

2008 Hall of Fame

Don and Barbara Ellis
IQHA Hall of Fame Inductees, 2008

When he was a teenager, Don Ellis discovered the Diamond K guest ranch near his home in Hot Springs, AR. He offered to help, and before long, he was employed, to work after school. The early years included a stint with Uncle Sam's Army in Germany and Austria, and then working at various barns in AR., the St Louis area, the Springfield area, and Bloomington, IL. Don has had good horses from the start and throughout his career showing and winning in halter, pleasure, reining and cutting. Don and Barbara were married in 1957. He moved to Chatham, IL to work for George Bryant. Their first son, David, was born in



1959, and a year later, Don and Barb leased facilities near Bloomington from Bob Baird (of Baird's Western Store). In 1961, a brief stint at Grant's Farm provided Don and Barb a unique experience and dozens of good stories they still tell. Don knew where his heart was, and soon Barb and Don were back at the Baird facilities where their second son, Brad was born in 1962. The early 60s started a new chapter in the Ellis' lives, and it also brought a string of top performing horses to the ring that are still remembered by many. Illini King Hand, with Don in the saddle, had a string of wins that just wouldn't quit. As a junior horse, King won the cuttings at the Chicago International and at the American Royal where he was also Grand Champion stallion. The horse earned his AQHA championship and also won the IQHA Champion Stallion and Open Cutting Champion awards. Don managed King's stud career for a number of years, and the breedings to a little mare Don showed effectively (Susie Duke), produced two barn burners who are still remembered in many places: Illini Duke and Riverbend King both becoming AQHA Champions. As the barn filled with a new string of cutters, Don and Barb found 40 acres about 10 miles south of Bloomington which they turned into a full-fledged horse facility. That was the mid-60s and is still home today. Pleasure horses were still part of the mix, but the real focus was on cutters, and to a certain extent, reiners. For three decades—the 60s, 70, and 80s—Don showed more than 50 horses to their AQHA championships, and had a hand in making two Supreme Champions.

As the 70s came to a close, Don and Barb complicated their lives by training Youth Activity horses for six girls, ages 11-16, and his youngest son, Brad, aged 16. Throughout the years, Barb has been a hands-on, but often behind the scenes partner in the Ellis horse business. Showing wasn't "her thing," she says, but she did show several horses in pleasure and hunt seat classes through the years, and for about two years she competed in cutting. She has given riding lessons for many years, and still does. Barb has had a variety of interest beyond the world of cutting horses and training. At one time she worked as a receptionist and later as a bookkeeper at a veterinary office. She produced a magazine for visitors to the Greater Bloomington area, and her long-time volunteer activities with the Humane Society have taken many forms. Finally, the congregation of the United Methodist Church in Heyworth has found Barb to be a tireless worker in a variety of capacities including her current responsibility as president of the women's club. During the years with the youth kids, Barb took on a host of new activities because the entire show routine changed. When the group left the stable for shows, they formed a caravan. Barb continued to do all the behind the scenes things, such as the billing, business management, and other definable things that needed doing. During the youth era, all of the "details" essential when working with youth also fell to her. She did the entries, found all things lost, cleaned hats, polished boots, punched belts, groomed horses, and did anything else that averted or cleaned up a crisis. After several years of that, both Don and Barb were glad to see kids outgrow their youth careers, and both were glad to shift back to the cutting horse focus, and still help young participants on a case by case basis.

Don has gone through his era of serving through offices and board membership in both the National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) and the Mid-State-IL Cutting Horse Assn. (MSICHA) where his term as president recently ended. He was a licensed NCHA and National Reining Horse Assn (NRHA) judge for almost two decades, but his judging schedule and show schedule caused too many conflicts for clients so he discontinued those roles. The Ellis' still are showing almost every weekend from June through September, and, they continue to make a number of the futurities. Where they go often depends on clients. Nobody says anything about slowing down or retirement.