



The Path to Developing a Dynamic Youth Horsemanship Program

By Kristin Jacob

“Knowledge is power” is a phrase attributed to Sir Francis Bacon, an English philosopher credited for developing the scientific method. This phrase holds true whether considering knowledge of a given trade or skill, or personal or spiritual knowledge of one’s self. Knowledge is gained through education, which develops in us a perspective with which to view life and the world where we live and interact. The knowledge we gain through education is instrumental in filling our lives with peace, joy, and meaning. This applies to the many facets of our lives and, of course, to horsemanship.

I have always had a passion for education. As I entered my senior year in college, I felt I had barely scratched the surface of my subject and was hungry for more. I entered the Ph.D. program at the University of Colorado Boulder where I focused my research in the area of geochemistry. While at CU, I began collaboration with the Science Education Initiative, a program developed by Nobel Prize-winning scientists to improve how the sciences are taught to undergraduate students by applying the latest advances in pedagogical research and approaches. Through my involvement with this program, I began to think about how to teach in a way that would both excite the learner and also help them retain the information. I felt joy, both in sharing the knowledge I had gained, and in watching the students grow and move onto rewarding jobs or other post-graduate programs. In my small way, I had contributed to developing their power to dream and achieve.

During the time I was in graduate school, I was also showing quite seriously on the national “A” rated Hunter/Jumper circuit. Although I was enjoying quite a bit of success in the show ring and had stepped up to jumping at the Grand Prix level, I felt there was something I was missing, although I didn’t quite know what it was. In 2010, I bought a very talented mare who made apparent to me all of my shortcomings as a horseman. I remember seeing her standing in a cold brick barn in Europe, and upon first laying eyes on her, the universe spoke through me and the words, “this mare won’t make you famous but will make you into the horseman you’ve always wanted to be” came to my lips. I had no idea at the time what exactly that meant or of the journey this horse would take me on. Although extremely talented, this mare was quite spooky, which led to a number of problems, especially in the show ring. Through a recom-

mendation from a friend of a friend, I was introduced to Mindy Bower and through her, to the philosophical approach of good horsemanship. Through Mindy’s generosity and willingness to share her vast experience, as well as my thirst for an empathetic approach to horses, that indefinable piece that I knew was missing was put in place and I was on my way to the lifelong pursuit of good horsemanship. I realized that until meeting Mindy, I was a rider, not a horseman.

After I graduated from CU, I took some time to refocus on my riding and on my pursuit of horsemanship. During this time, I was given the opportunity to start and run a business out of a barn in Boulder, Colo. Although I had spent the last decade in higher education, I took the leap and accepted the opportunity. We are a collection of our experiences and I knew that with my lifetime of showing Hunter/Jumper horses, my work with Mindy in the pursuit of quality horsemanship, and my experience working with the Science Education Initiative and teaching at the college level, I would be able to develop a unique program.

Most Hunter/Jumper riders begin riding because of a fascination with the beauty and majesty of the horse and also seek the thrill of jumping. They learn basic skills in handling and riding horses at a local barn. At this stage, the horse is just a tool to learn how to ride, and for some, the horse will always remain a tool; from a vehicle to pleasure ride a few times a week to a way to fan one’s ego, particularly in the show ring. There are, of course, many great riders who are poor horsemen, as I had realized in myself once I started my work with Mindy. I believe horsemanship comes when a rider is able to lay aside their own ego, put forth the effort to understand why a horse exhibits a certain behavior or reaction, and adapt themselves to

fit the horse. This journey is filled with highs and lows, requires an open mind and eagerness to learn, takes a lifetime, and does not have a definable end result. What a daunting pursuit indeed!

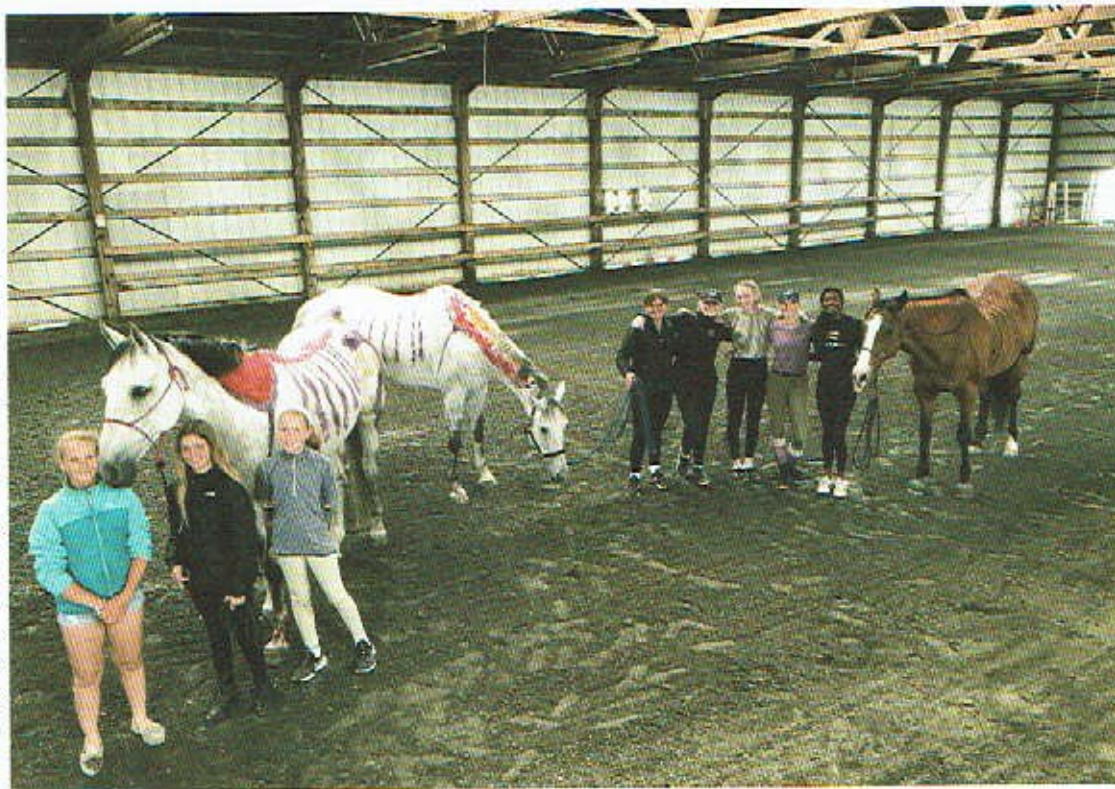
I also believe there are two parts to horsemanship: one being the more philosophical approach I described above, and the other being the daily care of the horses which leads to the sixth sense of knowing your horse inside and out. These two pieces to horsemanship, the more abstract philosophical approach and the tangible daily care of the horses, are what I have chosen to base my program on.

So where does one start, knowing that especially the more abstract concepts of horsemanship are not something that one can learn or grasp overnight, and that horsemanship takes a lifetime of dedicated pursuit?

My first step was to accept that a horsemanship program of this type may not be a fit for every rider, just as not everyone will have the motivation and drive to pursue a Ph.D. or the heart and desire to jump at the Grand Prix level. I came to realize that each person may get something different out of their horsemanship journey and that different people may have different levels of interest, which is OK, too. You can't force someone to learn.

Another hurdle for me in developing this program was that what I had learned while working with Mindy might at first appearance seem incongruent with the sport of Hunter/Jumper. How well accepted would rope halters, flags, and mecate reins be in a respected and competitive Hunter/Jumper program? I was tentative at first but soon learned that there were many adults out there looking for a better way to handle, understand, and connect with their horse and many kids who find working with a horse on the ground just as thrilling as riding the horse; what a magical feeling when your horse hooks onto you in the round pen and gives you his mind and feet with no ropes or restraints! I realized that there was a huge need for, and interest in, combining higher level show jumping with horsemanship, and that many riders were drawn to learning about horsemanship without first having to experience some kind of a wreck or difficulty with a horse to lead them there.

Through the various groundwork and under saddle exercises, the riders are able to learn how to make the right things easy and wrong things difficult, become a leader without causing the horse fear, and communicate through pressure and timed release. An understanding of these concepts is totally



Students of Blue Star Farm's USHJA Horsemanship Quiz Challenge summer camp painted major bones, muscle groups, and tendons and ligaments on three horses.

relevant no matter what a given rider's chosen discipline is. As riders progress through the various exercises, many also begin to consider the less tangible aspects of horsemanship and start to consider the horse's mind in what they are being asked, particularly with respect to the Hunter/Jumper discipline. These are budding horsemen.

How does this fit into the world of competition? I have found that my best show ring rides have come when I let go of outcome-based results and external pressure and am in the moment with my horse. This is when I feel unity with the horse. This feeling of unity can take place at anytime and anywhere, and for riders less experienced with the pressures of showing, it is easier to achieve this at home through work in the round pen or on the ground and then carry this into the saddle and then into competition. Furthermore, there are so many factors that can influence the results of a given competition. Was the day a failure if you didn't win the blue ribbon? Of course not! What I'd like my riders to have as their priority is to strive for unity with their horse, whether that be working with them alone, in a lesson, clinic, or in the show ring, and to have that be the biggest reward above any prize. But this is certainly not to say that one can't be excited and proud if one wins or places well in a competitive class. With that small shift in mentality, I have found that my riders better feel their horses which actually enhances their performance, and that they have satisfaction in the competition whether they get a prize or not.

I place great emphasis, as well, on the more tangible daily care of the horses, and fortunately, there has recently been a resurgence of interest in the Hunter/Jumper industry in educating riders about this form of horsemanship. With the world getting busier and the demand for instantaneous gratification on the rise everywhere, including in the Hunter/Jumper indus-



IN OUR COMMUNITY

try, the United State Equestrian Federation (USEF) and affiliate United State Hunter Jumper Association (USHJA) started to realize that the art of horsemanship was being lost and became rightfully concerned for the longevity of the sport. The USHJA has created some fantastic programs to get younger riders interested and educated in horsemanship. These programs include the Emerging Athletes Program (EAP) and the Stable Challenge and Horsemanship Quiz Challenge (HQC).

The program I have chosen to focus on and incorporate into my own program is the HQC. This program brings together young riders under 21 years of age from across the country to take a series of online, horsemanship-related exams during the summer, and culminates with the 24 top-scoring riders earning a place at the nation finals in the fall. The USHJA published a manual covering the various facets of horse care, welfare, stable management, riding theory, etc., which is what the series of exams are based on. I know what you're thinking: "What kid wants to spend their summer vacation reading text books and taking exams?! Yuck—even if it is about horses." You'd be surprised!

Although I spend my days in the saddle and evenings teaching lessons, I have found so many ways to incorporate my experiences in higher education into how I run my business and how I teach. Through my involvement with the Science Education Initiative, I learned how to change dry textbook and lecture styles of teaching into exciting hands-on formats and to set up exercises to help the students think not in terms of black and white or right and wrong, but rather in terms of the processes-

involved in deriving solutions, knowing that there is likely more than one correct way. Work with horses, of course, lends itself to hands-on learning. Using the USHJA's HQC manual as an outline, I have brought the HQC material to life both in a weekly course and more recently in a summer camp format. The participants learn the more tangible aspects of horsemanship during camp, with the more philosophical approach to horsemanship woven in, too. The participants of this camp walk away with a vast knowledge of an array of horse-related topics, which fulfills my goal of creating independent, thinking horsemen.

But I do realize that the majority of the junior riders I teach will quit riding when they go off to college. They will likely raise a family, and either return to riding later in life as an adult amateur or they will never again swing a leg over a horse and instead will just cherish the memories they had as a kid. Very few of the junior riders in my program will go on to ride professionally and even fewer will go on to start businesses of their own. So why should I put such effort into educating them?

"Knowledge is power." Through education, one gains knowledge, and with knowledge, one gains power. For those few who do go on to ride for the public, they will not only have the knowledge of the trade and daily care of the horses but the ability to work with the horse in a way that is fitting to the horse and not take shortcuts. Their horses will be happier and will understand their jobs better and thus perform better for their clients. They will have the knowledge to advocate for the horse if they go off to ride for someone whose approach may not be as fitting for the horse, as well the power to perhaps expand that

person's mind to see a better way for the horse. They will be thinking and feeling horsemen, not just technically good riders.

Education develops in us a way to view life and influences how we interact in the world. One is not just a horseman while working with horses; horsemanship becomes an approach to life. It is how you treat your partner, how you raise your kids, how you drive your car/truck, how you treat people in line at the grocery store, and so on. My hope is that through the experience of working with horses and being exposed to good horsemanship, my riders will gain knowledge about themselves which will in turn facilitate thought about how they interact with the world. The horse will always tell the truth; it is up to the



Clara Tracy asking her horse "Ozzie" to reach his front end across as they practice ground-work before their lesson at Blue Star Farms in Longmont, Colo.

horseman to listen, digest, and perhaps make a change.

Exposure to the daily care of the horses will facilitate a thirst for intimate knowledge of other subjects and will build character and work ethic. Exposure to the philosophical aspects of horsemanship will develop empathy, humility, and leadership skills. I hope for all my students to grow to feel empowered about themselves and to operate from a place of strength and compassion, and I hope for their lives to be filled with peace, joy, and meaning. I will share the knowledge that I have gained along my journey to help see them off on their journeys and perhaps one day, they will in turn help other young people on their journeys.

Never stop learning, keep your eyes up, and enjoy the ride wherever it takes you!

From Lisa Munro—The Amateur's Perspective

I moved to Colorado in 2016 where I longed for a trainer who understood my passion for education and horsemanship. I graduated with my master's degree in Sport Management from the University of San Francisco in 2015 after being an NCAA student-athlete on Fresno State's equestrian team from 2009-2013. Sports, education, and horses have always been and will always be my passion, but from a unique perspective—the perspective of how powerful education in sports, and specifically with horses, truly is. It was not until I met Kristin that I finally found someone whose passion aligned with mine.

For as long as I can remember, education has been the foundation of my equestrian career. In high school, I was an active member of Future Farmers of America (FFA) where my horses, Sox and Cat, were my project animals. While in FFA, I competed in education project competitions where I taught a panel of judges about horse health and how to properly give an intramuscular injection. These were invaluable programs and this was the first time I learned that horses can be so much more than just about going to competitions—they teach us everything from responsibility to time management, veterinary skills to nutrition, equipment to horse handling, stable management to horse welfare, budgeting to mental skills. You name it—horses have taught it to me.

As I was always education hungry, while in high school and FFA, I sought out the USHJA's Emerging Athlete Program (EAP) in its inaugural season in 2009. The EAP was created "to provide opportunities for young riders to advance their horsemanship education and riding skills" through stable management clinics, mental skills seminars, riding clinics with former Olympians—I rode with Anne Kursinski—and so much more. In 2009, to be accepted into the program, we had to apply and



Kristin Jacob and "Gulika" compete in the \$15,000 Monarch Casino Gambler's Choice at the National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colo. this year

submit letters of recommendation, write essays, and send in our riding accolades. It was an honor to be one of the few selected from California and USHJA's Zone 8, and I experienced an incredibly educational weekend which became a major turning point in my equestrian career where I truly learned the importance of horsemanship and education. It shaped my riding into what it has become today.

Fast forward seven years to when I met Kristin—an equestrian who was just as passionate about education and horsemanship as I but who also could take me to A/AA-rated Hunter/Jumper shows. The first day I met Kristin, I knew immediately that she had a different perspective from other equestrians, a perspective that I really respected. I explained to her that I had a talented, hot, thoroughbred mare with a mind of her own, the type that can never be told what to do but that would need to be led into making the correct decision. Kristin introduced me to Buck Brannaman's philosophy and teachings, and we connected immediately. Kristin strengthened my partnership with Cat out of the saddle and outside of the arena and coached me through the two most successful show seasons of my 20+ year career. She opened my eyes to a whole new world, a world where I knew we could together make a difference in each other's equestrian careers. And together, we did that.

USHJA's mission is to "unify and represent the hunter and jumper disciplines of equestrian sport through education, recognition, and sport programs," and with that mission, USHJA, Kristin, and I are doing just that. In 2017, Kristin and I came across USHJA's Horsemanship Quiz Challenge (HQC) education program and I was immediately intrigued—I knew it would align perfectly with Kristin's beliefs and passion for horsemanship and education as much as it did mine. It did not take either of us much convincing to make this program a part of Blue Star Farms. And of course, we had to make it unique because, as Dr.

Suess says, “why fit in when you were born to stand out?” That seems to be the motto of Kristin and my relationship over the years (I love being alongside her at shows, she with her blue flag and I with my purple flag).

The HQC program consists of two 100-question tests and a 300+ page study guide. In 2017, Kristin and I studied the program and came up with a nine-week course for the juniors at our barn. We met every Tuesday starting at 5 p.m., with head guest speakers every week—from the Publisher of *The Plaid Horse Magazine*, to veterinarian Dr. Christy Downey, and Purina nutritionists to our farrier, Matt Keil, and the great Mindy Bower—and that is just half of them! Each guest speaker broke down the materials through their specialty and gave our girls real, hands-on experience. Blue Star Farms went on to win USHJA's HQC Stable Challenge for zone 8 in 2017.

Kristin and I have talked about how we are concerned that the art of horsemanship has been lost among younger generations, and it has been our goal to turn that around at Blue Star Farms. In 2019, Kristin and I conducted another horsemanship camp where we brought in even more hands-on guest speakers and had even more equestrians participating. At the end of each camp, we had the riders take the horsemanship quiz challenge level one test, and seven of our nine campers passed with scores of over 80 percent. Those seven then went on to take the level two quiz, and six of those seven passed with scores of over 90 percent; three of those equestrians were then chosen to compete at HQC national championships in Findlay, Ohio.

To say we were proud is an understatement. I flew to Ohio

with our competitors and their families where the girls participated in an intense three-day horsemanship competition, and all three placed in the top 20 in the nation. HQC national championships are held in conjunction with the EAP national training session, so for me, the weekend came together full circle—a decade ago I was a participant in EAP, and now here I was, coaching youth at HQC national finals and watching the EAP national training sessions. Over the last decade, I have put in countless hours at the barn, both in the saddle and out, and now to be a coach watching junior riders at the start of their careers was enormously fulfilling. My education has brought me from a successful competitor to a trusted coach, and there really is not much more I can ask for.

As an amateur, one's role with the juniors is to be someone for them to look up to and for the parents to confide in. During these past four years with Kristin, I have found my niche as an amateur. I have been able to share my passion and the importance of education and horsemanship with junior riders and their parents, all with the support of Kristin as my trainer and confidant, and those riders and parents have all seen firsthand how my relationship with Cat is more than just a successful riding career. I'm grateful that Kristin believes in education as do I, and that as an amateur I have been able to impact so many juniors' lives far beyond just winning blue ribbons. I have studied with these riders, taken tests with them, coached them through what I believe is the most important part of being a horsewoman—everything outside of the saddle. I have even shown with them, but the educational and horsemanship experiences have been vastly more impactful.

We are so fortunate to have a trainer like Kristin to teach us all—juniors, amateurs, parents, and even professionals—the importance of educating ourselves outside of the arena. It is invaluable. It is more than a blue ribbon or a championship. Being alongside Kristin has brought my equestrian career full circle—she has helped me shine as an amateur and most importantly, has believed in me every step of the way. My most proud moment in my equestrian career was sitting in Ohio and watching these riders blossom into horsewomen. And I owe that opportunity to Kristin, who believes in me more than I believe in myself.



Blue Star Farms student, Karina Patel and “Adonis” riding in the Buck Brannaman clinic in Kiowa, Colo.