

SEIZING THE CHALLENGE

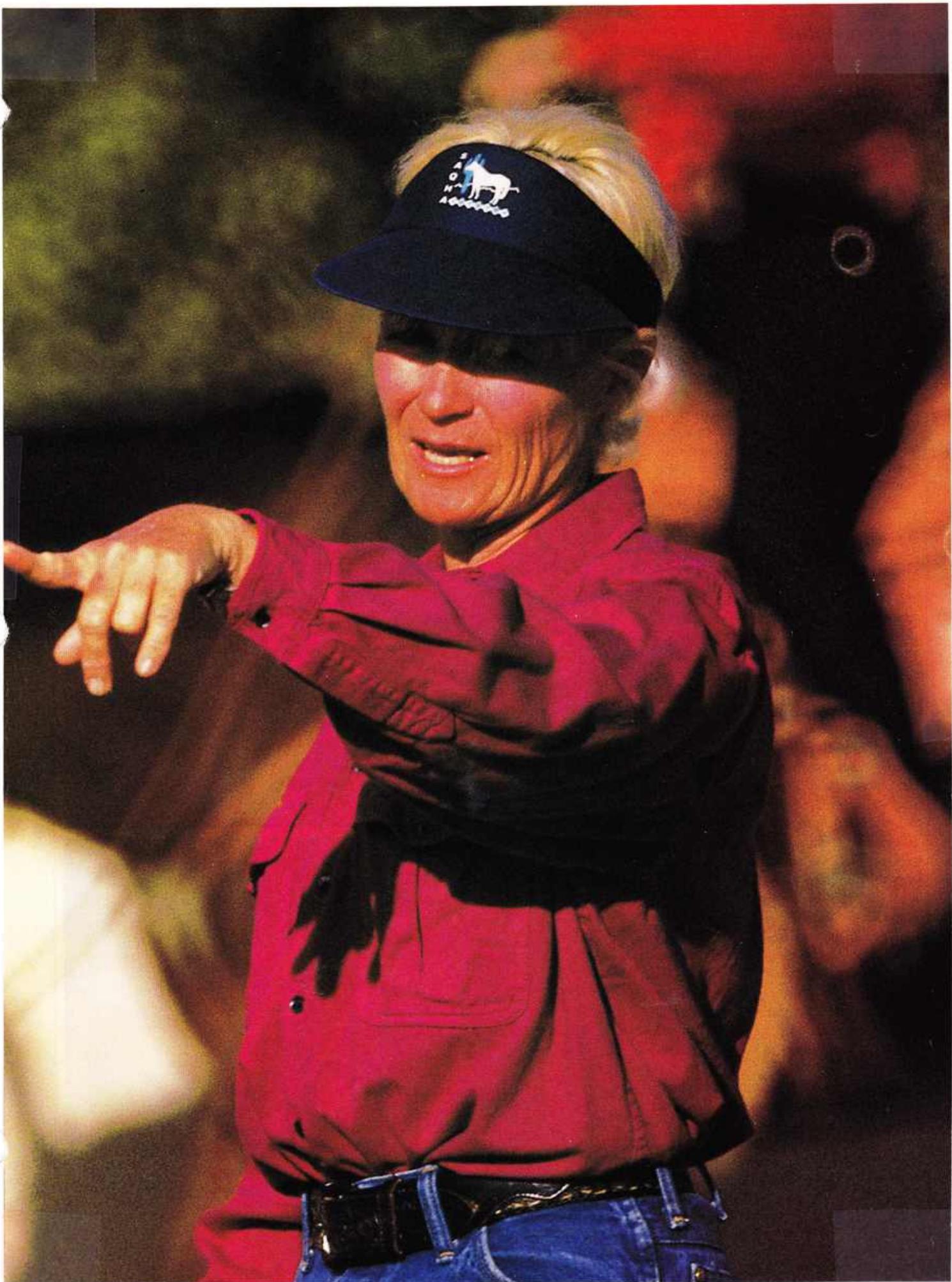
In her work with physically challenged riders, trainer Mary Ann Adamcin gets back as much as she gives.

WRITTEN BY
ANNE LANG
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
CAPPY JACKSON

YOU KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE to have a bad riding day: Your frustration level builds with every stride your horse takes. You convince yourself that you're making zero progress—even regressing—and you flirt with the thought of throwing in the towel, or in this case, your wet saddle blanket. Well, imagine what it's like to deal with those occasional riding frustrations *on top* of being physically challenged, or hindered by permanent health problems.

Arizona trainer Mary Ann Adamcin doesn't have to imagine. She's had first-hand experience with battling, and overcoming, a physical handicap to her own riding. (A horse in training charged her after bucking her off, crushing her leg.) And while that experience enhances her reputation as an extraordinary teacher of physically challenged or chronically ill riders, it's Adamcin's somewhat unorthodox training philosophy—underscored by a fierce, heartfelt compassion for her students—that sets her apart from so many other show-focused trainers.

Hers is a barn where shining triumphs aren't always measured in terms of silver trophies. It's where the often painful struggle of getting through a day takes precedence over getting through a pattern. And it's where, in some cases, the ability to ride at all can prolong a student's very will and capacity to go on living.



THE REAL WINNERS

Adamcin is a different kind of trainer; she'll tell you that up front. But her decision to do things differently, while originating as a conscious goal, largely evolved from the circumstances in which she found herself.

Taking a break in the roomy kitchen of the Arizona ranch house she shares with Roger—husband, business partner, and best friend—she points out that not *all* her students have physical limitations. “I have a number of healthy students, also,” she says, “and I’ve found that the mixture of abilities is beneficial to everyone. This is a supportive environment, with no pressure—riders can feel comfortable working within their own framework.”

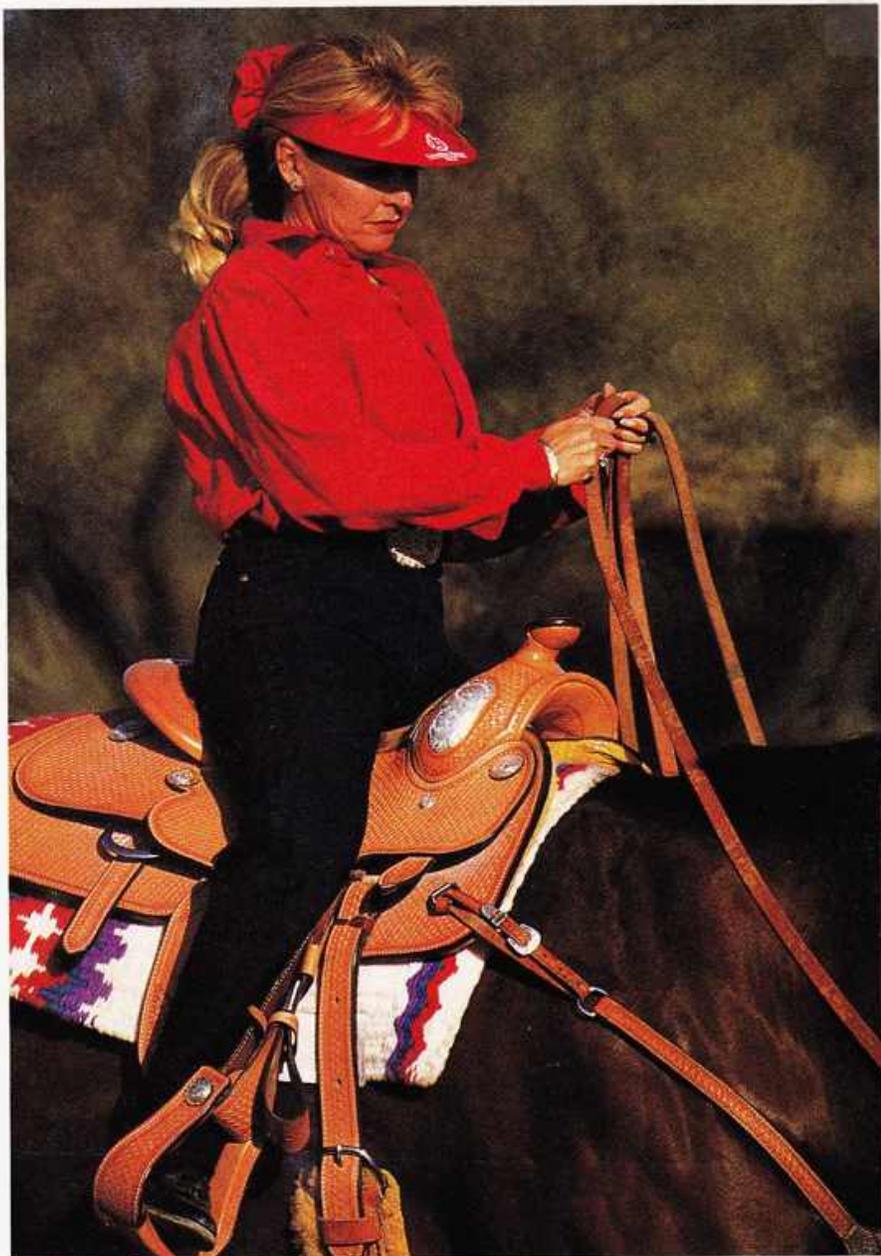
The unique framework that exists at Adamcin’s barn today has taken shape over the past 8 years. In 1986, Adamcin moved to Tucson from Columbus, Ohio, where she’d been an accomplished competitor and trainer at a succession of several large show barns. But after spending years in the cutthroat show ranks where the underlying drive to win was relentless, Adamcin was no longer feeling fulfilled.

Heading for the West with an open mind, her goal was to establish a boarding and training barn, then tailor a program to fit her new students’ needs and desires. Little did she know how unique those needs and desires would be.

Adamcin, who’s now 50, began her business with healthy, able-bodied clients. Then along came Barbara Zeihler, who was looking for a trainer to help her “ride through” her then-early stages of chronic fatigue syndrome. Soon came Sharon Scofield, whose lower legs had been rendered useless by polio. Seizing the challenge, Adamcin taught the rider to post off her inner thigh, creating the illusion of a steady calf and foot. (Sharon, who’s now in her 40s and still hauls in for occasional lessons, went on to sweep just about every equitation division in the region.)

Word of Adamcin’s skills and willingness to coach riders with special needs began to spread through the community, developing into the clientele she handles today. Although the trainer has no formal training in teaching physically challenged riders, Adamcin has no reservations about it, either.

“Because these are all adults, we have a very good two-way communication,” she explains. “They tell me everything I need to know about their physical limitations, and most of them are very focused on maintaining their balance. And I’ll never ask a rider to do something with a horse





that can't be executed by that person."

Communication between rider and trainer is further ensured by Adamcin's belief in one-on-one lessons. Group instruction is occasionally offered, but it's the exception rather than the norm. However, Adamcin does encourage riders to observe others' lessons as a learning tool.

"My students watch each other in a supportive way," she states. "There's no criticism, judgment, or laughter because a person didn't get it right."

THE REACH FOR EXCELLENCE

Though Adamcin claims to possess no special skills for working with physically challenged riders, Sandi Harting strongly feels otherwise, crediting her trainer for helping her and her Quarter Horse, Hes A Honky Tonk Man, to achieve world-class status in the show ring. Despite bouts of low energy caused by her leukemia, in 1993, Harting and her gelding managed to capture the following: Novice National Champion; Arizona All-Around Novice Amateur; Sun Circuit All-Around Novice Amateur; Blue Ribbon Circuit Reserve All-Around Novice Amateur; and third at the All American Quarter Horse Congress in novice amateur horsemanship.

"Mary Ann helps me to philosophically focus on what I *can* do, rather than what I *can't* do," explains Harting, the 42-year-old former owner of a travel agency. "That's good for me, because I'm very goal oriented. But she's persuaded me to be realistic about my goals."

Harting is quick to point out that Adamcin is by no means easy on her special students, either. "Sometimes we call her the Iron Maiden!" she laughs. "It's incredible what she's able to see when she's standing in the ring watching us—like telling me to move my calf back just 1 inch, in order to get my horse's hind leg forward by an inch.

"But Mary Ann knows when to pull back, too. She recognizes that when you reach for excellence, you've got to push yourself, but she also recognizes the fine

Opposite page: Sandi Harting (top) hasn't let leukemia prevent her and Hes A Honky Tonk Man from achieving world-class status. Dr. John Myers (below), who's HIV-positive, credits his special bond with Our Midnight Magic as the key to keeping him strong. This page: Adamcin (top) explains an exercise to student Tannis Duncan. Paraplegic student Becky Czerak (below) leads True Zip on wheels.

line between pushing our bodies, and taking care of our bodies.”

Harting adds quietly, “What Mary Ann really understands, though, is the time element. Some of us don’t know if we’ll even be around next year, so she makes us work hard for today—this day, every day.”

MOVING FORWARD

It is indeed a fine line that Adamcin walks between wanting to maximize her students’ training sessions, and respecting how quickly they can tire.

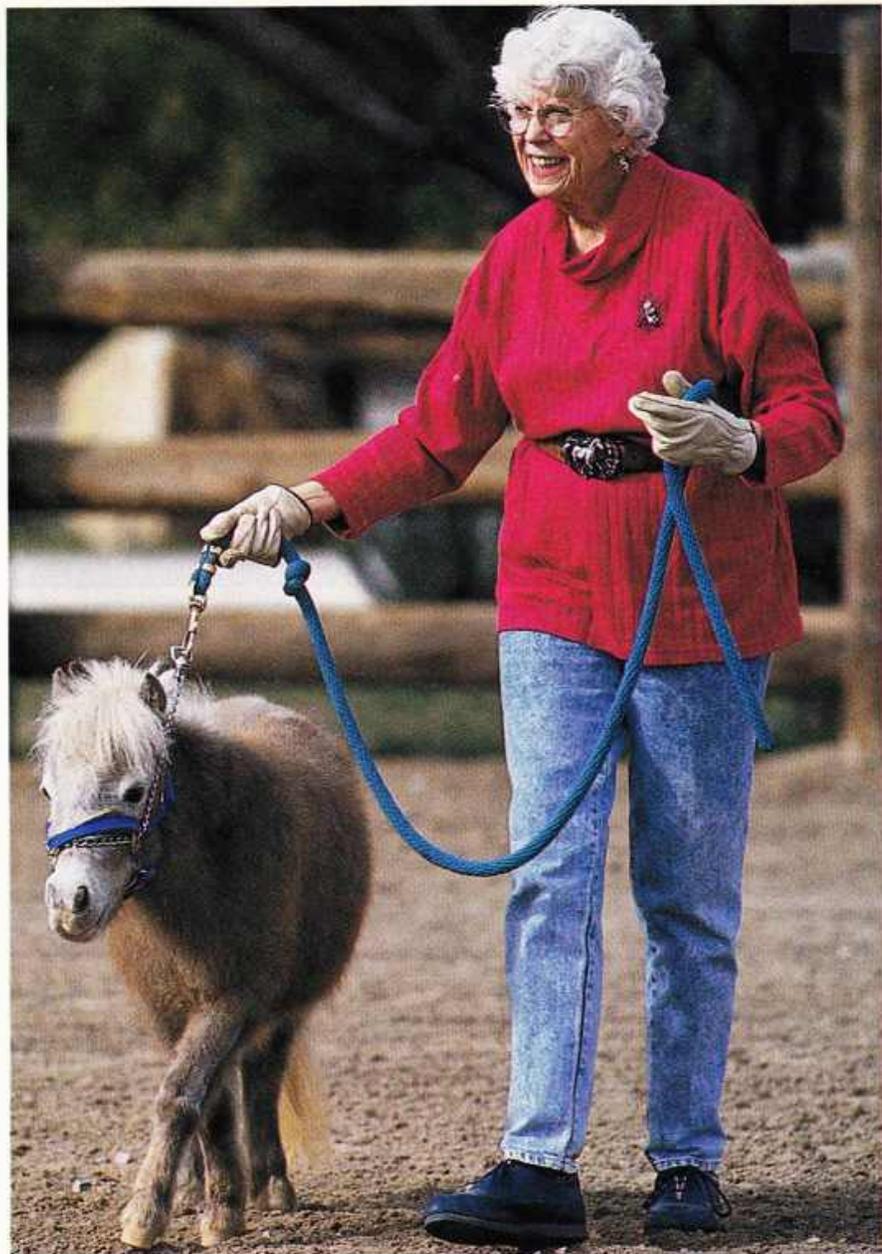
“I tell them, ‘If you can post one stride more every day, by the time you get to the show ring, you’ll be ready.’ When these students are riding, I don’t see their limitations. I see a rider who has a problem, and that’s what we work on—the *riding* problem, not the physical problem. For most of these people, riding is their freedom. It allows them to participate in a normal, challenging activity.”

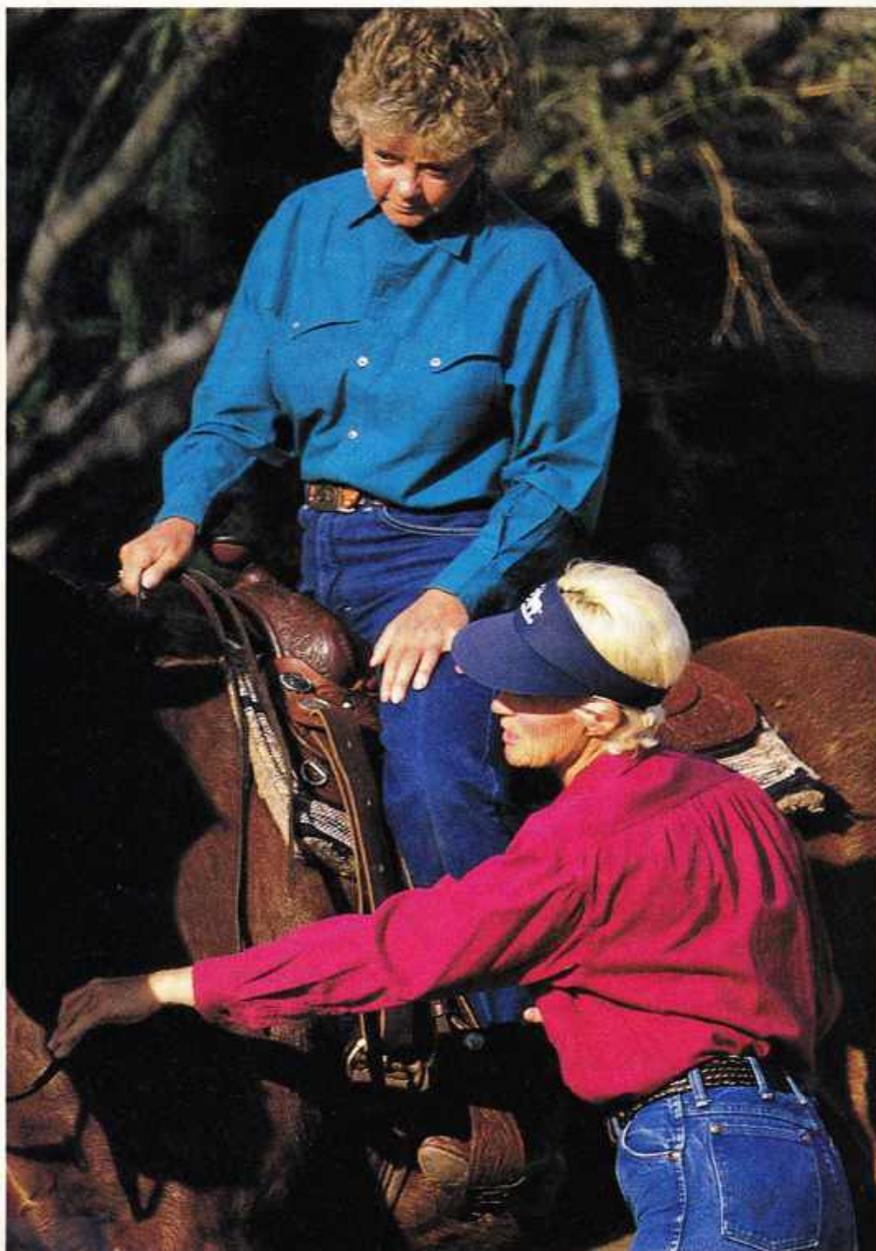
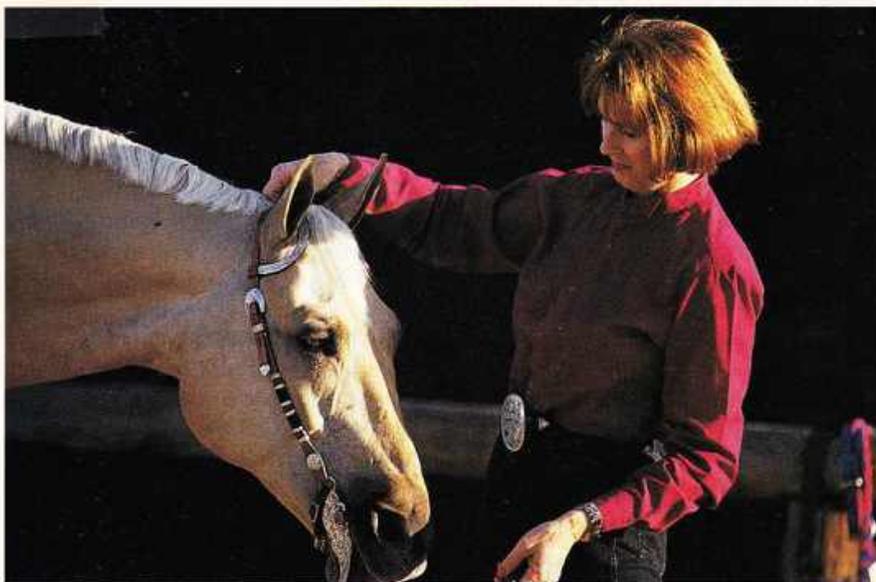
With a sizeable contingent of riders whose physical strength is not always up to par with the strength of able-bodied riders, Adamcin might be forgiven for allowing liberal use of artificial aids. But in fact, she doesn’t condone them one bit. No draw reins, no martingales, no crops, no spurs are allowed in Adamcin’s ring.

“My riders learn to use the forward style of riding—more leg and seat, less hand, so they know what it feels like when it’s correct,” Adamcin states. “I believe that no tack or equipment should be used to cause pain. If the horse is kept relaxed and happy, the rider can be, too. Our program is what many describe as soft, because it’s based on relaxation. But it’s okay if I’m accused of being a soft trainer. I’m comfortable with how I do things, and I’m not going to change.”

If Adamcin is indeed “soft,” that characterization shouldn’t be confused with “easy.” Her focus on the horse and rider is intense and unwavering—from the minute the lesson begins, until its very end. The student definitely exits the ring feeling as though he/she has gotten a thorough workout.

“My main objective is that when someone leaves here after a lesson, they leave with a positive attitude about *something*,” she stresses. “Whatever we’ve been working on, it doesn’t matter if they don’t get it. They might not *ever* get it. If they were in there trying, and then they drive away feeling good about that session, that’s what’s important. I’m not negating the importance of riding skills or performance levels and all that, but it’s *not* the most important thing.”





PLANNING FOR FLEXIBILITY

At the beginning of the year, Adamcin sits down with each student to create a goal program that fits within the rider's physical limitations. Goals might be as simple as perfecting lead changes, or as ambitious as qualifying for several national shows. More by choice than by persuasion, all of Adamcin's students do compete at some point during the year, be it locally, regionally, or nationally.

"We can plan for certain shows, but everything is contingent on the health of the rider," Adamcin says matter-of-factly. "So a lot of the time, we end up cancelling."

Adamcin maintains that her riders pursue showing for the whole experience, not just the winning. "It's the idea of participating in something competitive that's appealing to most of them. Doing the pattern correctly, getting the right lead, having your horse look nice, even just getting through a class—it gives them a great feeling of accomplishment. It's going in there and doing something they've been working on at home, and making it happen. It's the idea that you've worked for something, and it's not about anyone else.

"You always hear people saying, 'You only compete with yourself.' Well, our customers truly feel that way. They go in and show their horse to the best of their ability, come what may."

That's not to say that winning isn't sweet. Adamcin recalls a particular highlight a few years ago, when in a novice class of 10 riders, the first six places went to special riders from her barn. She also remembers a bittersweet day when paraplegic student Becky Czerak won a class for the first time—and received a hoof pick instead of a blue ribbon.

"I was crying, partly with happiness and partly with frustration, because I knew she wanted that blue ribbon so badly," Adamcin says, ruefully shaking her head.

Diagnosed last year as HIV-positive, Dr. John Myers, 38, has accepted the cards he's been dealt with an astonishing measure of frankness, dignity, serenity, and customary humor.

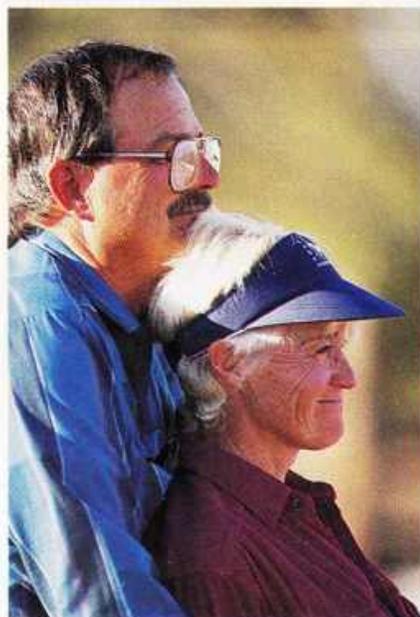
continued on next page

Opposite page: Helen Hinton (top), who battles Guillain-Barre syndrome, shows off her first "horse," Coco Peli. Roger Adamcin (below) jokes with Laura McMillan and Barbara Ziehler. This page: He Man (top) relaxes under Ziehler's touch. Adamcin shows Bobbi Clarey (below) how to ride despite scleroderma (hardening of connective tissue).

SEIZING THE CHALLENGE

Adamcin, who's been teaching the anesthesiologist for 5 years, helped Myers find the current love of his life: a 10-year-old Quarter Horse, Our Midnight Magic. In 1993, the pair scored wins in novice amateur hunter under saddle, and novice amateur hunt-seat equitation at the Sun Circuit and Blue Ribbon shows.

During the roller-coaster phases of Myers' illness, Adamcin has been a rock of support, he says. "It's all been positive reinforcement, more of a 'do what you can do' than a focus on my limitations. There's been no pressure, but whenever I'm strong enough to ride, Mary Ann is ready to go as far as I can go."



Myers was in the hospital recently, experiencing his most severe setback to date. As he lay in intensive care, drifting in and out of consciousness, Myers remembers seeing Adamcin frequently at his bedside. "I would grab her hands to smell the horses and leather on them," he says, smiling with the memory. "You have no idea what that did for my mental state." That, and an avalanche of love, hospital visits, and cheerful horsey paraphernalia from his barn friends made him strong, he declares.

So did an emotional encounter with his beloved Magic.

Toward the end of his hospital stay, Myers convinced his reluctant physician to grant him a two-hour pass. Friends took him straight to Adamcin's, driving right up to the entrance of Magic's barn. With tubes in his nose attached to a portable oxygen tank, a still-weak Myers

walked haltingly to Magic's open door. As he slipped his arms around the horse's neck, Myers felt his legs give way. He tightened his grip and hung on for all he was worth. The normally playful Magic instantly sensed his owner's distress—and for the next full 15 minutes, he stood absolutely stock-still, silently supporting the gently weeping head burrowed deeply in his neck.

WHAT SOMEONE ELSE CAN DO

"I've been warned, don't ever become friends with your customers. But we just don't operate that way. All of these people are our friends," says Adamcin, who last year persuaded Myers to move into a cottage that sits on her property. Soon, Myers and the Adamcins were sharing nightly dinners—a ritual they still enjoy. Adamcin is comforted by being able to check on Myers constantly. Myers benefits not only from the added attention and companionship, but also by living so close to the horses.

While Adamcin's friendship with Myers is an extreme example of going way beyond the usual customer/trainer relationship, working with special students does call for extra degrees of human compassion. And although this particular group hasn't yet had to deal with it, the somber reality of death hovers just out of sight. Adamcin acknowledges that such an intense atmosphere wouldn't appeal to everyone.

Her own emotions rise to the surface when she's asked to describe her special students' most admirable traits. "Their courage, their tenacity, their honesty...." She starts to cry softly, then laughs through her tears. "...their senses of humor!"

Adamcin freely admits to having cried in front of—and with—her students on numerous occasions.

"My students are very honest about expressing their emotions, and that makes it easier for me to be open, too," she says. "I've wanted to cry at times when I wish I could make things better, but I know I can't. We just have to work with what we have."

And even if it all came to an end tomorrow, Adamcin says she's at peace with herself, knowing that she's helped in some way to improve the quality of her special riders' lives.

"Inner peace really comes from an individual's life experience, and from what you've accomplished on a personal level," she declares. "But it also comes from believing in what you know someone else can do." □