

# CATCHING UP WITH KELLY RENO

The actor who played Alec Ramsay recalls his classic role.

By Elizabeth Kaye McCall

It was 35 years ago when a young boy from Colorado named Kelly Reno thundered down a pristine beach against an aquamarine sea with outstretched arms, riding bareback on a black Arabian stallion named Cass Ole. Together, they became the embodiment of the boy and horse in Walter Farley's classic tale, *The Black Stallion*, giving life to Alec Ramsay and the wild stallion The Black in ways that only the extraordinary visual storytelling of Hollywood conveys.

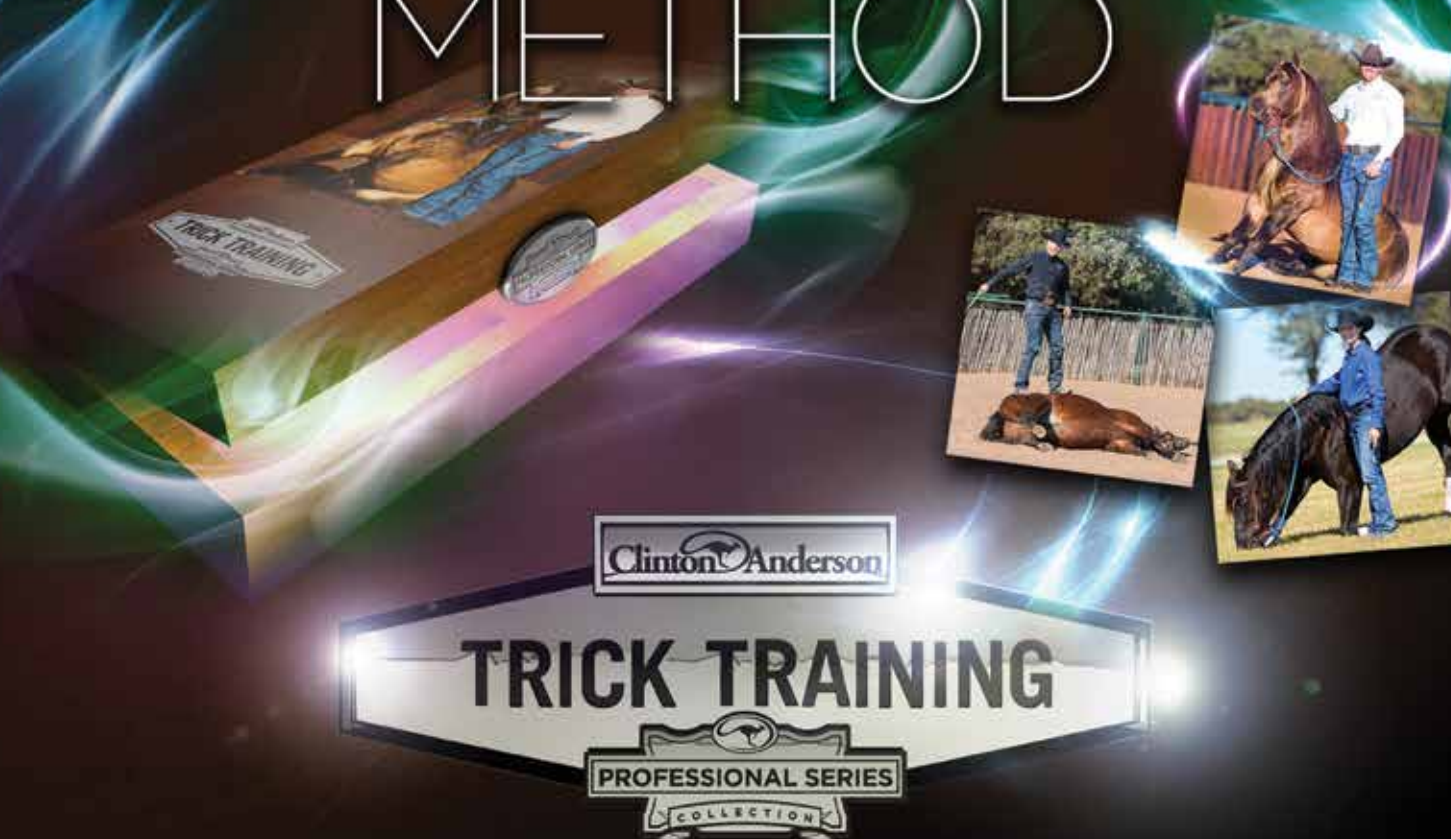
As timeless today as when the Academy Award-winning movie was released in 1979, Reno was only 11 years old with no acting experience when filming began. In contrast, riding was totally ingrained from growing up on his parents' 10,000-acre cattle ranch. "Basically, my whole childhood from birth was sitting on horseback somewhere," says Reno, now 47.

A family friend spotted an advertisement in *The Denver Post* for the lead role in a new movie based on Walter Farley's book, *The Black Stallion*, and told Reno's mother. The idea of getting out of school to go to Denver for auditions held immediate appeal to the young boy. "One thing led to another and I happened to be what they were looking for, and I wound up getting the part," says Reno. "I had never done any acting, but I was always kind of a ham."



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Despite noteworthy co-stars such as Mickey Rooney (as retired jockey-turned-horse trainer Henry Dailey) and Teri Garr (who played Alec's mother), young Reno made his acting debut in tandem with National Champion Arabian stallion Cass Ole, trained for the role by Hollywood horse trainer Corky Randall.

"I worked with a number of horses [on the film], but Cass Ole was the main one," explains Reno. "There were doubles and stand-ins. Some were trained for specialty moves. I guess you'd call Cass Ole the star. He was a typical Arabian. Because he was so intelligent, he knew when he could get away with things and would play it to the hilt."

Working with Cass Ole on the beach in Sardinia remains crystal clear in Reno's mind. And no, there wasn't a hidden neck strap to grab on to for balance. "I had a handful of mane, if I was lucky," says Reno. "As a small kid, when somebody throws you on a full-blooded stallion in the middle of the ocean and swats him on the butt, you take off and you've got 300 to 400 yards to run. Hopefully, somebody catches you on the other side. It could be very scary—like a runaway freight train. He goes and you go."

Shot on location in Canada, Sardinia, and the Italian mainland, Reno's parents, Bud and Ruth, traveled with their son throughout production on *The Black Stallion*.

"As a kid, you don't really think about the places," says Reno. "I was on a remote beach in Sardinia that nobody could get to. You had to take a boat or hike 2 miles. The crew would hike. They would take us on a little fishing boat and dock us at the beach."

"There were times when it was not fun. I was an 11-year-old kid having to grow up fast," describes Reno of a child actor's life. "There were time schedules. I had to get up in the morning and memorize my lines. My mom and my dad and I would rehearse way into the evening."

Reno's friendship with Randall often restored his perspective when the pressure was on. Reno recalls, "Corky was a class act no matter. He knew his stuff and was always one to inspire. He'd say, 'Little buddy, do what you got to do.' That would put something

back inside me and I would just buck up. Corky was a top-notch trainer and so was his dad, Glenn [who trained Roy Rogers' horse Trigger]."

A question about the months involved in production makes Reno laugh. "It was years!" he replies. "We would film so much and come back. Then, they would have things they missed or wanted to redo so we'd fly back." Meanwhile, the clock was ticking considering Reno's ripening age. "I was a scrawny little guy and I never grew too much when I was young," he says. "They were worried about that. People grow up in that time frame. I really didn't get my growth spurt until I was almost a senior in high school. They were real lucky that I didn't grow facial hair!" adds Reno, who did become noticeably taller by the time of his encore performance as Alec Ramsay in 1983's *The Black Stallion Returns*, shot in Morocco.

Now the father of four adult children (three from a former marriage), Reno calls his wife, Dawn, his greatest fan. "My wife fell in love with that movie. She fell in love with me. Back when she was 14, she used to write me fan letters. Now, we're married," he shares. Reno admits to watching *The Black Stallion* frequently, even after 35 years. The only hitch is that his children prefer watching alone, since he invariably tells stories in the background.

Does a particular day stand out that encapsulates the experience of working on the film? Reno pauses. "I think when I throw my hands to the side galloping down the beach. They basically told me to act like I was free. Looking back on it now, I really was. I just threw my hands up and whatever happened, happened. That was the epitome of being free, of having nothing to restrain me, nothing to hold me back. I'm out there—me and the horse—and we're running as fast as we can. Throwing your hands up and saying, 'Let it go!'"

ELIZABETH KAYE McCALL is an author, journalist, and media consultant based in Los Angeles, Calif., specializing in the horse industry, travel and entertainment. Her new children's book about a talking horse, *Rajalika Speak*, was inspired by her own Egyptian Arabian stallion that "speaks on request."

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