

# A DIFFERENT ROUTE TO REINING SUCCESS

## JESSICAH KELLER BECOMES NEWEST NRHA MILLION DOLLAR RIDER

by Cheryl Cody  
Photos provided by Jessicah Keller

In an era where it's common for champions at elite reinings to win upwards of \$100,000 per show on the way to million dollar rider status, it's easy to forget that milestone can be achieved by a different route.

For the newest NRHA Million Dollar Rider, Non Pro Jessicah Keller, of Sumner, Texas, the road to million dollar status involved entry into 2,119 NRHA classes, most of them ancillary competition, with over 87% of her lifetime earnings coming in increments of less than \$1,000.

The daughter of Tammye Hutton, Jessicah grew up surrounded by horses at the family's Hilldale Farm. Her mother's goal was to raise halter horses that could perform, and Jessicah showed halter horses in AQHA competition from the time she was four years old, also competing in the full range of youth classes.

Now 40, Jessicah entered her first National Reining Horse Association-approved event in 1998 as a youth and kept competing in youth competition... then something changed in 2001.

She laughs, "It was really about a mule." Jessicah had been showing Martins Miss Cody in mule competition, winning national championships in mulemanship, showmanship, and keyhole. She also did driving, and predictably, reining. The national mule show dates coincided with a nearby reining show, and Jessicah begged to show their stallion, Nu Chex To Cash.



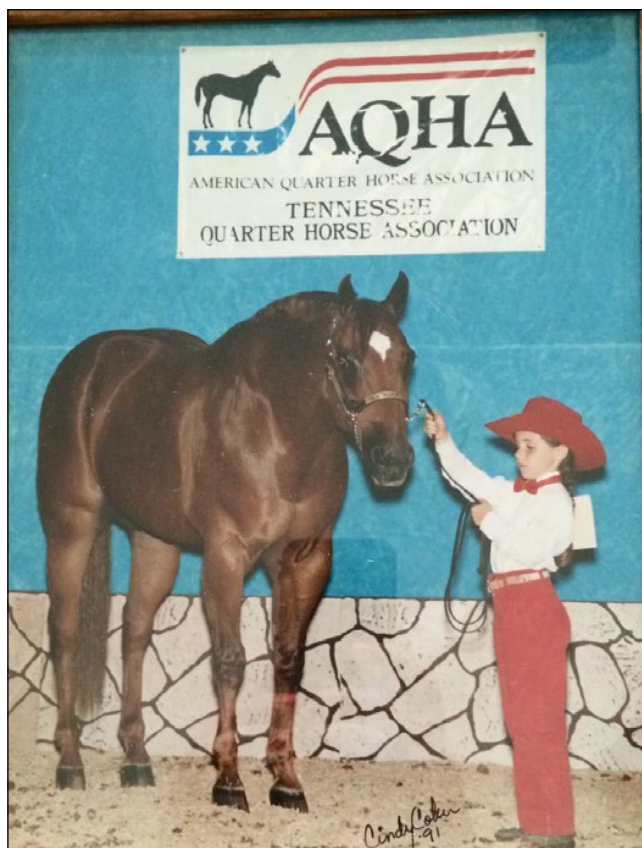
Jessicah and her first all-around horse, Sheza Royal Step.

Nu Chex To Cash had already secured an all-time record in reining with Charlie Hutton riding so Jessica was allowed to show the stallion in an NRHA Limited Non Pro class at the Kentucky Futurity. The veteran show horse and the young rider clicked and won the class.

The NRHA Futurity was just weeks away so Jessicah and Nu Chex To Cash were late-entered in the Limited Non Pro class at the NRHA Futurity. They ran as draw -3, and their score held to win the class of 108 entries.

With Keller at the reins, the team won NRHA World Championships in the Intermediate and Limited Open divisions as well as the reserve titles in the Non Pro and Intermediate Non Pro, all in the same year. They were also the reserve champions in the freestyle reining at the 2002 All American Quarter Horse Congress.

After amassing more than \$57,000 LTE the



stallion spent the last 25 years of his life in Hilldale Farm's breeding barn and was inducted into the NRHA Hall of Fame. And Jessica was on her way, claiming titles and championships and earning money in over 77% of the classes she entered. She is now a 12-time NRHA World Champion and 5-time NRHA Reserve World Champion.

Fittingly, Jessica went over the million dollar mark at a Heart of Dixie event in McDonald, Tennessee, the Wicked Slide. It was a show and a group of people she started out riding with before moving to Texas. This time she was aboard GT Cruise Girl, a Gunnatrashya daughter out of Chexes Girl, a mare out of her 13 and under horse from back in the day, Crews Girl.

Hilldale Farm had owned GT Cruise Girl and planned to show her, but she was sold. When they got her back early last year, Ben Gerst had spent the year getting her show-ready so Jessica hauled her to the Georgia show to see what she had to work with.



Top Left: Jessica and Bull Ben Moore, who was shown by both Keller and her mother Tammye.  
 Top Right: A special photo from 2002. Pictured are See Chex To Cash, Nu Chex To Cash, and Wimpys Little Step.  
 Bottom: Jessica and The OG Crews Girl at the AQHyA World Show, where they finished 3rd.

Jessica said, "We took her to the last horse show to see where we were for 2025." They won the Derby and the Novice horse there and Jessica passed the million dollar mark.

Renowned NRHA Professional and Non Pro



Coach Ben Gerst has been at Hilldale Farm for about two years and has a tremendous respect for Jessica. “She has a great feel for what her horse is doing and what she needs to do. She can really get a horse stopping. It’s natural to her. She’s a fierce competitor – just ask for a runoff with her and she’ll hit another level. She’s always better under pressure!”

He adds, “She’s won the million the hard way in mostly small increments but not because she wasn’t competitive!”

Jessica laughs, “I remember I told Brian Bell that I was going to be the only person that makes it to a million without winning the futurity!”

Keller’s top finishes do include landmark wins, such as in 2008 when she won the Bill Horn Shootout Single Shot L4 Non Pro Derby Championship on Helluva Chex (Nu Chex To Cash X Full Sis by Peppy San Badger), earning \$20,000 (her largest check ever in competition). That win was especially sweet for her and you can hear the emotion in her voice when she explains, “I was such a fan of Bill Horn and he meant so much to me. He was first to win a million and in those days that was so hard to do. Winning that event named after him was



Top Left: Jessica on Nu Chex To Cash in 2001 at the International Livestock Show.  
Top Right: Jessica showing Sparkling Major, who won one of the first 7 & Up classes at the NRBC when he was 13 or 14 years old.

wonderful and we put Chex over a million that weekend as a sire, too.”

One of Jessica’s favorite horses was Night Deposit Chex, a 1997 stallion by Nu Chex To Cash out of Salena Cee by Maxi Lena. In 2005, when they won the Non Pro World Championship, Jessica rode him to earn an amazing 11 bronzes. He finished his career with 152.5 AQHA points and over \$118,000 in NRCHA, NCHA and NRHA earnings.

Another favorite is Snips Shining Gun (Colonels Shining Gun X Snip O Gun) . She has won around \$98K now and Jessica’s goal is to put her over \$100K. Jessica said, “She’s 9 and still marking 73’s. You know my horses have not always won the biggest events but they have always been consistent and lasted a long time. Charlie (Hutton) taught me how to make them last when I was a kid. My parents couldn’t afford to buy me a new horse if I wrecked the one I had. I had to make mine last 5 or 6 years before I could even think of a new one!”

It’s always been about the horses at Hilldale



Farm, and along with great horses it also takes a great team to get to a million dollars won. Team is family to Jessica. “My Mom has always supported all of my goals, big and small. She always told me to set achievable goals and she has always stood behind me and helped me reach them. My brother David Hutton and my mom’s boyfriend Doug Gerard both work at the farm and make it to where we can show and do what we do.”

“My sister works a full time job with Purina and still finds time to help at the farm and show with us. Will Sherwood (my other half) stays at home a lot and runs his leather business, feeds horses and takes care of our son, Finn, so I can be away and do what I love. My daughter Josey has been cheering me on, too. It is a family effort.”

For Jessica, family is big – and behind the bounds of actual relatives. “Ben is certainly part of the family, and when I was getting close this fall, my work family at Sport Innovations (red blankets) called me every day I was showing to see how close we were.”



Top Left: Jessica and Splash Me A Chex at the NRHA Futurity. Top Right: Jessica and Nu Chex at the NRHA Futurity. Both stallions are by Nu Chex To Cash and out of Snips Shining Gun.

So, with the long-sought Million Dollar Rider goal attained, what is the best reward for Jessica?

She quipped, “Obviously I wanted a parking place at the Futurity,” referring to special parking for Million Dollar Riders. “It was all about not having to walk as far at OKC!”