

Living Legends: Wilson Dennehy

Equitation's greatest record holder reflects on beating—and befriending—George Morris, earning—and declining—a spot on the U.S. team, and finding his true love.

BY CATIE STASZAK

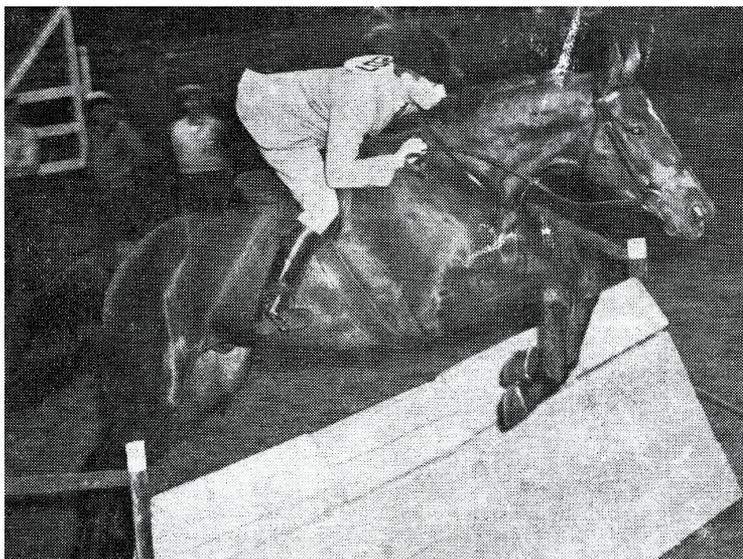
Records are meant to be broken. A cliché, yes. But one that Wilson Dennehy apparently hasn't heard.

In 1955, the native of Lake Forest, Ill., became the first junior rider to sweep the three major equitation finals: the AHSA Medal Final (now the Pessoa/USEF Hunter Seat Medal Final), the ASPCA Maclay National Championship and the USET Medal Final (now the USEF Talent Search Finals) in the same year.

Six decades later, Dennehy's record still stands. While other talented riders—who have gone on to win Olympic, Pan American and Nations Cup gold medals—have swept the series of intense, grueling, perfection-seeking finals, none have been able to do so in the same calendar year. Dennehy, now 77, can only marvel and reflect at the magnitude of his accomplishment.

"If you would have told me when I was 13 years old that horses would be this big a part of my life, I would have said, 'There's no way it will happen like that,'" he says, remembering how he took just one riding lesson before his debut at Madison Square Garden for the 1952 National Horse Show.

The ever-vibrant Dennehy loves to tell a good story: "And that's a true story!" he'll often exclaim, chuckling, at the end of a detailed yarn worthy of a fairytale novel. But his favorite story isn't how he etched his name in the hunter seat equitation history books. It's how his medal finals sweep led to a love story.



Wilson Dennehy rode Fortune Hunter at the 1955 National Horse Show for his wins in the AHSA Medal Final and ASPCA Maclay Finals. BUDD PHOTO

Learning By Observation

When Dennehy says he was mostly a "self-taught" rider, he's not exaggerating. A son of Charles Dennehy and Virginia Wilson Dennehy (Wilson is named after his mother's maiden name), he got his first taste of horses at the family-run Tower Farm in Wadsworth, Ill. Wilson's grandparents owned Tower Farm; his father managed it alongside an insurance business so that the family—Charles was one of seven children—could visit and enjoy the property. Although Tower Farm is no longer in the Dennehy family, the farm's namesake, a white water tower, still stands tall.

"I remember my brother [Charles

"Charlie" Dennehy, Jr., who would go on to make the U.S. Equestrian Team in 1953], five years older, was getting to go to Arizona, and my parents told me I couldn't go until I learned how to canter by myself," Dennehy recalls. "I know I rode before that, but I can tell you, that was the first real time I really remember riding, was when I cantered my pony Brownie through that field.

"If you can believe this, there was a Young Rider Championship held right down the road from Tower Farm years later, and I coached a team," he adds. "I could see the field where I had learned to canter from where I was."

Virginia was the rider in the family, having shown horses for the esteemed Hitchcock family in Aiken, S.C., in the 1920s.

"She had a very light contact that everybody today would love to take and do," says Wilson, who learned his first riding lessons from her. However, he had no professional instruction through his first horse show, and he would not until he was introduced to a new term for the first time: "diagonal."

"I had competed in an equitation class on one of my ponies, and someone said to me, 'Wilson, you don't know what a diagonal is!'" he remembers. "I had never heard the word 'diagonal' before. So, my parents sent me off.

They didn't know what diagonals were; they weren't a thing when my mother rode. Anyway, they sent me, and I had one lesson where I learned my diagonals before going to Madison Square Garden in 1952. Otherwise, I was basically self-taught, because I taught myself by looking at the professional riders around that rode well to see how they did things."

Some people are aural learners, but Wilson is definitely a visual learner. He won his first blue ribbon in June of 1952 at the Lake Forest Horse Show, but it wasn't in a novice equitation class. It was in a 3'6" equitation class: the only Maclay qualifying class in the state of Illinois.

"This was how my real horse life started," Wilson says. "I talked to my dad after winning this class and told him that I really wanted to go to the National Horse Show."

"The Luckiest Phone Call I Ever Got"

In order to attend the 1952 National, Wilson and his father came up with a two-pronged agreement. The first stipulation: Wilson was forbidden from mentioning the words "National Horse Show." The second: good grades and permission from school.

"I had always been an OK student but not a good student, but that fall I started as a day student at a private high school where my brother had gone, and I brought home my first report card to my father, and I was tops in the freshman class and second in the school," Wilson remembers. "[My father] said, 'Wow, you really want to go to that horse show, don't you?'"

Wilson ran into a roadblock, however, when his teacher refused to give him permission to attend the show. A single phone call would change things.

"I was home sick one day. My mother was out somewhere, and my dad was at the family farm because he had some things to do, and he really didn't want to be bothered unless it was important," Wilson says. "The school called home and got no answer, so they called my father out at the farm. They said, 'Mr. Dennehy, we thought we told you that Wilson could not go to that horse show.' My father was mad that they were



Sixty years ago, Wilson Dennehy accepted the trophy for winning the USET Medal Final aboard Altmeister. PHOTO COURTESY OF USHJA

bothering him when he didn't want to be bothered, and he was very upset that they were calling him a liar. So, he piped back, 'He did not go to the horse show. You're calling me up and telling me that I did something that I didn't do.'

"That ended up being the luckiest phone call I ever got," Wilson says, "because my father told the school, 'If Wilson wants to continue in your school, he will not go to that horse show, but if you never see him again, you know he chose the other option.' Do you need me to tell you what option I chose?"

Soon thereafter, Wilson and his brother Charlie were on their way to Madison Square Garden.

The "Squirt From Illinois"

Wilson was 14 when he competed at the National for the first time in 1952, riding a horse named Tinka in the junior hunters and the Maclay. The unknown entity from the Midwest went straight to the top in the juniors, defeating a highly regarded rider by the name of George Morris. Wilson caught Morris' attention in a big way that day, but instead of becoming rivals, the two became close friends.

"[George] had been champion at Devon [Pa.] and all over, and he said, 'Who's this squirt from Illinois? I've never heard of this guy before,'" Wilson says. "George and I got to be best friends after that. He won the Maclay and the Medal finals that year and became the youngest ever to do it."

"My horse was a very quiet Thoroughbred, and when I went

in for the junior hunter class, he had already switched [riders] twice, and I didn't have the best eye at the time when a horse was not in front of me, so I made a major mistake," Morris recalls. "I knocked down a wall, and evidently Wilson won the class. We're exactly the same age—I think we're a few weeks apart—and I guess that's how we met. It was sort of a mutual admiration society that weekend. He won that class, and I won the Medal and the Maclay—and we followed it up."

While Wilson excelled in the hunter ring that year, he struggled when it came time to jump the Maclay course.

"I was not good, because I had never seen a course like that before," Wilson says. "They did not do that in Illinois. The courses they built in the East were much tougher. I did nothing in that class."

Wilson knew he had a lot to improve on for the following year's final, and for the next three summers, he traveled from Illinois to Connecticut to spend two weeks riding with Morris.

"George was still living in Connecticut where his parents were, and every summer from 1953 to 1955, I went to visit him for two weeks," Wilson says. "He was riding with Gordon Wright at the time, and when I went there, I got two weeks of professional instruction in 1953, '54, and '55. That's the only professional instruction I ever had, aside from the one lesson when I learned what a diagonal was."

Morris also visited Wilson in Lake Forest.

"I had an aunt that lived right next door to Lake Forest where I would stay," says Morris. "I was very close to Wilson, and I would go out to his family's stable. We were very, very good friends from 1952 on. He's one of my oldest, best friends."

"Despite what he might say, Wilson, as I remember, was a very good rider, and when he had Gordon Wright educate him, he was even better," Morris adds. "He was a very good rider and a very correct rider. He was a more talented rider than I was. He just didn't have the access to the East Coast shows as easily."

Wilson began to travel to other shows in the summer of 1953.



Wilson Dennehy and Fortune Hunter en route to a record string of equitation wins in 1955. BUDD PHOTO

"The 1952 National Horse Show was the first show I had ever been to outside of the state of Illinois," Wilson says, "but in the summer of 1953, my parents let me go to Michigan to show. My brother and I went up there, and I sold Tinka there. [My father] had paid \$1,000 for her. I sold her for \$2,500."

"The price of jumpers has certainly changed from then to today," he adds.

The Great Equitation Year

In 1953, Wilson returned to the National Horse Show. "Truthfully, I couldn't even tell you the name of the horse that I took, because I still didn't quite know what I was doing, but I was learning," Wilson admits.

But in 1954, he clearly remembers his mount. Potato Chip, a former 3-year-old champion in Virginia, left a sour taste that still lingers in Wilson's memory more than six decades later. Before landing in Wilson's care, Potato Chip established a habit of rearing and refusing to move forward upon entering the arena, but when Wilson took the gelding to Harrisburg for the Pennsylvania National, he performed beautifully, bringing home the tricolor in the junior hunters. Wilson headed into the National Horse Show feeling confident, but Potato Chip would revert to his old habits.

"Those days at Madison Square Garden, you couldn't jump before you went in the ring," Wilson says. "You could go up and down the wood ramp that had fire hoses attached to it and hack between the in-gate and the out-gate where they had a little bit of dirt, but you could not jump before you went in any class. I used Potato Chip, and he stood up on his hind legs again when I went in the AHSA Medal Class. I didn't know how important jumping was. I had never shown him without jumping, and I thought I had him fixed, but obviously I had to jump him before I went. I was so mad at him, I never rode him again. I ended up borrowing a horse for the Maclay, and thank God I didn't win it, because the next year, I would win all three."

"That horse cantered past the in-gate on a circle and stopped and reared straight in the air," Morris remembers. "When he went, you couldn't beat him, but when he didn't go, he'd rear at the in-gate."

But a year later, Wilson enjoyed a glorious three days as all three finals were held in one weekend at the National, and Wilson arrived at the Garden with two very capable mounts. He used Fortune Hunter, an equitation specialist, for the AHSA Medal and the Maclay, while he

“He was a more talented rider than I was.”

—GEORGE MORRIS

saddled the German-bred jumper Altmeister for the USET class.

The USET of old was a two-phase event: half dressage and half jumping. The dressage round took place on Friday at Squadron A, the location of the cavalry unit of New York City's Upper East Side, while the jumping phase was held the following day at Madison Square Garden. Wilson and Altmeister, a horse that Wilson's brother Charlie had ridden on the U.S. Equestrian Team, won both phases, but not without some controversy.

“It made some people mad, because they said, ‘You're using a horse that your brother is using on the U.S. Equestrian Team,’” Wilson says. “I said, ‘Yeah, but do you want to know how this horse wins for my brother on the team? My brother rides beautifully, but if I don't do the flatwork on this horse before he goes, he goes horribly. If I don't warm him up, he's awful for my brother. He wins when I warm him up.’ People didn't know what to say to that.”

Earlier in the day, Wilson soared through the AHSA Medal Final with similar ease, notably defeating Michael Plumb, who would go on to compete in eight Olympic Games in eventing and become the first rider to be inducted into the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame, in a final test that involved switching horses. Unbeknownst to Wilson, he would be faced with that test again—and again (and again, and again, and again, and again)—in Sunday's Maclay Final.

“After the first jumping phase and the flat phase, they took seven of us back to jump the second round,” Wilson remembers. “But they had each of us change horses on all the other horses, so I rode, besides my



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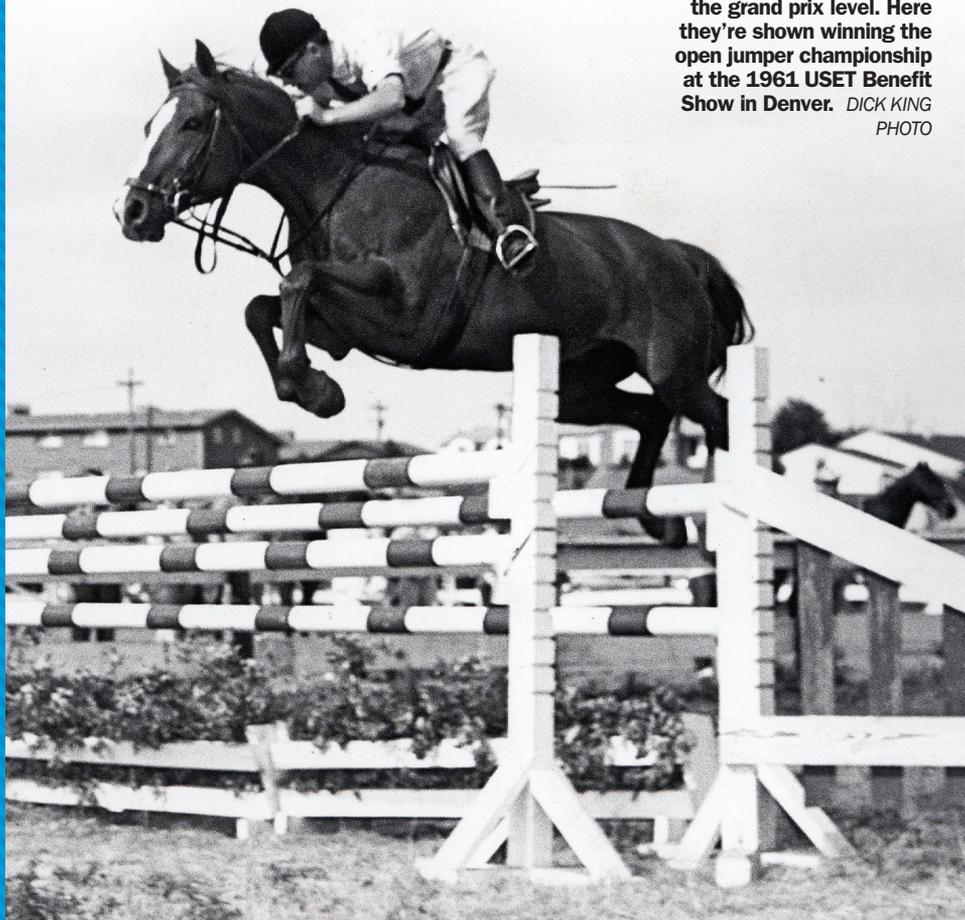
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Pill Box is one of the many horses Wilson Dennehy trained and showed at the grand prix level. Here they're shown winning the open jumper championship at the 1961 USET Benefit Show in Denver. *DICK KING PHOTO*



horse, six other horses.”

By the time Wilson mounted his final horse of the test, the effects of a grueling, pressure-filled weekend began to catch up with him.

“I took care of my horses at that time. I had no groom. I braided them, cleaned their stalls, and did all of this,” Wilson explains. “So by Sunday, when I rode my last horse, I was maybe a little foggy. I cantered to the first jump, and I will never forget this feeling: ‘Oh my God, I’m going to get to that long distance! That’s a perfect long distance, but I’m not quite in position. I have to switch position and do this now so [the judges] don’t see.’”

“I thought that when I jumped it I was OK, but I wasn’t really sure whether they could see me doing that,” he adds. “But that woke me up, and after that I probably rode better than I had ever ridden before or maybe even better than I ever did after that. It just shocked me, and I know I rode beautifully. But I had to switch my position to that first jump so I did not get slightly behind my horse.”

The judges couldn’t find a reason not to give Wilson his third equitation championship in 48 hours.

Sandra “Sandy” Phipps Dennehy

Wilson’s sweep was a launching pad for a tremendous, impactful career in the horse industry, one that included competitive stints in the hunters, jumpers and even three-day eventing, more than 30 years of judging at shows from Florida to California to Alaska, and pivotal roles in horse show administration. He even had his own spread in a 1956 issue of *Sports Illustrated*.

But ask Wilson the greatest impact his equitation championships had on his life, and he goes beyond the realm of horses.

“It got me a wife!” he’ll tell you.

Two months after the 1955 National Horse Show, Wilson received an invitation to a dinner party that changed his life. The host of the party had seen a newspaper article about Wilson’s

Wilson’s wife Sandy Dennehy rode Riff Raff to multiple year-end titles in the hunters.

CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

riding accomplishments and wanted him to meet a friend of hers who also rode horses. Wilson agreed to attend, and that night he was introduced to Sandra "Sandy" Phipps. Two years later, her surname would change to Dennehy.

"Thank God I had been good enough to make the local paper, because on January 3, 1956, I met my future wife at that dinner party," Wilson recalls. "She was 16, and I was 17 when we met each other that night. You see, horses made my whole life for me."

While Sandy attended school, the two were separated for more than 14 months. They originally kept in touch through letters, but the letters stopped in October of 1956 (Wilson says he suspects some letters were lost in the mail, and both parties naively assumed the other had lost interest). During that time, Wilson focused on his riding career. He aimed to try out for the U.S. show jumping team, but he lacked the funds for a horse of that caliber; his parents told him they couldn't offer him financial support while also supporting his older brother in the same endeavor.

So he found an alternative.

"I said that I rode well enough that I was going to go out for the three-day event team," Wilson recalls. "I said, 'I ride well enough to beg, borrow and steal horses to go do that!'"

The trials for the national three-day event team were held in Colorado Springs, Colo., so in June of 1957, Wilson traveled west. He would not only make the team, but he would also reunite with Phipps.

"I went to the Broadmoor Hotel there, and guess who was also there? My future wife, Sandy," Wilson fondly remembers.

Wilson never let Sandy get away again, proving his love with a life-altering decision.

"I was prepared to [try out for the eventing team] again in 1958, when the officials called me and said, 'Wilson, you're definitely on the team. You're going to go to the Pan Am Games next year in 1959 and then the Rome Olympics,'" Wilson says. "I started thinking, 'I love Sandy. I don't want to lose her.' I wasn't sure if I could bring

her along with me to the Pan Am Games and the Olympics."

Wilson turned down the offer and gave up his spot on the national team. Instead, in October of 1958, he asked Sandy for her hand in marriage. They married in March of 1959.

"I gave up the team to go do that, and that really was the first smart thing I ever did," Wilson says.

Developing Horses

Wilson and Sandy settled in Denver and had three children: Liza, Michael and Charlie. Wilson originally worked for Gerald Phipps, Sandy's father, in the construction business while also giving instruction at the Arapahoe Riding Club, a training facility Gerald Phipps started in the city of Parker.

In the mid-1960s, Wilson left the



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construction business to pursue a full-time career in horses, but the decision wasn't easy.

"After our second child Michael was born, I decided that I couldn't do both anymore, because I didn't have enough time to spend with my young kids," Wilson says. "I was afraid at that time, if we did the horse business, I wouldn't make enough money to support the family and do what we really wanted to do. But Sandy said, 'Wilson, I think you can. I think you can.' She finally convinced me, and I'm glad she did."

Wilson developed countless successful show horses at the Arapahoe Riding Club, including In Dutch, a horse Sandy qualified to ride in the amateur-owner division at Madison Square Garden seven years in a row, from 1982-1988 and was the AHSA Amateur-Owner Horse of the Year; Mark Twain, a year-end champion in the second year green hunters; and Riff Raff, a five-time USEF Horse of the Year. It didn't take long for Wilson to establish a reputation for being an excellent scout of young talent.

"I've said this many times, but if I wanted someone to buy me a jumping horse, it would be [Wilson]," says Dr. George Marvin Beeman, Wilson's longtime veterinarian. "He just had an uncanny eye of picking out a horse that would go ahead and be a really good jumper. On several occasions, he'd come back from Europe with horses that would go on and do really well, and he didn't have to pay the biggest amount of money. I'm sure he paid his fair share, but he didn't have to buy that horse that was just terribly expensive just because somebody thought it was. I really appreciated his ability to do that."

"My father could look at field full of 100 horses and watch them just trotting around loose and say, 'Those are the two best jumping horses,' and he'd be right," Wilson's youngest son Charlie adds. "His eye for horseflesh, to me, if not unparalleled, is very close to it. I've been so lucky and spoiled with the horses I've gotten to ride, all thanks to my dad's ability to pick them."

Wilson almost missed out on Riff Raff, however. He first scouted the 16.2-hand Hanoverian in Europe and had plans to purchase him, but the horse

sold at auction before he had the chance. Thankfully, a friend from Germany would make a valuable connection for him.

"The people who had him told me they would call me when the sale was going on, but they never did," Wilson recalls. "These people from Italy ended up buying him, but I had a German friend go talk to the people after the sale. They didn't want to sell him; they loved him. But my friend was very smart and gave them his card, and sure enough, they called him about a month or two later and said yes, they wanted to sell him. I said to my friend, 'Italy's a lot closer to you in Germany than it is to me. As long as he's the same horse, and he's not stopping at crossrails or anything, I want to

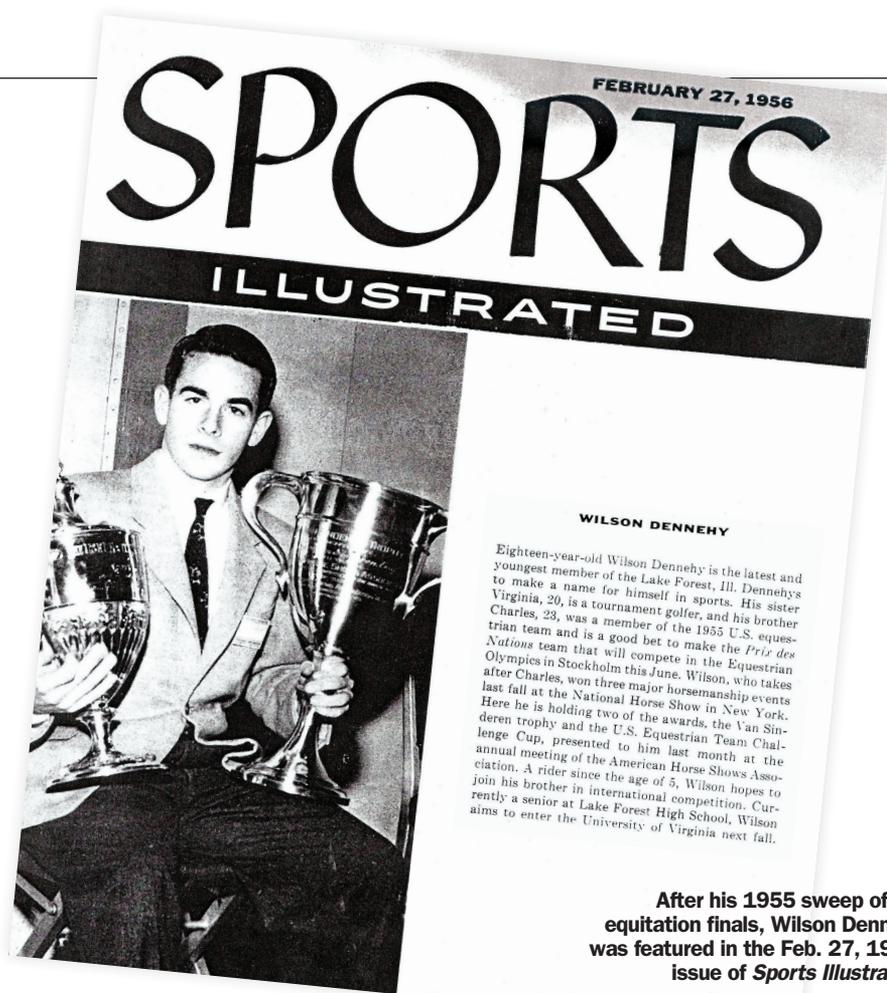
“His eye for horseflesh, to me, if not unparalleled, is very close to it.”

—CHARLIE DENNEHY

buy him.' He remembered how he had jumped at the sale, so he went to Italy for me and called me up and said, 'Wilson, he's jumping just fine.' So I got him."

Riff Raff was originally intended to be a jumper, but the gelding would instead make a name for himself in the hunters, winning numerous championships. Both Wilson and Sandy rode the gelding, who was amateur-owner champion at the Pennsylvania National and now has a trophy named in his honor, awarded to the Hunter of the Year of the Colorado Hunter Jumper Association. While he was a pleasure to ride, he wasn't nearly as easy to handle on the ground.

"He was a great horse, but you couldn't work on him," Wilson



WILSON DENNEHY

Eighteen-year-old Wilson Dennehy is the latest and youngest member of the Lake Forest, Ill. Dennehy's to make a name for himself in sports. His sister Virginia, 20, is a tournament golfer, and his brother Charles, 23, was a member of the 1955 U.S. equestrian team and is a good bet to make the *Prix des Nations* team that will compete in the Equestrian Olympics in Stockholm this June. Wilson, who takes last fall at the National Horse Show in New York. Here he is holding two of the awards, the Van Sinsler trophy and the U.S. Equestrian Team Challenge Cup, presented to him last month at the annual meeting of the American Horse Shows Association. A rider since the age of 5, Wilson hopes to join his brother in international competition. Currently a senior at Lake Forest High School, Wilson aims to enter the University of Virginia next fall.

After his 1955 sweep of the equitation finals, Wilson Dennehy was featured in the Feb. 27, 1956, issue of *Sports Illustrated*.



Wilson Dennehy learned much of his riding from his parents, including his mother Virginia, who rode for the Hitchcock family in the 1920s. EDWIN LEVICK PHOTO

says. “Dr. Beeman, my vet for many years who I think is the best veterinarian in the world, said to me, ‘He’s the most difficult horse I’ve ever worked on.’ It turns out, this is why the people that bought him at the sale didn’t want him.”

“Of all of the horses in my practice, I had the most respect for that horse and always thought that if he got me in the right position, he’d just do something to kick the tar out of me,” Beeman says. “Every time he had something wrong with him, I’d go over [to the barn] thinking, ‘I’ve got to be careful!’ But the other side of that coin is what a remarkable horse he was. He won so many championships. I used that horse when I gave a lecture on conformation, because he was such a quality athlete. He was one of the best horses that I had the opportunity to provide veterinary service for in my career.”

Wilson also became known for bringing out the best in problem horses. Riff Raff was just one in a long list of well-known names, including his former equitation mount Potato Chip. But the horse that started it all was a Thoroughbred named Pill Box, a horse that belonged to his brother, Charlie. Charlie had competed the horse in the hunters but eventually lost interest in the gelding, so, in typical brother-to-brother hand-me-down fashion, he gave him to Wilson—that is, until he saw how well Wilson had the horse going when he returned from the 1952 National Horse Show. Pill Box would never enter the show ring as a hunter again. Instead, he became a top-caliber jumper and earned Charlie a place on the USET.

“When [Charlie] saw me jumping him again, he said to me, ‘Brother, you’ve done wonders with this horse! I want to jump it again!’” Wilson recalls. “So he did. He took this horse to the Chicago International and showed it in the regular jumper division, and the jumper

judge was Arthur McCashin, captain of the U.S. Equestrian Team. Arthur McCashin came up to my brother and said, ‘Charlie, you should take this horse to the tryouts next year. This horse looks good enough for me to put you on the team.’ So my brother took him to the sectional tryouts in Kansas City and won both in June of 1953, went to the final tryouts in Pennsylvania and won those, and made the U.S. Equestrian Team. My brother did all of this on that Thoroughbred horse that I trained.”

Later on, Wilson would again get to ride Pill Box, showing him in grand prix classes, mostly on the West Coast. Wilson says the gelding’s best class may have been his last, in a grand prix in San Francisco. That day, Pill Box displayed—quite literally—an immense amount of heart.

“He jumped the first one or two fences normally, but all the sudden he no longer had his normal energy and forwardness and so forth,” Wilson remembers. “We had to start adding strides. I had to put two [strides] in a



one, three [strides] in a two, and extra strides down the side. But he ended up being one of only five horses to jump clear. As I approached the in-gate after the round, a man approached me and said, 'I'm a veterinarian. I know what's wrong with your horse. Hurry up and get off. I can save him.'

"It turned out that he had had a heart attack," Wilson says, "yet he never had a rail. He couldn't jump-off, obviously, and he never jumped again, but the vet did save him. Can you imagine, in having a heart attack and adding strides, that [Pill Box] wanted to leave the jumps up that badly? That shows what a great horse he really was."

A Family Business

As the Dennehy family put down roots in Colorado, Wilson took on a leadership role in helping to grow the horse show community. He helped establish the Colorado Hunter Jumper Association in 1964, was one of the original partners in the Colorado Horse Park, and he was a founding director of

the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association.

"I was the first person west of the Appalachians to win any of the horsemanship finals," Wilson says. "I know I improved riding when Sandy and I decided to move to Colorado. We helped not only people in Colorado but also riding in general in the western part of the country, because we took some knowledge from back east and helped distribute it around the country more."

Wilson also took on the role of educating his children. Liza, Michael and Charlie each competed in the major equitation finals as junior riders.

"We grew up showing! We showed a lot, because everybody [in the family] rode," Liza says. "We didn't all win the medal finals, but we were all competitive. We were all champion here or there or won this or won that or rode on this team. We've all had our day when we've been successful."

"From the earliest days in my life, I can remember going to a horse show," Michael adds. "I started actually competing at age 7. I had gotten scared,

Wilson Dennehy (right) rode his winning equitation finals partner Fortune Hunter on the winning hunt team at Grosse Pointe Horse Show, along with Dorothy McLeod (left) and Mrs. James R. Green.

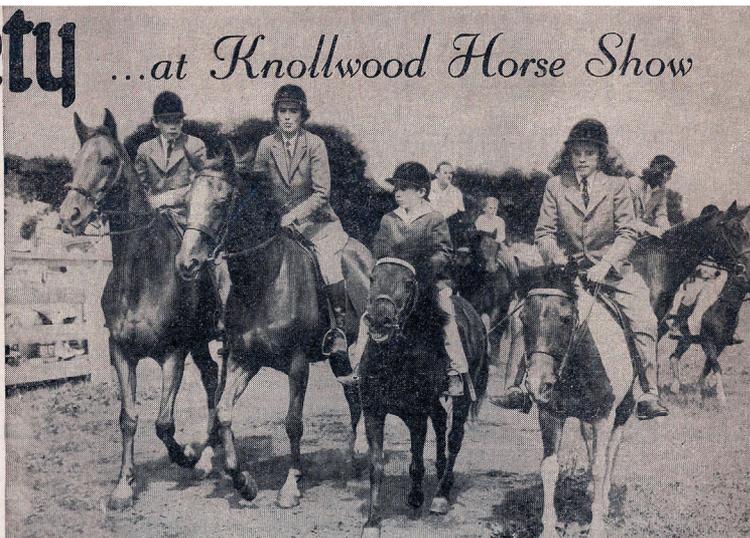
and I didn't want to ride, but then my sister was champion at a show in Minnesota. I decided that looked pretty cool, and I wanted to do that."

The Dennehy quintet did everything together, sharing horse care responsibilities, "hand-me-down" horses, and living quarters while on the road at shows. ("We left the day after school and were on the road until the day before school," Charlie says.) At times, that made for tight quarters, but it also made the family closer.

"The thing I remember the most growing up, as far as the horse show life, was in the early '80s, when people first started catching on to the idea that you could save a fair amount of money on the road by living in campers," Charlie says. "The first time we stayed in a camper, we went to the Lions Club Show in Dallas, and all five

Society ...at Knollwood Horse Show

Lake Forest amateur horse show brings both parents and youngsters to Knollwood Country club for two-day meeting. Riding abreast around Knollwood ring (right) are Mrs. Charles Dennehy of Lake Forest and her children, Charles, Wilson and Virginia. Below: Tearful Caroline Ann Biehn, 2, youngest entrant, smiled later when she won ribbon in costume parade.



Riding was a family passion for the Dennehys, and Wilson often competed in the “family class” with his mother Virginia, brother Charlie and sister Virginia.

of us—Mom, Dad, Liza, Michael and me—stayed in a camper on the back of a pickup truck.”

Michael and Charlie would become professionals like their father, and they began their careers by training alongside Wilson at the Arapahoe Riding Club before going out on their own. Michael now runs Bridlewood Farms, located at the Columbine Equestrian Center in Littleton, Colo., while Charlie’s operation is called Adobe Ridge Farm, based out of the Colorado Horse Park in Parker.

“It truly was a family business in the true sense of the word that way for a very long time,” Michael says of the Arapahoe Riding Club. “As a father and trainer, [Wilson] always expected your best effort, and I learned probably 90 percent of what I know from him.”

Charlie says Wilson taught largely through his own example, and he points to one Christmas holiday in particular to illustrate his father’s work ethic.

“A number of years ago, we were in Illinois for Christmas, and we got a phone call from home saying that a woman riding Mark Twain had gotten him confused to the point where he would not go over a pole on the ground, and she couldn’t make him,” he remembers. “On Christmas Day, [my dad] flew home from Chicago to go to the barn and ride this horse and get it fixed, and then he flew back to Chicago for dinner Christmas night. That’s how seriously my dad took training horses and how

dedicated he was to it. The biggest lesson in life that he’s taught me is that there is no substitute for hard work.”

Liza, who also still resides in Colorado, remains an amateur rider; she’s pursued a career as a judge and course designer. She’s judged alongside her father on several occasions, most recently at the 2014 Franktown Meadows Hunter Derby in Reno, Nev.

“We had a great time,” Liza says. “It was a very fun judging job. It was one very good class.”

Sandy, herself a member of the National Show Hunter Hall of Fame, passed away on May 29, 2015, from complications of pneumonia. Wilson and her three children proudly carry on her legacy.

“Before my wife died, she and I were the only still-married, still-alive couple in the National Show Hunter Hall of Fame, if you could believe that,” Wilson says.

Wilson continues to work out of the Arapahoe Riding Club and trains a small group of young horses, some of which he bred himself. He remains a pres-

ence at the indoor equitation finals, as the Wilson Dennehy Trophy is awarded annually to the rider with the best results overall from the ASPCA Maclay National Championship and the Pessoa/USEF Hunter Seat Medal Finals. Last year the award went to Spencer Smith, who won the USEF Medal Final and was fifth at Maclay finals.

“Last year it was only for the best rider in the Medal and the Maclay, not the USEF Talent Search, because unfortunately that is not run these days by the equitation committee, which approves my trophy,” Wilson says. “It’s run by the committee that [U.S. Show Jumping Chef d’Equipe] Robert Ridland is on. I talked to Robert last year, and he said, ‘Wilson, the reason we never got to it last year is that we had so many things to catch up on. But I think it’s a wonderful thing.’ So I just called Robert after the Pan Am Games in Canada and reminded him, because I’d love to have all three count for my trophy.”

In attending the finals, Wilson receives an annual reminder of his historic accomplishment, one of sport’s longest-standing records—just 14 years younger, in fact, than baseball player Joe DiMaggio’s legendary 56-game hitting streak. Sports critics across the country say that record may never be broken, and Wilson Dennehy’s may never be equaled.

“I had a whole different life because of the wonderful wife that it probably got me, and the opportunities to train people and put them on good horses,” Wilson says of his finals sweep, set in motion

by his debut at the 1952 National Horse Show.

“That phone call that was put in to my father in 1952 was probably the luckiest thing that’s ever happened to me. It got me off to Madison Square Garden, and I was lucky enough to be able to go on from there.”

“The biggest lesson in life that he’s taught me is that there is no substitute for hard work.”

—CHARLIE DENNEHY