

# Cover Story

# Unlikely World Champions!

By David Dineen

Hello, my name is David Dineen. My mules, Svana and Valkyrie, and I are the most unlikely winners of the World Champion Speed Team of 2021 held in the “Mule Capital of the World”, Bishop, California. Why are we unlikely World Champions? I’ll explain. Let me tell you this fascinating story!

I was born in the big city of Chicago in 1964, the year of the Beatles arrival to the United States. I grew up in suburban Chicago. I am a huge Cubs fan and love everything Chicago! My only experience with equines was the occasional family vacation to Wisconsin when I got to ride my favorite horse of the time, “Onion.”

I spent most of my time growing up doing the usual suburban boy things like Little League, bike riding, and kick the can. At ten years old, I discovered what would be my lifetime passion, music! I performed percussion in band and orchestra throughout my school years. I had a brief dream in late high school and early college to become a Navy aviator. That lasted just through my first year of college. I then changed my pursuits to music and graduated from DePaul University in Chicago in 1992 with a degree in Music Education. That has been my career and my passion ever since.

I met my beautiful wife, Tracy, and was married in 1990. She also had a passion for horses but had never had one (although her mother has always talked about the burro her family got from a Spiegel catalog!) I can still remember a time when we visited an Arab horse ranch that our friend was caring for. As he was letting them back in the barn after turnout, I ran out the other end because I was so scared of them! Eventually, Tracy convinced me to do some trail riding with her. We had some great rides in Wisconsin and Michigan where the trail leaders even let us lope. I started to get hooked on the adrenalin and the thrill that comes with riding and being close to our mules.

In 1995, our careers took us to the world entertainment center - Las Vegas! We were so excited to be in the Wild West! We loved the open spaces and endless recreational opportunities. In 2002 we adopted our first child from foster care. In 2003, we adopted our second! We decided we needed a bigger house and room for the kids to run. We de-



*David Dineen on “Duke” and Tracy Dineen on “Svana”  
Spring 2021 trip to Red Rock Canyon, Nevada  
Photo by Walter Greer*

ecided to take a look at half acre properties. We thought we might have a few farm animals for the kids to enjoy. We found a property in NW Las Vegas and the hunt was on for some animals!

We learned about the wild burro adoptions from the Bureau of Land Management. They were having specials on males, \$25. We drove out to Kingman, Arizona with our neighbors (they had a truck and trailer) and picked out our donkey, D’Leary Ass. Our neighbors (horse owners) were impressed that a donkey just taken away from its mother would be able to be put in a trailer. We got him home and went to work. We read everything we could about donkeys. Meredith Hodges’ books were a lifesaver. By the second day, our burro was able to be haltered and brushed. He even

learned to walk and whoa! We also joined the Muleskinners Forum on the internet.

We learned all we could from everyone. Our neighbors were always taking trail rides and going to team penning. We wanted to join them but knew our cute little burro was not going to work for these events. What kind of equine would fit the bill? A mule of course! We really wanted to stick with longears after all our research with our burro. If mules were the choice of the Grand Canyon, they were the choice for us. And the game was on!

The search began for a mule. Eventually, we found an ad for a mule near Phoenix. We decided to go check her out! We came home with a five-year-old mule. We named her "Mama Chula." I guess we didn't pay much attention to the experts around us. We would be green riders riding a green mule. Green on green makes black and blue, right? Well, luckily, we never got hurt by Chula. In fact, she was very forgiving even though she tested us many times. We used to take turns hiking and riding her. We would also lead her with the kids taking turns in the saddle. What an adorable mule!

Not long after getting Mama Chula, our neighbors all talked about moving to Idaho. As new parents (and teachers in the know), and because we were concerned about the environment of raising kids in Las Vegas we decided to join our neighbors and move to the beautiful state of Idaho.

We found a ten acre ranch just outside of Boise, our own Green Acres! What a great place to raise the kids! Of course, now that we had more space, it was time for all to have their own mule! We joined the local mule club. A nice family gave us an older mule for our daughter to ride. We also bought a couple more from a prominent mule family for my wife and son. We had a great time riding in all the beauty Idaho has to offer. I became good friends with a neighbor who enjoyed hunting. He and I packed and rode all over the Sawtooths. All this experience taught this city boy a lot! About seven years into our Idaho experience, the girls came along!

Svana and Valkyrie are Fjord Mules (or Fjules - a name coined by a friend from the old Muleskinners' Forum website). We aptly named them after their Norwegian/Viking roots. Svana means pretty girl. Valkyrie was the Norwegian Goddess of war who decided who would live and die in battle, and then would take the heroes to Valhalla where they lived an eternity in paradise. What a way to go!

They are absolutely wonderful mules, but most would not guess that a Fjule Mule Team could in a speed champion-



*From left: David Dineen, William Ty Prescott, driving "Valkyrie", and "Svana", and Kara Prescott riding "Mama Chula" at the Hells Canyon Mule Days Parade 2015*

ship. In fact, during my first visit to Bishop in 2019, they were laughed at by an unbelieving young packer who proclaimed, "Fjord mules in a speed race?!" Let's talk about how they got here.

Svana and Valkyrie came to me from Coyote Mules at the ages of one and two. They were only halter broke and were able to be roached and have their hooves trimmed. They have always worked as a team, often even lowering their heads to eat at the same time. They have almost always walked side by side in the position they would take as a team. They looked so much alike; we often were confused about who was whom. Eventually, we were able to figure out that the younger mule, Valkyrie, was actually taller than her older sister.

We knew from the start that they would have to become a team. We had no experience driving at all! We became members of the local whips club to learn about driving. Our mentor there suggested that we don't start with a green team. He knew of a wonderful Fjord gelding that was for sale. We went to check him out and had to buy Duke! Duke was nine years old and broke amazingly by an old teamster. It was the last horse he broke to drive. He was unable to harness and drive him anymore. Duke came with a work harness and wagon. We took Duke home and harnessed him right away so we wouldn't forget how to do it. We were now officially addicted to driving! We always say that driving puts a stupid grin on your face! We dove right in and drove Duke as often as possible.

When the girls turned three and four, we decided it was time to either get them working or send them on their way to someone who would use them. We found out about the Southern Idaho Draft Horse and Mule Club. We visited a





*David Dineen driving “Valkyrie”, “Duke”, “Mama Chula”, and Svana. Photo by Tracy Dineen*

farm day when the group was disking and harrowing a field. We brought the girls out to show them to the teamsters. We almost even sold them to a new friend we made. When we brought them home, we decided to get some help from a local well known mule teamster. He and his daughter took them for thirty days and got them used to harnessing and traffic.

When they got home from their first schooling, we took them out to our new mentor near Twin falls. He helped us size up our new harness and we helped him hook them up for their first Hitch on a horse drawn disk. We hitched them up in a large arena and watched our mentor take them for their first drive. They were just slightly excited from the sounds and the effort it took to pull the disk. Within seconds, he was turning them in figure eights while giving them their Gee and Haw cues. It was amazing! He used them for the next three weeks or so disking up his fields. He couldn't believe how calm they were and how quickly they caught on. He also hitched them to a wagon and drove them down to a truck weigh station on the busy highway near him to get them used to trucks and air brakes! After those three weeks, our mentor called us up to come get them. He told us to just go home and use them. And that's what we did!

We continued to expose *the gurlz* (our nickname for them) to everything we could. We used them to spread manure on our hay fields, harrow our arena, drill seed, disk fields and more. We never did a trot until we knew the walk and whoa was working. And we never went beyond a trot until we knew they could handle it without excitement.

We started showing them that first year. We took them to Mule Mania in Washington in their second year of driving.

We placed them in all the driving classes including chariot barrel racing! By then, I had found a cool light chariot from the quarter horse racers in the area. It had bicycle type wheels and only weighed around sixty pounds. As we were waiting our turn in the barrel race, we watched their half siblings run a really fast barrel race, how exciting! But as their sibling rounded the last barrel, the chariot tipped, throwing their driver out! They raced around the arena two or three times before being able to be stopped. The driver was hurt badly and had to be taken to the hospital. We were next in the arena! Needless to say, I kept them in a trot and took it easy. I also knew that those bicycle type rims would not work if I'm going to pursue speed with tight turns! When we got home, I went straight to the local machine shop and had them lower, widen and put car sized rim and tires on the chariot so that I would have a stable and safe ride even at high speeds and turns. The chariot became my go-to vehicle. It was easy to throw into the trailer even for local trail driving.

In 2017, life brought us to Carson City, Nevada. We would miss all our Idaho friends in the mule and horse world. We quickly found activities for our mules and Duke in Nevada. Endurance driving, fun Gymkhana days, and even team sorting became our equine fun. It turns out that there are many competitive mule folks here in Northern Nevada including the Hall of Fame speed teamster. We've competed against single drivers and done really well with the team. All of this prepared us for Bishop Mule Days!

We competed at our first Bishop Mule Days in 2019. We were a little overwhelmed by the size of the show. This was the 50th Anniversary year and it was well attended by com-



*David Dineen on “Duke” and Walter Greer on “Valkyrie” at Logandale Trails, Nevada Spring 2021.*

petitors and audience. The first race would be the chariot straight away. I decided that if I was going to compete, I might as well compete against the best. So, I chose to challenge the long reigning champion. Lining up for the race was so exciting. The gurlz were amped up. It was hard to contain them. They felt the excitement from the crowd in the air. We jockeyed for position at the starting line as we waited for the flag to drop. The flag dropped and we took off! It felt like I was floating. The gurlz were going so fast! I couldn't believe it, but we were in the lead! I could feel the champion right beside and a little behind me. I kept urging the gurlz on! We got to the finish line and neither team was quite ready to stop. As we went around the track trying to slow our teams down, we congratulated each other on an amazing race. We both agreed that it was really close and that no matter who won, it was amazing! The champion said that he thought I may have beat him. I couldn't believe it! I was so high on adrenaline and joy for my team! I went back to the trailer to let them rest and unhitch. I eventually made it to the stands where my wife proclaimed that the champion had been declared the winner! I was shocked. Even he said he thought I had won. It turns out that they had always called the races from the announcers booth because they never had a close race. They could not see the finish line clearly in a close race. I had a good friend who took a video from the finish line. We showed the video to the show office and eventually, they called the race for me and my team! This was the only time the Hall of Famer had ever lost a race with this team. I did well enough in all the events to win the Reserve World Champion Speed Team. I was so proud of my team!

We all know what happened in 2020! The year of the pandemic! I was just getting all my entries together when it hit. We had to wait to challenge for the title! We continued our work locally. I mostly use my team for pleasure drives, but we do love the occasional run! I am a board member at a local nonprofit, Friends of Silver Saddle Ranch. Silver Saddle is a Carson City Park located at a historic ranch. The Friends work to keep the rural nature of the park. My equines give wagon rides at special events at the park to help raise money for the nonprofit. We also appear in the very popular Nevada Day Parade in Carson City. Typically, the gurlz are hitched to the large carriage with Duke in a three abreast hitch. Since moving to Nevada, Mama Chula learned to drive at the age of twenty and has joined the hitch. I can now drive all my equines in a 4-up hitch! I've come quite a long way from the scared of equines suburban Chi-



*Alana Jeffries in driveing "Valkyrie", "Duke", and 'Svana"  
Homestead Holidays Wagon Rides, Carson City, Nevada.  
Photo by David Dineen*

cago boy!

What a relief the spring of 2021 was! Bishop Mule Days would happen! I would have another chance to see what my team could do! We also learned that the hall of fame teamster would probably not compete in the chariot races. This provided me and my gurlz a great opportunity! I continued practicing in earnest with a new goal in mind, winning it all! My teamster friends offered some advice on a harness change to help my team turn in the arena events. I had been using the race harness that came with my chariot for everything. It's a strange set up. The yoke is snugged up tight onto the collars with a belt. This is how the Quarter horses race in Idaho and Utah. It turns out that this set up made it more difficult for my team to flex as they went around barrels and poles. I only needed to try my regular harness once to find out that this was true! I knew I had shaved off valuable seconds in my barrel and pole times!

This year, the arena events occurred before the straight away drag race. We started with pole bending. We went out and the gurlz had great control and good speed. I cut the end pole too tight, especially with my teams' newfound tight



turning radius! I ran over the pole base, but was able to keep the pole standing! We had a clean run and got first place! I knew I was on my way. I struggled with the birangle pattern. I cut the first cone too close again and knocked it over. Then my mind went next. I almost forgot the pattern. I fixed it at the last moment and we ended up with 3rd place. We also struggled on the barrel hoops. It's the barrel pattern, but you have to throw balls in the barrels too. I hit a few cones around the barrels and couldn't make any balls into the barrels. Again, this was my fault, and we came out with 3rd place again. The next evening was the big event - the straight away. I went head-to-head with who I thought had the fastest team. I knew my gurlz would run faster if they had good competition. As we were jockeying for position, I didn't realize the flag was dropped! Oh no! I urged my team to "Get it!" Boy, did they ever. They caught up to the competition by the time we were at the start of the grandstand. We were neck and neck the whole race. In the end, we couldn't tell who had won! I knew that our tires were side by side and my competitor had larger mules, so I assumed he won. Video showed that he won by a head and the timer said he won by .25 seconds! What an epic race!

The next afternoon would be our re-match! This time, I got a great start, and my competitor did not. Because I was so far out front, the gurlz were not running their fastest. It was also very hot. I urged them on knowing he would be coming soon enough. The next thing I knew, he and his team passed us like we were standing still. I lost by a bunch! Had I lost the title? Luckily, I still got second place in this event. There was only one more event left. Traditional barrel racing would take place that night (if you could call barrel racing in a chariot pulled by a team of mules traditional!).

I knew what we had to do. We had to have a clean run faster than my competition. I knew some of the teams had

control issues and others were not as quick. Then, I learned that the Hall of Fame teamster who had beaten me 2 years before was going to do one last race with his team before retiring them from the speed events. It was to be a grand celebration of a great team and teamster. He was to go last!

I decided to go first. I knew I didn't have to beat the Hall of Fame team, just the other three teams. I had a really clean run with a time of just thirty-two seconds. Not bad. But I knew I could go faster. Unfortunately, I may have sacrificed accuracy and gotten a penalty. The next three teams went and none got better than thirty-seven seconds. I knew I had accomplished what I had wanted. The Hall of Famer and his team got twenty-five seconds! I was so glad that he was able to get one more first place before retiring his team. That was his moment!

It takes quite a while to find out official results. For the next day or so, I was doing all the calculations I could, to see if I had won. I thought I did but knew it would be close. I learned I had won the World Championship late Sunday afternoon! I was so excited! I went and picked up my awards and was so pleasantly surprised to see that it included a Silver Buckle!

Wow! This Chicago born muleskinner (probably the only one in existence!) had won the World Champion Speed Team at Bishop Mule Days!

What's next? Who knows? God only knows and he's not tellin'!

Maybe I go back and defend? Wouldn't it be cool if the Cubs would let me take a spin on Wrigley Field before a game? Maybe the "gurlz" can make the Bishop Hall of Fame?

Only time will tell for this unlikely team of World Champions!

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