

CALL THEM TOYS AT YOUR OWN PERIL

They are models, and you can please cut out the snickering when they show in competition and even breed, because their collectors know what you are thinking, and they know you are wrong

By SANDY TREADWELL

In his nightclub act, comedian Steve Martin says: "I'm on drugs. I mean, you know what it is. It's a deal, man. I love to get small. It's a wild, wild drug. Very dangerous for kids, though. They get really, really small."

It is unlikely that Martin, that self-proclaimed wild and crazy guy, ever pitched his parodies at the Holiday Inn in Mt. Prospect, Ill. Too bad. The motel offers a blizzard of material: The Holiday Inn sign was once nearly recalled because of numerous breaches in the Holiday Inn code of standards; the new lounge took a year and a half to build after the chief carpenter kept sitting down every time the manager left the premises; and the inn itself is a fiscal bomb, because Mt. Prospect, a bedroom community located 30 miles northwest of Chicago, is a town visited by almost no one. But what Martin would have really enjoyed is the one weekend of the year when the motel is booked solid with people who, really, do love to get small. Really, really small.

For three days last summer 65 little girls, teenage girls and grown women

country. They brought 1,600 two-hand-high horses made out of plastic, china and wood to compete in the 130 classes of the 1978 Model Horse Congress. To an outsider, these people who get high on tiny horses, who adorn their models with tack, who house them in stables, jump them over fences and attach them to wagons, carriages, sleighs and sulkies, might easily be mistaken for an assortment of loonies. At the very least, they are misunderstood. Linda Walter, aged 30, who each month produces a 54-page issue of *The Model Horse Shower's Journal* in the spare bedroom of her Troy, Ala., home, speaks forcefully of skeptics. "I'll throttle anyone who calls our horses toys," she said. "We are collectors of models, just like the people who collect model trains, planes and cars. There must be thousands of us around the country. The trouble is a lot of people are ashamed of their collections. Non-collectors think of model horses as just pretty little things that are a bother to dust. Mention that you are taking your model horse to a show—people tend to crack up."

Walter's *Journal* who have brought their horses out of the closet and down from the shelf, and hers is not the only publication in the field. There are a handful of smaller magazines like *Model Turf and Tassel* and *Model Horse Review*, not to mention such specializers among the breeds as the Model Arabian Registry, the International Model Appaloosa Horse Club, the American Model Paint Horse Registry, the International Model Pinto Association and the American Model Quarter Horse Association.

"There are about 12 different foundation clubs," says Marney Walerius, organizer and hostess of the congress. "There are numerous all-breed organizations. Most 'live' model shows are held in backyards and bedrooms. A lot more shows are held through the mail. Collectors are spread all over the country, so they photograph their horses and send in the pictures to judges. There is even an organization that holds quarter horse races by mail. Name tags of models are sent to a track—someone's house—where the races take place by rolling dice and

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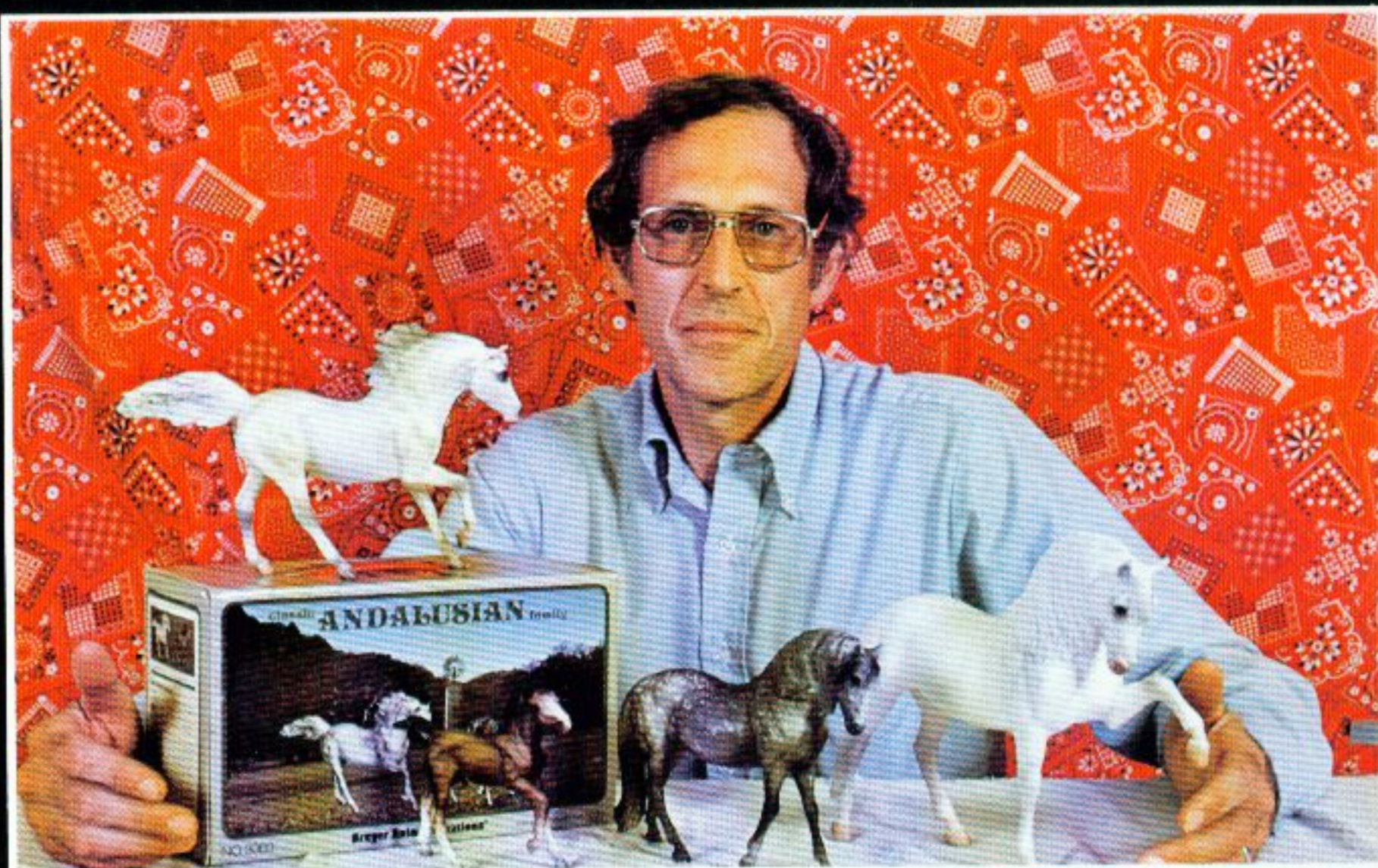
Walerius estimates that some 1,200 collectors are involved in showing models. She began her collection 20 years ago at the age of 10. Now her home in Barrington, Ill., contains 700 models. Best of the lot is a Hagen-Renaker china buckskin quarter horse named Poco's Bucketfull of Trouble. A gift from a friend, Trouble arrived at Barrington with two broken legs. Walerius glued him back together and sent his photo off to the races and into the show ring.

"He's my Secretariat," she says. During his career the model has collected 187 blue ribbons, 14 grand championships and five high-point show championships and was grand champion of the AMQHA. Retired to stud four years ago, Trouble, Walerius says, "now has 54 colts on the ground. His stud fee is \$1. He was bred to 12 outside mares this year.

"I know breeding model horses may sound a bit silly, but, really, there is a lot that can be learned from it," she says. "Like real breeders, collectors study bloodlines. I know some who use stud books to trace the ancestry of their models. Not all collectors go that far, of course. But all of them learn the basics about horses from their models—things like the proper saddles and equipment for various performances. Then there is the artistic side of models. We remake and repaint our horses, so we gain preliminary knowledge of parts of the body, conformation and color. By the time a collector gets a real horse, she will have picked up a surprising amount of information from her models.

"When I was young, my models were

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Karen Breitkreitz (from far left), a member of the Elton John fan club, brought a model of the singer and her horse Captain Fantastic to the congress. Marney Walerius cradled Trouble, her favorite horse, and ran the show while Kathy Maestas of New Mexico filled two tables with her

remakes. She won a dozen ribbons and the forbidding nickname Frankenstein. Manufacturer's representative Peter Stone (from top down) told of whopping sales. Larita Snyder's Clydesdale hitch was a gift from her husband, Gary, and guru Linda Walter answered admirer's questions.

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my best friends on rainy days. But when the sun was out, I'd spend my time at a stable around live horses. Many people make the mistake of thinking that models are a quaint substitute for horse-crazy girls who never get to ride. Wrong. Models are the beginning. Just about every collector I have heard about has gone on to ride and show the real thing."

Although she began taking riding lessons two years before she collected her first model, Walerius did not own her first horse until 1969. She was a Morgan and quarter horse mixture named Fidgett, and during her free hours from her job as a policy checker for the Kemper Insurance Company, Walerius rode her at The Bit and Bridle, a riding club in Barrington. The leisure-time activity ended abruptly after five years.

"We were in a barrel race at the club," she says. "Just as we crossed the finish, a spectator shook his jacket. Fidgett shied, and I went off her face first at full blast. The fall cost me my appendix, gall bladder and a row of teeth."

While she was recovering, Walerius expanded her hobby. She fashioned tack for her models and made friends with a group of midwestern collectors. During a historic two-hour, \$24 phone call, she merged a Chicago model club with a group of collectors from Indianapolis, thereby creating the grandly named International Model Horse Association.

The IMHA held its first congress in 1972 at the home of a collector in Southfield, Mich., and drew 11 entrants. The number doubled the following year, when the congress site moved to the Walerius backyard. One collector came from California, another from Pennsylvania and a third from Canada. "That show was coast-to-coast and international," Walerius recalls fondly. Congress No. 3 created a new nickname for Walerius. "Rain moved the show into my garage, and then a gale blew the models off the judging tables," she says. "I became known as 'The Nervous Wreck!'"

Instead of her proper name, that was what was printed on the tag she wore when welcoming the 65 hard-core collectors who arrived at the Holiday Inn's banquet hall for this year's congress, the IMHA's seventh. The hall was lined by folding tables assigned to collectors. In its center were empty tables forming two judging rings. The Nervous Wreck surveyed the scene just before calling the first two classes—junior original finish stallion halter and junior repaint/remade stallion halter—to the rings.

"We've come a long way since the early days of the congress," she said later. "But I miss the days before the number of entries forced us into a motel. Those backyard shows sure weren't big time, but they were a lot more fun and a lot less of a headache."

And footache. On the eve of the first session, Walerius slipped on a splash of water in the lobby of the Holiday Inn and slid into the open elevator. "I am not bionic," she said, "I am in pain. [After the congress an X-ray revealed that she had broken her right foot.] I have also just learned that my car has a flat tire. I am by nature a nervous person. To relieve tension I sometimes go for a drive, windows closed and the radio turned way up. Then I scream as loud as I can. It works wonders. I might do that now, except, of course, I can't get my car out of the parking lot."

Linda Walter thought she had another means of escape, a disguise. She appeared at the banquet hall carrying dozens of copies of her *Journal* and a few of her horses and wearing a pair of Groucho Marx glasses outfitted with rubber nose and bushy eyebrows. Still, she was mobbed by young collectors. In the world of model horses, Walter is resident guru. "Don't all fire questions at me at once or I'll hide under a table," she told her admirers.

Walter knows more about model horses than anyone in the country. She says she first fell for the real thing when she was 18 months old, "trotting down the street after the milkman's horse." Later in life she traveled the U.S. in search of models. The 400 she owns were found in pawnshops, flea markets, rummage sales, flower shops and the Salvation Army. Her collection includes models made in Austria, India and Japan and contains brand names of two dozen international companies. Like Marney Walerius, she favors the models of Hagen-Renaker, a California manufacturer. But at shows these days, she says, "almost all of them are Breyers, the country's largest model horse maker."

One corner of the hall contained a Breyer's sales display. Located in Chicago, the Breyer Moulding Co. has been producing plastic horses for 30 years. In 1977 the company sold more than 1 million models at an average cost of \$6.

The best single-horse seller among the company's 74 items is the Clydesdale Stallion. "We sold 24,000 of those last year," said Peter Stone, president of Breyer Animal Creations, who manned

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the exhibit during the second day of the congress. "We could have sold a lot more, but, like all our models, they are hand painted. One person can paint only 15 Clydesdales per hour."

The production line at the Farmington, N. Mex., home of Kathleen Maestas moves more slowly. The month before the congress she worked straight through each day until midnight remaking and repainting Breyer models. "I was really drastic with them," she said. "I changed heads and legs around and made standing horses into running horses. I even changed companies once. I took a body from one company and attached a head from another. People here have started calling me Frankenstein."

Maestas, age 28, arrived at the Holiday Inn in a 1968 Plymouth filled with her mother, brother, 50 for-sale models and her 12-model show string. Her family is used to cramped quarters. "When I was 14, my parents took one look at my room—I had 300 models in the closet, on the shelves, all over the floor—and said no more horses. So I snuck at least 50 more through the window. Like everyone else at this congress, I've always been crazy about horses."

By the time the congress was deep into the seventh hour of its second day, specifically the judging of "Class 82—repaint/remake Arabian costume—Maestas was exhausted. She had spent most of the previous night creating minute s-shaped bits out of paper clips, and now she was squinting through her glasses at Spanish Diamond. The palomino, a quarter horse-Tennessee Walking Horse cross, was well on the way to becoming a grand repaint/remake champion at the congress. But Maestas was winning almost everything. The Double Diamond Ranch Banner above her table was covered with blue ribbons. And of Maestas's 50 for-sales, only three remained in her possession. "The average price was \$45, so I guess everyone liked my horses," she said.

No one offered higher praise than the guru. "Kathy Maestas is the epitome, the Rolls Royce of model horse remaking," said Walter to her ever-present entourage. "I intend to buy one of her models myself. Oh, well, just another hoof to dust." Of all the models in the world, she was asked, which would collectors most want to own? "It's impossible to answer that," she said. "Every collector has different tastes. Some like china, others plastic; some like English

imports, others German. Hey, speaking of remakes, do you want to see a picture of Ralph? It's a 1955 Studebaker Commander coupe that my brother and I rebuilt. That little car will get up and boogie. I'm into horsepower of all sorts."

The circle of young collectors giggled and looked politely at the photograph. They were not, however, into autos or, worse luck, into Walter's hints that they stop asking model horse questions. "What's the most famous model?" another asked. Walter smiled patiently and pointed to a nearby table. "That's easy. The Blimp. He's right over there."

At the 1977 congress The Blimp became a sensation. Word of his unique conformation and coloring spread to non-model showers, who wandered into the show in search of the "little green horse." He is a remake horror, a Breyer model that was left too long in a pail of hot water by Deb Bergs, a collector from Marathon, Wis. As his name suggests, The Blimp bloated. Liz Isham, a friend and fellow model enthusiast, asked Bergs for the rotund model. She wanted him as a mascot for her Glengarry Stable. Given the horse, she turned it into a green Appaloosa with a yellow hip blanket, the stable colors, and as a joke entered him in the congress. Linda Walter then showed the horse on the cover of the *Journal*, thereby creating a model legend.

This year The Blimp was back, placing fifth in one class and for the rest of the time standing on the paper lawn in front of Isham's model stable. A new story no longer, he was upstaged by the barking dog. In order to create a realistic exhibit for the remake/repaint trail with obstacle class, Kathy Knott placed a model dog at the far side of a model pond. Not only would her horse have to cross the pond, it would have to face the dog, which, thanks to a tape recorder placed next to the exhibit, barked. Sound effects were provided by a husky owned by Knott's neighbors back in West Caldwell, N.J.

There were only three problems with her exhibit: The dog, a German shepherd, was half the size of the horse, the tape recorder fell apart just as the judges reached the exhibit and Knott was in no condition to scramble under the ring after the batteries, since she was on crutches. Two days before the congress she was kicked by a real horse during a trail ride and tore ligaments in her foot and leg.

"I told my doctor that I'd been saving for two years to come to this show and that I wasn't going to miss it," she said. For the record, the barking dog exhibit

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placed third in the class.

Larita Snyder, a grocery store cashier from Elwood, Ind., had also allowed a pet in her exhibit—a tiny dalmatian sat on a model wagon behind a replica of the Budweiser Clydesdales, which won the heavy team harness class—and there is even a big fish in her family tree. "My husband's uncle showed fish," she explained. "He had the world champion guppy. Really, he did. He took that fish to shows all over the country. But one winter the electricity went out in his house, and the fish froze to death. At least that can't happen to my Clydesdales."

By the third and final day of the congress the 65 collectors were getting punchy. Karen Breitz, a 16-year-old from Dayton who named her models after Elton John song titles, was dazed by the show's final roping and cutting-action classes. "Except for the fact that there are no flies and manure, this is just like a real show," she said. "You get butterflies in your stomach just before your class, but the rest of the time you sit around with nothing to do. It doesn't help that there's only one boy entered in the congress. Boys just don't seem to be interested in model horses."

Congress leader Walerius estimates that, on the contrary, there are 12 males in the U.S. actively involved in the hobby. "There must be a lot more out there," she says, "but they just are not willing to come out of their bedroom stables."

An exception is Gilbert Jones, 16, president of the American Model Quarter Horse Racing Association. Entrant No. 66, he spent just eight hours at the congress but won a second-place ribbon before departing for home in Lansing, Mich. He was due for football practice.

In order to spice up the final hours of her show, Walerius placed the subject of sex on the floor of the congress. She asked the delegates to describe how they bred their models and received the following answers:

- "I take all but the mare and stallion off the same shelf and leave them alone."

- "For privacy, I take them to a cupboard and close the door."

- "For privacy and cleanliness, I put the mare and stallion in the bathtub but allow them extra time to negotiate the slippery porcelain."

At which point, Steve Martin, raising his arms above his head and shaking his hands, would have had his exit line: "Excuuuuse meeeeee." ■