

# **Riders Up!**

**in Blythewood & Fairfield County**

Spring 2016

## ***Breezing the Best***

Emma Clifton's next ride  
could be destined  
for greatness

## ***The Last Cowboy***

in Fairfield County

Hey Kids!

## ***Join Pony Club***

and join in the fun

## ***Look who's winning***

## ***Blue Ribbons***

in Blythewood and  
Fairfield County







Emma Clifton lives her dream, breezing a race horse at 38 miles per hour around the track at Kirkwood Stables.

# Breezing the Best

**Barbara Ball**  
**Publisher**

During the winter months, it's cold and dark at 5:45 a. m. when Emma Clifton, 23, leaves the cozy warmth of her Blythewood home for work at Kirkwood Stables in Camden. Half an hour later she's walking into one of the stalls of a long shed row on the grounds of the Springdale Race Track, to saddle the first of 10 or so thoroughbred yearlings and two-year-olds she will ride before she goes home around noon. On this morning, a thick fog has settled near the ground, limiting visibility. Still, she rides. No matter the weather, no matter what, six mornings a week, she rides unless there

is ice on the ground.

By 6:45 a.m., Clifton is guiding her mount onto the track, preparing to breeze her first horse of the morning. After a short warm up, the pair rounds the oval track in the dark. Coming up on the quarter pole, the rhythmic sound of thundering hooves grows louder in the quiet, cold-to-the-bone early morning fog. Suddenly the horse and rider burst from the fog and shoot past to the eighth pole - and just as suddenly disappear again into the fog.

A man waiting by the track clicks the timer in the palm of his hand the instant Clifton passes the eighth pole. He looks at the timer and pinches his lips.

"That's just what I was looking for," he said to him-

self, sliding the timer into his coat pocket and returning to his Lexus.

The man is Kip Elser, an internationally acclaimed thoroughbred race horse trainer and the owner of Kirkwood Stables. What he was looking for, among other things, was for Clifton's horse to span the quarter pole to the eighth pole in 13 or so seconds which is about 38 miles per hour. In training, with an exercise rider on board, it's called breezing. On race day at Churchill Downs with a jockey on board, it's call horse racing.

A few minutes later, back at the shed row, Clifton dismounts, handing the reins to a waiting groom who will unsaddle and cool down the horse. She then saddles



Kip Elser, owner of Kirkwood Stables, times Emma Clifton's early morning breeze.



another horse and heads back to the track, this time with instructions to gallop. There's no time to warm her ice cold hands or rest her arms, already tired from holding the first powerful two-year old. She has at least 9 more to ride.

While the pay is good, the work is hard. It is also dangerous. She's had several spills. Still, Clifton says it's the job of her dreams.

"I never thought I'd be doing this," Clifton said. "Sometimes, when I wake up in the morning, I think to myself, 'Am I really getting to do this?'"

'This' is breaking, galloping and breezing some of the top yearling and two-year-old racing prospects in the country - sometimes in the world - who, in coming months, could sell for as much as six figures, some higher.

The breeding and training at Kirkwood have destined these colts and fillies for the big tracks such as Fair Grounds in New Orleans, Santa Anita in California, Churchill Downs in Kentucky as well as tracks in Europe and beyond. A few years back, Elser arranged for the sale of a foal sired by the 2000 Kentucky Derby winner Fusaichi Pegasus. That foal sold for a record-smashing \$4.5 million. A current top prospect in the Kirkwood barn that Clifton rides is the last and some say the most promising foal of the Elser-trained Soaring Softly, winner of the 1999 Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf, who unfortunately died last fall in a paddock accident.

Kirkwood has in recent years churned out three Kentucky Oaks winners, a Breeders' Cup Classic winner, a champion sprinter, a

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-- Emma Clifton



Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Turf winner and numerous graded-stakes winners in this country and abroad.

But, with a degree in Exercise Science from Lander University, the job at Kirkwood was not the job Clifton was initially looking for.

Clifton and her husband Bryce, newly wed last June, moved to Blythewood last August after Bryce, also a graduate of Lander University, was hired by Richland School District Two as the assistant coach for Blythewood High School's varsity baseball team and head coach for the junior varsity team.

With two horses, two dogs and two cats in tow, it was not easy finding a place to rent that would accommodate their menagerie. Finally the couple settled into a cottage with a barn, pastures and riding ring on Rimer Pond Road.

Clifton had set her sights on attending graduate school in the fall of 2016 and earning a Doctorate of Physical Therapy. She was looking for a job during the interim to save money for graduate school when a friend suggested she call Elser about working as an exercise rider at Kirkwood. Clifton was confident her

experience in both western and English riding as a member of the Lander equestrian team would help her get the job.

"The day I tried out, Kip said he was putting me on Mr. Wilson, an older horse who knew the ropes," Clifton remembers. "He told me to take Mr. Wilson out front and lead the babies (yearlings) who were in early training. He said, 'It's going to feel like he's taking off, but he won't take off. If you feel like you need to go out front, then go out front, but you'll be fine. He won't take off.'"

"Well, he took off. I couldn't hold him," Clifton recalls, still embarrassed about her debut. "We pulled up 20 yards later."

But Elser saw something in Clifton that made him keep her on, and three months later he's quick to report that she's doing great.

"When she came here, she had a little bit of background," Elser recalled, "but the best thing was that she had no bad habits, which was great. She has a tremendous work ethic. She hasn't done much breezing but," he said in reference to the morning's breeze, "she did exactly what I was looking for today. I don't know how hard or how easy it is for her but she's making it work."

For her part, Clifton said she's learning.

"I still have trouble holding the hard ones, holding with my body and not just my arms, but I love learning all this," she said. "The transition from western and English riding to race riding has been difficult. As a hunter-jumper rider, it was shoulders back, heels down and squeeze with the inner thigh. Here, the stirrups are



and squeeze with the inner thigh. Here, the stirrups are hiked up and it's pinch with your knees – that's what holds you on – and toes in. It was a lot to get used to overnight.”

But Clifton said the most difficult thing has been to learn how to use her internal clock.

“We have to ride between poles, say, the quarter pole and the eighth pole, in a certain amount of time, like 12 seconds or 13 seconds. Obviously I can't be counting M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I. I think I'm getting there, but it's hard,” she said

As for the strengths she brought with her to Kirkwood, Clifton said, “The thousands of riding lessons I've had over the years taught me how to put a horse together to make him use himself so he's not all on his forehand or hanging on you. And I think knowing that has served me well.

“It's not enough just to hold the horse,” Clifton said. “There's a lot to learn, and I knew after that first day I had to learn quickly or I'd be gone.”

As one of five exercise riders at Kirkwood and the only full-time female rider, Clifton said she is considering postponing her plans for graduate school. She hopes she will be able to continue riding at Kirkwood a while longer.

“It's a very exciting job. I love getting to ride these horses, knowing that I might be helping to train one that will go on to win the Kentucky Derby or another big race. You never know what will come in next.”

“I love riding any horse, but it would be really special to have ridden one of the great ones,” Clifton said. “With the horses that come in here,” she added, “it could happen.”



**Emma and Bryce Clifton at home with Emma's 18-hand Warmblood, Sully, who was rescued as a yearling from the flood waters of Hurricane Katrina and flown to safety on a transport plane. The horse still bears the brand of the G-Force-1 plane he boarded.**



**Arriving at the barn about 6 a.m., Clifton collects her tack, saddles her first ride, and is on the track all before the sun comes up during the winter months.**