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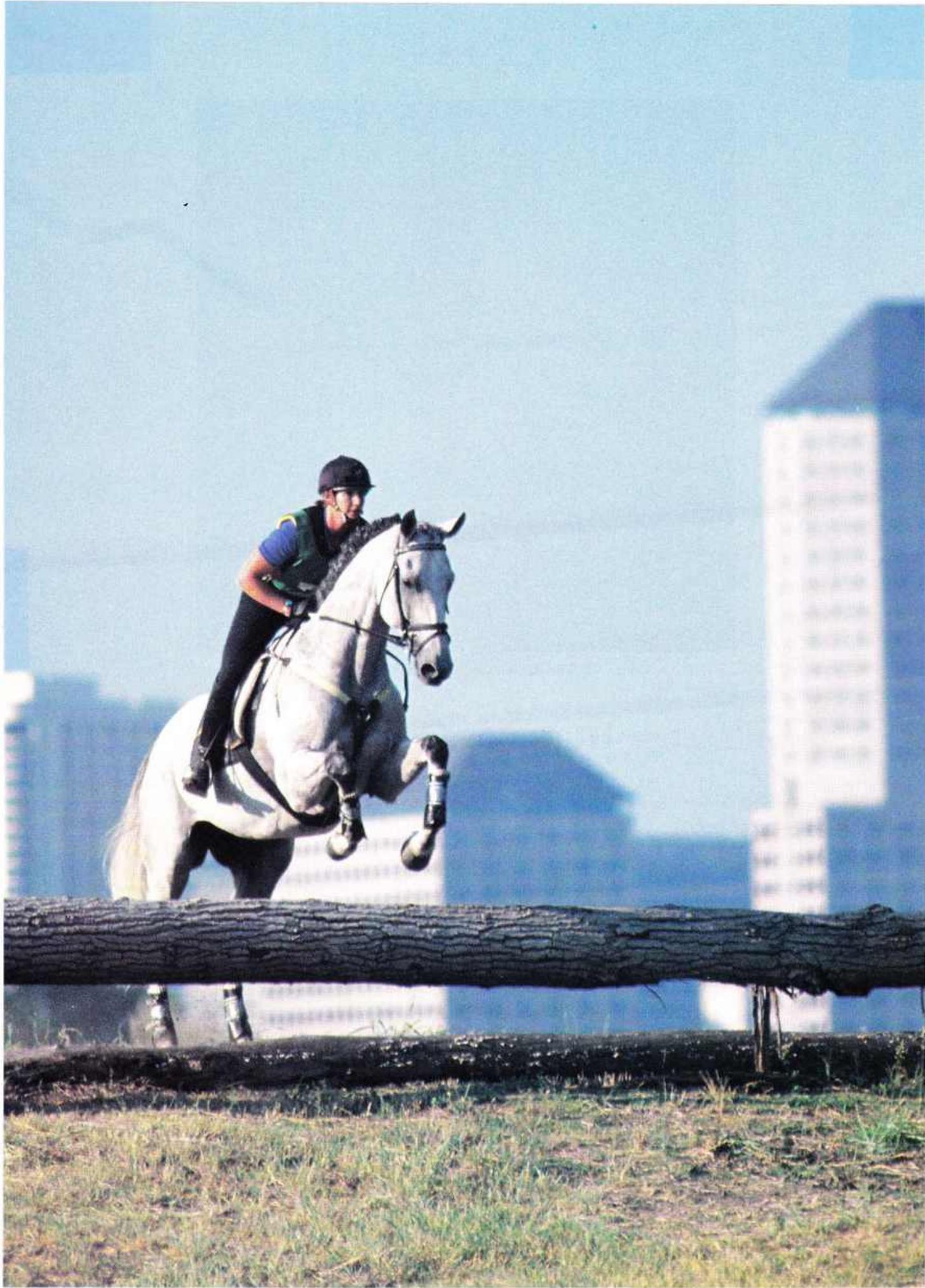
MAY & JUNE 1995



HEADS UP!
LEAPIN' LESLIE TAKES AIM
Spur Visits Las Colinas, Texas



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Las Colinas

A horse haven in the shadow of Big "D's" skyscrapers, this Texas equestrian center appeals to dressage, hunter/jumper and combined-training riders as well as stock-seat enthusiasts.

BY ANNE LANG • PHOTOGRAPHED BY CAROL KAELSON

Twenty-five years ago, Texas rancher and real-estate tycoon Ben H. Carpenter had an extraordinary vision.

In his mind's eye, he saw a grand, expansive equestrian facility dominating a sizable chunk of Texas plain, its borders nudged by the Dallas skyline's far-reaching shadows. He imagined a horse haven—a forever unthreatened oasis of equine activity ensconced in the virtual midst of America's eighth largest metropolis. It would be an idyllic refuge where the urban trappings of towering steel and concrete mazes would give way to majestic stables adorned with

graceful columns, to lush green meadows dotted with rustic hurdles and to miles of tree-shaded bridle paths where only the chatter of birds and the drone of distant traffic would penetrate the soothing silence.

Carpenter was indeed a dreamer. He also was a scrupulous planner and an ambitious doer—traits that long ago had secured his status in the ranks of Dallas' leading entrepreneurs. But it was his lifelong passion for horses that particularly inspired the equine aspect of a grand-scale planned community begun in the 1970s—all of it conceived and implemented by Carpenter. Today, situated at the center of the sprawling Las Colinas residential/commercial/retail development is the thriving, 14-year-old Las Colinas Equestrian Center, one of Carpenter's proudest achievements.

The 70-year-old Texan explains that the dream was based on practical insight.

"Most riding facilities are initially located on the far edge of whatever city they're in," Carpenter points out.



COURTESY BEN H. CARPENTER

Left: Competing in the August 1994 Las Colinas Horse Trials, Diane Hanrahan jumps Maximilian on the cross-country course framed by looming city towers. Inset: Las Colinas visionary Ben H. Carpenter poses with daughter Elizabeth Frater, whose commitment to riding sparked the idea for the equestrian center.



Above: The main barn at Las Colinas offers 103 stalls and a clerestory that provides light and ventilation.

“Then those areas eventually get developed, and the horse property gets sold. I wanted something right in the heart of the development that would be permanent, including riding trails and a jump course.”

He got his wish and a bonus to boot. The equestrian center’s use as a horse-oriented establishment is legally protected, a tremendous advantage that’s envied by many but shared by few similar facilities elsewhere.

Las Colinas, the development, is part of the city of Irving—home of Texas Stadium, where Dallas Cowboys football provides a big boost to the local economy. The Dallas/Fort Worth airport is just 10 minutes away, and Irving’s 165,000 residents can opt for a short commute to downtown Dallas, located 12 miles east—or a longer, 35-mile drive west to Fort Worth.

Approximately two-thirds of the 12,000 acres on which the Las Colinas community sits was originally owned by the Carpenter family. In 1928, Carpenter’s father bought an 800-acre parcel of land and turned it into Hackberry Creek Ranch. Carpenter’s mother nicknamed the property *El Rancho de Las Colinas*—“little ranch of the hills”—for which Ben Carpenter’s future development would be named. (In pancake-flat Dallas, the slightest

rise in the earth is considered a hill; arguably, the clusters of “rises” in parts of Las Colinas are considered substantial enough to warrant the name.)

Over time, the elder Carpenter bought more land, expanding the ranch to 6,000 acres. In later years, 2,000 additional acres were acquired by Ben Carpenter. The Carpenters initially raised Hereford cattle at Hackberry Creek and their three satellite ranches, as well as homebred draft horses and mules—which they sold to farmers and ranchers. When the tractor’s emergence ended the latter enterprise, the equine-loving Carpenters simply switched to breeding and training Quarter Horses and Paints.

In 1948 Carpenter married, and he and wife, Betty, raised a son and four daughters on Hackberry Creek Ranch. Elizabeth Carpenter Frater, who still lives in Dallas, was the most dedicated rider of the bunch. In fact, it was her deep involvement in owning and showing hunter/jumpers (a fledgling discipline in Texas those 20 or so years ago) that sparked her father’s idea for creating an equestrian center. The concept that eventually evolved into Las Colinas Equestrian Center began at Hackberry Creek, with Elizabeth running a small-scale boarding and lesson business on ranch property.

By the late 1960s, Carpenter was contemplating the feasibility of turning the ranch—and some surrounding real

estate—into a master planned community. Toward that end, he formed the Las Colinas Corporation, which went forward with the planning and development of the Las Colinas community. The development was officially announced in August of 1973, with Carpenter as principal planner.

(Carpenter retained 100 acres of the original ranch property, where he still lives with Betty and their numerous horses. He and his son, John, are general partners in the Las Colinas Limited Land Partnership, which owns the remaining 2,000 acres to be sold in the development.)

Progress on the multi-phased Las Colinas project rocked along, and the equestrian center was completed in late 1981. The center’s site is protected by a deed restriction implemented by Carpenter, requiring that those particular 40 acres can be used only for equestrian-related purposes “in perpetuity.” Read: forever.

“That deed restriction was created so someone can’t come along in the future and move the darn thing,” Carpenter declares. “I wanted the equestrian center to become a permanent facility in its present location. I love horses, and I know a lot of other people love them—but normally they have a hard time finding a place to enjoy them that’s close in.”

Predictably, boarders’ horses quickly filled the 100 box stalls, and the school program filled up as well. Many of the first customers—boarders and lesson students alike—transferred from Fra-

Top left: Veterinarians Wes Williams (left) and Jake Hersman manage the Las Colinas Equestrian Center. Top right: Jane Huber scrutinizes clinic riders in the indoor ring. Middle left: Linda Tedesco poses with Skippo Zippo, ranked second among Palomino geldings nationally. Middle right: Phil DeVita holds boarder Lacey Conner's Hogan's Hero. Bottom left: Laura Kraut placed sixth and seventh in the 1994 Las Colinas Show Jumping Classic. Bottom right: Tack shop manager Rennie Meriweather shows hunters at Las Colinas.

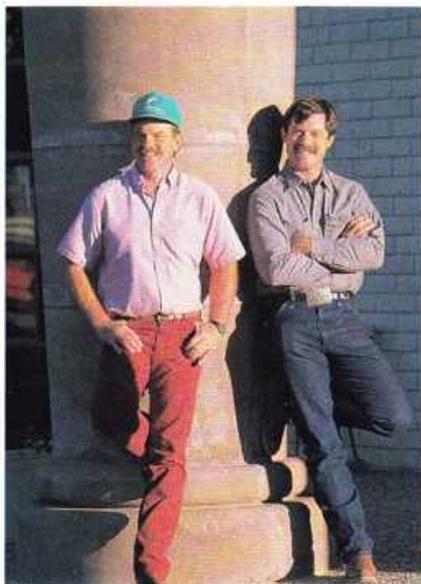
ter's hunt-seat operation at the ranch. Whether because of that influence or of English riding's gradual emergence in Texas, Las Colinas immediately developed into a hunter/jumper facility.

From its central location in a region where rodeo, roping and reining are the common equine pursuits, the equestrian center's atypically non-cowboy image is further enhanced by Carpenter's choice of elegant, Spanish-style architecture, right down to the red-tiled roof. But at Las Colinas, function underscores form—again directed by Carpenter, who chose reinforced concrete as the primary construction material, eliminating potential destruction by fire.

Inside the imposing entrance of the pillared main building is a spacious two-story foyer. On the ground floor is a large tack and equestrian supply shop (established, owned and managed by Frater until she sold it in 1991), a labyrinth of administrative offices, and doors leading to the stable area. A grand, sweeping staircase ascends to a second-floor multi-purpose room, its glass windows commanding a view of the indoor arena.

The barns are laid out in an "H" design. In between are tack rooms, feed storage, wash racks and a connecting aisle. One end of the huge (160 feet by 300 feet) covered arena abuts the stable area. Fixed bleachers along one side accommodate 2,000 spectators, but auxiliary seating can raise the capacity to 4,500.

Adjacent to the main arena is a smaller ring, also covered, which was added last year. A 17-stall school barn is situated near the opposite end of the main arena. Two covered show pavilions, also added in 1994, provide





Left: Sarah Dawson performs a dressage test on Royal Touch. In the background are The Studios at Las Colinas, where movies including *JFK*, *Silkwood* and *The Trip to Bountiful* have been filmed. Opposite left: Laura Hightower and daughter Jordan relax after a ride on the Las Colinas trails on horses Aspen and Annabell. Opposite right: Dressage trainer Lyndon Rife schools Lehnstritter, a 17-hand Hanoverian who doubles as a breeding stallion.

permanent box stalls for up to 190 visiting horses. Elsewhere on the grounds are two outdoor arenas, 11 turn-out pens and three round pens.

A source of particular pride is the relatively new cross-country course, spread out over 60 acres next to the 40-acre equestrian center site. During the time they taught at Las Colinas (in 1992-93), renowned three-day eventers Mike and Jane Huber, along with Mike's mother, Judy, designed the course and supervised its construction. The Hubers have since established their own north Texas facility but will likely serve as consultants in transforming the course to the next level of difficulty.

Judy Huber continues to help run combined training-related events at Las Colinas, which so far have been limited to a couple of horse trials per year. The equestrian center's current managers hope that once the existing cross-country obstacles have been upgraded beyond the Novice/Train-

ing level, three-day events will become part of the center's regular competitive offerings—especially since facilities for the dressage and stadium-jumping phases already are in place.

Across the street from the center's main entrance is yet another 60-acre tract, this one used for trail riding. While it would seem logical this property would be earmarked for general development, it, too, is protected for equestrian purposes—along with extensive strips of trail land.

Las Colinas Corporation donated the tract to the Dallas County Utility and Reclamation District, which—to augment the facility's status as a permanent Las Colinas entity—has owned the equestrian center since 1984. Also donated were several miles of flood-plain land along the Elm fork of the Trinity River, which runs from the south end of Las Colinas all the way to Dallas' LBJ Freeway. The entire greenbelt is being developed for eques-

trian trail riding and other forms of non-motorized recreation as part of an agreement between the utility district and the city of Irving. The project (to be completed by 1996) was yet another of Ben Carpenter's long-range visions.

"The saving grace of Las Colinas is Mr. Carpenter's foresight to have insisted on maintaining the various equestrian-use purposes," says Dr. Jake Hersman, one of the equestrian center's managers. "In most metropolitan areas like this, land is usually at such a premium that it's difficult to justify retaining pastures when you can cash in on condominiums."

Hersman, 39, established Las Colinas Veterinary Clinic on equestrian center property in 1990, leasing the facility from the utility district. The clinic, a mere stone's throw from the center's main arena, handles numerous outside clients as well as Las Colinas boarders and features the surgical services of area equine specialists. In 1992, Hersman was joined by his old Texas A&M University veterinary school classmate, Dr. Wes Williams. Later that year, the men took over management of the equestrian center as well.

"It was kind of a natural evolution in that the facility was in a bit of reorganization at the time," Hersman explains, referring to a period when the center's management lacked horse-business experience, when on-site trainer turnover was high and when many out-of-town exhibitors were unhappy with horse show conditions. "We, of course, had a desire for equine activity continuing to thrive over there, so we felt that if we had a say in how it was managed, maybe we could make it a more viable entity that would in turn benefit the clinic."



The veterinarians plunged right in with several capital improvements (at their own expense), including covering the second arena, building the permanent show barns and shoring up the main arena's footing.

"We feel we've made efforts to improve all three major fronts—the boarding, the school and the shows," Williams says. "It helped that when we took over management, a good core of boarders was still here, who were genuinely interested in their sport and in showing competitively. Also, the school lesson program was a very vital part of the picture, and we've tried to maintain that without any radical changes."

While they now focus most of their day-to-day energies on the clinic, Hersman and Williams stay in constant contact with the equestrian center's full-time administrative, maintenance and teaching staff. Employees and boarders alike praise the veterinarians for their prompt response to problems and for the positive changes they've brought about.

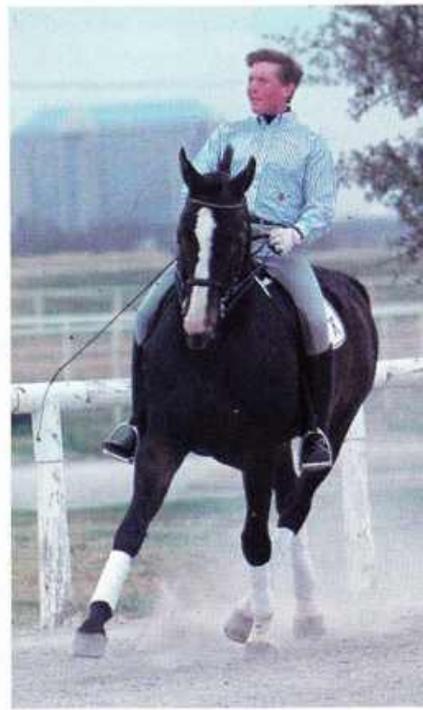
"Jake and Wes are good people, right down to their souls, so they're great to work for," says Las Colinas office manager Phoebe Damon, whose impeccable attire reflects the quiet elegance of her surroundings. "We've had

a lot of comments about how things are shaping up around here, turning it back into the Las Colinas it used to be."

Damon joined the Las Colinas staff in March of 1993 after moving from upstate New York. She keeps her warmblood gelding at the center, so she gets to know the boarders during riding time as well as in her office. "We've got surprisingly nice, reasonable people here, given the number of personalities we have to try to please. Generally at upscale barns like this, the boarders tend to be pretty demanding."

Representing the largest contingent of boarders from one household is the Schmalz family of nearby University Park. Bonnie, a non-practicing lawyer, shows her Thoroughbred in hunter classes; Karl, a tax lawyer, rides in adult jumper on his Thoroughbred/warmblood cross; and their daughter, 17-year-old Kristina, competes in junior jumper on her Hanoverian. A son who used to ride is now in college. The Schmalzes came to Dallas from Connecticut by way of Houston.

Bonnie says the family appreciates the warmth of the people at Las Colinas. "At some barns, the competitive atmosphere can get pretty intense, but here the people are friendly and supportive. There's a very little of that intensity."



Although a relatively small percentage of its boarders can be defined as serious show riders, Las Colinas does offer regular opportunities for competition—intense or otherwise. Aside from a variety of shows hosted by outside groups (saddle seat, Arabian, etc.) that rent the space, the center conducts several of its own annual hunter/jumper events, several of them A-rated—including the four-day Bear Creek Horse Show in April and the four-day Labor Day show.

The biggest events of the year are the Las Colinas Show Jumping Classics, which take place during the last two weekends in May (Thursday-Sunday). Two major grands prix highlight those shows, which through the years have attracted some world-class riders: Margie Goldstein, Mark Leone and Laura Kraut are among the repeat competitors. Past grandprix sponsors have included Mercedes-Benz and Lincoln-Mercury.

Crown Royal also has underwritten several of the classics, which have boasted purses of up to \$50,000. The 1994 Crown Royal Grand Prix qualified as a United States Equestrian Team regional championship event. But regardless of who's backing the competition, the horse-loving commu-



The Mustangs of Las Colinas, located in nearby Williams Square, were sculpted by Robert Glen and dedicated in September 1984.

nity turns out in droves: Tickets for the grands prix traditionally sell out.

Still, the staff admits that news of the center's significant improvement has been slow to spread, and it may take some time before formerly disgruntled exhibitors are willing to return to Las Colinas. For years, riders were put off by temporary, tent-covered show stabling erected on gooe mud that never dried, uneven and too-shallow arena footing, lack of a covered schooling area, poor rainwater drainage, and the absence of adequate, all-weather parking lots.

Hersman points out that all of those problems have been resolved except the parking areas, and work on those is currently underway. "If people come back, we can show them that changes have been made," he reasons.

One person who came back—in a more long-term capacity—is hunter/jumper trainer Phil DeVita, who during the 1980s operated his own north Texas show barn before returning to

his home state of Florida. He worked at his father's Orlando show barn for three years but in 1993 was drawn again to Texas. He now leases 50 stalls at Las Colinas, teaching a large number of boarders as well as school customers. DeVita spends an increasing amount of time on the road, taking riders to away shows.

"When I came here, there was no show clientele to speak of," he recalls, explaining that a former hunter/jumper trainer had taken most of the competitive riders with him when he left. "Little by little, we're building this back up to be a show facility." Last summer, for instance, DeVita took a small group of riders—both juniors and adults, with a broad range of hunters and jumpers—to shows in Kentucky and Oklahoma, in addition to major Texas venues.

DeVita says he isn't bothered by the fact that Texas isn't exactly known as a hunter/jumper mecca. "Historically, there has always been a high quality of horses and riders down here; it's just that we're more spread out," he says. "It's hard to compare our shows to Tampa, Palm Beach or Indio because the sheer volume of talent in

those places is so concentrated. I like training in this part of the world, or I wouldn't have left Florida. And this facility has a lot to offer."

In April 1994, trainer Lyndon Rife came back to his native Texas to be near his Dallas-based family. Prior to joining dressage trainer Vicky Maeckle at Las Colinas, Rife had spent 25 years as a trainer in Michigan. Besides teaching dressage (to mostly boarders), Rife schools the few combined-training riders who remain at the center. Like DeVita, Rife regularly takes a handful of students on the road to shows and is faced with the pleasant dilemma of his discipline's ever-growing popularity.

"I think everyone is understanding the concept of dressage more these days, and they see it as being helpful to their training," Rife suggests. "More and more Texas riders are getting into dressage, and they're buying quality horses." Factors contributing to the growth of local interest, he feels, are "the Dallas area's diverse population and having the money to do it." Las Colinas is a comfortable setting for the 41-year-old Rife "because I'm given the freedom to run my own program."

Freedom to enjoy the social aspect of horse ownership, apart from the big commitment, is what appeals to boarder Mary Shilling. The resident of Plano (a Dallas suburb 30 minutes away) keeps her 11-year-old mare, Lexus, at Las Colinas. In the next stall is pony Denee, owned by Shilling's 9-year-old daughter, Kate. Shilling's two sons don't ride, but they're involved in Scouts and various sports—so their mother's daily schedule is a hectic one.

"I like it that I can come out here to ride, have intelligent conversation with other adults who share my love of horses and not have to worry about what I'm wearing," Shilling cheerfully remarks as she clips the crossties to Lexus' halter. It's early morning, her usual riding time. This afternoon, she'll return for Kate's lesson.

Laura Hightower, who splits hunter/jumper training duties with DeVita (teaching mostly school students), offers the seasoned perspective of one who was among Las Colinas' first boarders. A former professional fashion model, the striking blonde recalls what a serious show barn it was back in 1981.

"An East Coast trainer came on board and showed us how it was done in that part of the country, with grooms traveling to the shows and all. It was kinda strange; I'd been used to braiding and tacking my own horses until then." In the years that followed, she remembers, transitional periods were caused by trainers who exited with as many as 20-30 students in tow. "There were a few times when the place was nearly empty."

But Hightower stayed at Las Colinas until 1988, when she married and moved to England. Returning to Dallas four years later with her family (daughter Jordan, 10, is a junior rider), she eased back into the Las Colinas scene by breaking green horses for various owners, then began taking on teaching responsibilities. Aside from her wish for "more school horses," Hightower credits Hersman and Williams for helping return Las Colinas to its original respectable state.

"They really care about the people

and the horses," she says, "and their attitude filters down through the staff. They do a great job of accommodating 100 people's needs and desires. The stalls look better than ever; the place is really cleaned up (thanks in no small way to facility manager Robert Barton); they make sure the horses are bathed and turned out. And the best part is having a couple of veterinarians right across the way."

Another Las Colinas veteran is tackshop manager Rennie Meriweather, who has boarded a horse at the center since 1985. That year was a high point, she says, with a waiting list for stalls.



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MARY SHILLING



Meriweather, who worked for Elizabeth Carpenter before taking over management of the store in 1991, recalls the founding family's dedication to creating a first-rate equestrian facility.

"They had a lot of pride in this place," she says. "Everything was top-notch and immaculate." Meriweather also remembers the subsequent periods of empty stalls, but she thinks the collapsed Texas oil economy contributed to those circumstances as much as various trainers' departures. Anyway, she points out, things are "definitely looking up" at Las Colinas these days.

"Thanks to the improved economy, we have almost a full barn of boarders, a successful school (with 300 students) and a lot more horse shows right here," Meriweather says. "Phil (DeVita) has really improved the quality of hunter/jumper training, and he takes people to shows,

which no one did for a long time. It had turned into more of a commuter barn for a while; now it's shifting back to becoming a show barn. And Phil deserves credit for instilling camaraderie and a supportive environment."

That supportive spirit was put to the test when, in 1992, Hersman and Williams took a groundbreaking step: They hired a stock-seat trainer. Actually, Linda Tedesco had been hired by the former managers two years prior—but they told her to teach hunt seat because "they didn't want Western," Tedesco relates. "I said: 'Get a grip! A lot of people around here want to ride Western.' Well, when Jake and Wes came along, they realized that."

Tedesco, who moved to Texas from Florida in 1990, leases stalls from the equestrian center. She and assistant Darlene Bush share about 50 students, mostly non-boarders. Tedesco teaches on her own three school mounts and also uses a few customers' horses.

"The lack of Western riding at Las Colinas really surprised me," Tedesco says. "I attracted customers right away, but it took a little longer to be accepted by the regulars here. It helped that I have a background in hunt seat and dressage; in fact, I incorporate dressage techniques into my lessons.

"The old regime had a reputation of being stuffy, and they're working hard now to erase that image." Three Western shows are scheduled for this year, but "I'd like to see them add some English classes so we don't segregate this barn any further. Our various riding disciplines are so similar; I just wish more people realized that," Tedesco sighs.

Indeed, some changes take longer than others. But Hersman and Williams feel they can take some measure of satisfaction in the progress that's been made during their three years as managers.

Have they earned Ben Carpenter's approval? Hersman smiles. "We still see him occasionally when he brings a horse over to the clinic. He kind of watches us from afar, and although he's not the type to say it out loud, I think he's pleased with the way things have turned out." 