

Harold A. (Sonny) and Ann Via are a unique couple with a diversity of interests, including beagles, antique cars and steeplechasing, and it is steeplechasing that has brought them the accolades heard up and down the East Coast.

Growing up in Virginia in the '40s and '50s, it was very difficult not to be influenced by horses at some level. The level to which Sonny and Ann Via have risen is in the stratosphere. For the last two years they have won the National Steeplechase Association's Champion Owner Award.



Sonny Via and
Good Night Shirt

The Rise of Good Night Shirt

and his owners Sonny and Ann Via

By
Jane Porter Fogleman



Shirt, with William Dowling in the
irons, winning the Iroquois



Good Night Shirt ahead of the field at the Iroquois

The winners circle at Belmont. From left: the Via family, Mary McGlothlin, jockey William Dowling and the Fishers



It all began with her growing up in Norfolk and him in Charlottesville. She got involved with horses at camp as a young girl. His father was a horseman. He was introduced to the show ring at an early age and showed open jumpers for many years while growing up. When he joined

the Navy, he was stationed at Oceana in Norfolk and kept a horse at Cavalier Point Stables. She brought a horse to school at the stable and met him. They married after he returned from the Korean War, and they moved to Richmond, then Baltimore before settling in Virginia Beach. He worked in

the insurance industry until his retirement in 1984 when they moved to Free Union just outside Charlottesville in Albemarle County, in the midst of horse country. They bought a farm and moved into a 1700s-era house, which they had moved from Dinwiddie County and restored. She

Shirt over the last hurdle of The Lonesome Glory at Belmont





Ann and Sonny Via accepting the Lonesome Glory Trophy from Lou Raffeto, CEO of NSA at Belmont
From left: Jockey William Dowling, trainer Jack Fisher, Ann Via, Lou Raffeto and Sonny Via

bought a foxhunter, became the senior whip for the Farmington Beagles pack, and he continued his lifelong passion for old cars.

The Vias' steeplechase venture began in 1989. They started out as part of a syndicate for steeplechase horses. When the syndicate petered out, he went out on his own to continue his love for horses and steeplechasing. His first trainer was Ricky Hendricks, who trained Via's horses for five years. Via then moved his horses to Jack Fisher's stable in Pennsylvania. There he and Fisher began building up his string. They won a lot of maiden races, but Via wanted to get beyond that. His opportunity came in 2004 when Sean Clancy (the legendary steeplechase jockey and founder/publisher/editor of *Steeplechase Times*) came to Fisher with a big, laid-back three-year-old chestnut named Good Night Shirt. Via purchased Good Night Shirt, and the winning team of Via, Fisher, William Dowling (the jockey) and The Shirt was formed.

Shirt broke into prominence in 2007 when he started the Grade 1 steeplechase at Keeneland and finished second by a head. In all his races, Shirt would walk into the paddock in his typical laid-back

style, standing for the saddling with one hind leg cocked. Dowling would get up, and off they would go to the most winning period in the Vias' steeplechase career. Shirt beat the greats Sur le Tete and MacDynamo in the Iroquois Grade 1 in 2007, despite almost falling after the last fence. Via was speechless. Fisher and Via then gave Shirt the summer off. His shoes were pulled and he was turned out in the field where he beat the heat by standing in the pond up to his belly.

He was brought back to work at the end of summer and was at the start for the inaugural running of the Lonesome Glory at Belmont. He won that rather handily and moved on to Far Hills. The weather was rainy and the going deep at Far Hills. The Shirt did not particularly like the turf that day and finished a close fourth behind MacDynamo. But he did not like losing, so at the Colonial Cup in Camden, he rose above it and beat MacDynamo. This race clinched both the Eclipse Award and the Horse of the Year Award from the National Steeplechase Association for Good Night Shirt and the Vias. This was a wonderful experience and great honor for

the Vias, but it did not come without moments of anxiety. One receives an invitation to the award ceremonies, but there is no indication which owner and which horse is nominated for the awards. The Vias obviously knew they had a great horse, but the final word from the stage is what counts. They won! Once again Fisher pulled Shirt's shoes and turned him out for the winter.

He got back to work in early spring to prepare for the 2008 Grade 1 races. Could he be a repeat? Via and Fisher were very hopeful. His first race could have been Keeneland, but he would have been carrying 20 pounds over the other horses, and Fisher said, "Even Big Brown wouldn't do that." So they skipped that race and set their sights on the Atlanta Cup, where Shirt came from behind to win. Dowling said he thought Shirt acted like he was just out for a little gallop—with a big pot of gold at the end. Iroquois was next, where he won handily for the second year.

In the fall of 2008, he again won the Belmont, then the nemesis Far Hills. At Far Hills the going was firm, and Shirt rose to the occasion, winning the race going away. He capped off his season with a final come-from-behind win at the Colonial Cup in Camden. He started five Grade 1 races in 2008 and he won all five. Good Night Shirt is a true champion of steeplechase. Once again the Vias received an invitation to the awards party. Two years in a row, they won it all—Good Night Shirt was Horse of the Year, the Vias were Owners of the Year, Jack Fisher was Trainer of the Year, and William Dowling was one of the top Jockeys of the Year. Additional accolades have been given to the Vias, who won the Eclipse Award for Champion Steeplechase Horse for a second year. As for the 2009 schedule, it will look just about the same with the same hopes for success. At present, Good Night Shirt is third in winnings for all time.

So where does one go after such success? In spite of all of the awards and

fanfare, to the Vias it is still just about the horses and doing well by them. They hope to have another horse turn out that well, but the chances may be slim, and it could be someone else's turn to experience the great thrill of having an incredible steeplechase horse like Good Night Shirt.

Afternote:

The Vias' other horses are younger and are coming along nicely. Fantorinni broke his maiden at the Colonial Cup with jockey Xavier Aizpuru in the irons. His win pushed the Vias over the top as 2008 Owner of the Year in purses. Their four-year-old Pleasant Top is a bit more high-strung, but they are hopeful that the spring racing season will mature him into a potential champion. There are other young ones on the horizon.

Photos courtesy of Sonny and Ann Via.



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Jane Porter Fogleman is a lifelong fox-hunter. She was born and raised in Charlottesville and lives there today where she hunts with Farmington Hunt Club.

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