the places Guy has seen"*.

Carol and Leslie as a baby.



Lu and Guy at the age of 2.5 years old at Chagrin Falls on Noel. Video

