

Sandhill Performance Horses, located in the heart of the Bakken Oil Patch near Epping, North Dakota, is a partnership operated by Gene Vandeberg and Melodie Nelson. It is the result of merging two distinctly different disciplines of Quarter Horses: pleasure and trail being slow and precise; reining and ranch riding blending speed, grace, and grit.

Melodie grew up a farm girl, crazy about horses, and had a couple of ponies as a kid, but her parents did their best to guide her interests in other directions. It did not work! At 18 years old she bought her first two horses, a sorrel mare named Peachy Doll and a big palomino gelding, Beaus Lucky Lad with the help of early mentors, Wayne Vance, and Leo Klatt. She hired a trainer, Kevin Lucas, and set about learning to show her horses. She obviously had a keen eye for quality, even at an early age. Both of those horses had legendary show careers. Peachy Doll earned Performance Registers of Merit in Open and Amateur competition, with Superiors in Open and Amateur Western Pleasure. Her influence as a broodmare is a dominant influence in the Sandhills remuda. Beaus Lucky Lad, although originally rejected by the trainer, went on to earn an 8th place finish in Jr. Trail at Melodie's first World Show qualification, along with earning Performance ROMs in Open and Amateur.

Gene grew up horseback, starting with Smokey, who he would feed on the ground and then crawl up his neck to get on. Then a big ranchy Appaloosa mare, who produced his first foal, a gelding named Domindigo, which he broke during his senior year of high school. When Gene met Melodie, he was riding a couple of ranch horses that he was using to compete in Team Penning.

When Gene and Melodie partnered up in 2000, Melodie came with four horses, including Peachy Doll and three of her daughters. It wasn't long before she was advising him to purchase better horses for himself – not quite so big and a little quicker footed to be more competitive in the arena, so he began saving his \$25 lunch stipend from his job in the oil field and purchased Cracklin Hot Dew at the Vesey Quarter Horse Sale. "Cracker" qualified for the world show in reining as a four-year-old – his first reiner, and they still have her today, as she has been the foundation of their reining program.

Gene and Melodie are dedicated to a hands-on approach to breeding, foaling, handling, and training their colts. They currently stand five studs of their own and about 35 broodmares. Their horses are known for their excellent pedigrees and conformation, but even more importantly, their excellent dispositions. The foals produced at Sandhill are just as much a product of their proven bloodlines as they are a product of Gene and Melodie's dedication to delivering a product to their customers that has the potential to become a calm and reliable partner regardless of the job asked of them.

Over the years, their breeding program has produced horses that have been shown throughout the United States and Europe. The fruit of the Sandhill program can be found on a trail ride, local 4-H shows, saddle clubs, regional shows, the American Quarter Horse Congress, the National Snaffle Bit Association World Show, the AQHA World Show, National Reining Horse Association Finals, or any of the top competitions in the US. They are committed to bringing the absolute best bloodlines in the quarter horse industry to North Dakota. This has resulted in multiple year-end NDQHA Highpoint award winning horses, AQHA Champions, AQHA World Champions and National Reining Horse Association Champions. An incredibly special accomplishment was winning a Gold Medal at the SVAG (European) World Championship with Cade McCutcheon aboard Smart Little Dunit in 2019.

Gene and Melodie still personally campaign two to three homegrown horses each year. Using the same breeding principles, Sandhill Border Collies has become a standard of excellence for working livestock, and a better working companion cannot be found. Their dedication to their shared goals has earned them induction to the North Dakota Quarter Horse Hall of Fame.