



HORSE  
SHOW  
ISSUE

## Tales From The Trainers' Trenches

*Tom Brennan, Donna Cheney, Matt Cyphert, Jim Hagman, Charles Moorpark and Sandra Ruiz share some of their most amusing tales. Enjoy!*

AS TOLD TO ANNE LANG  
ILLUSTRATION BY JODY WERNER

### A Trio Of Chuckles

One winter, a little pony rider came down to ride with me in Florida. I didn't know her very well. Before she went in the ring the first time, I asked her if she'd learned the course. She told me, "I looked at it, but I was unable to de-code it." I had to laugh, but she was totally serious.

Then I had another youngster who was riding in a walk-trot class. It was crowded, and she was repeatedly getting cut off. Every time she passed the in-gate, even though I was smiling encouragingly at her, she would mouth the words "Help! Help!" After the class, her mother came up to me and said, "I think she was saying 'help.'" I comfortingly replied, "Oh, I'm sure that's not what she was saying." But just then another trainer came over and said, "How cute was your little girl who kept saying 'help'?"

In yet another walk-trot class, when the judge asked for the sitting trot, one of my students protested very loudly, "Oh come on, you've got to be kidding! This is really hard! Can I come out now?" Everyone heard her, including the judge. Those are the kinds of funny stories that just stick in your mind forever.

### Lighten Up, Will Ya?

When I was a very young trainer, I worked for someone else. At one of the first shows where I took customers by myself, I really wanted things to go well so I could come home and tell my boss that everything went great. At that show, we had a kind of timid adult lady whose young horse had only been shown a few times. They were just jumping small fences, and practice day went well. But in the schooling ring before their first class, the lady kept letting the horse drift left at the jumps. I said, "C'mon, you really need to steer to the right and jump the middle."

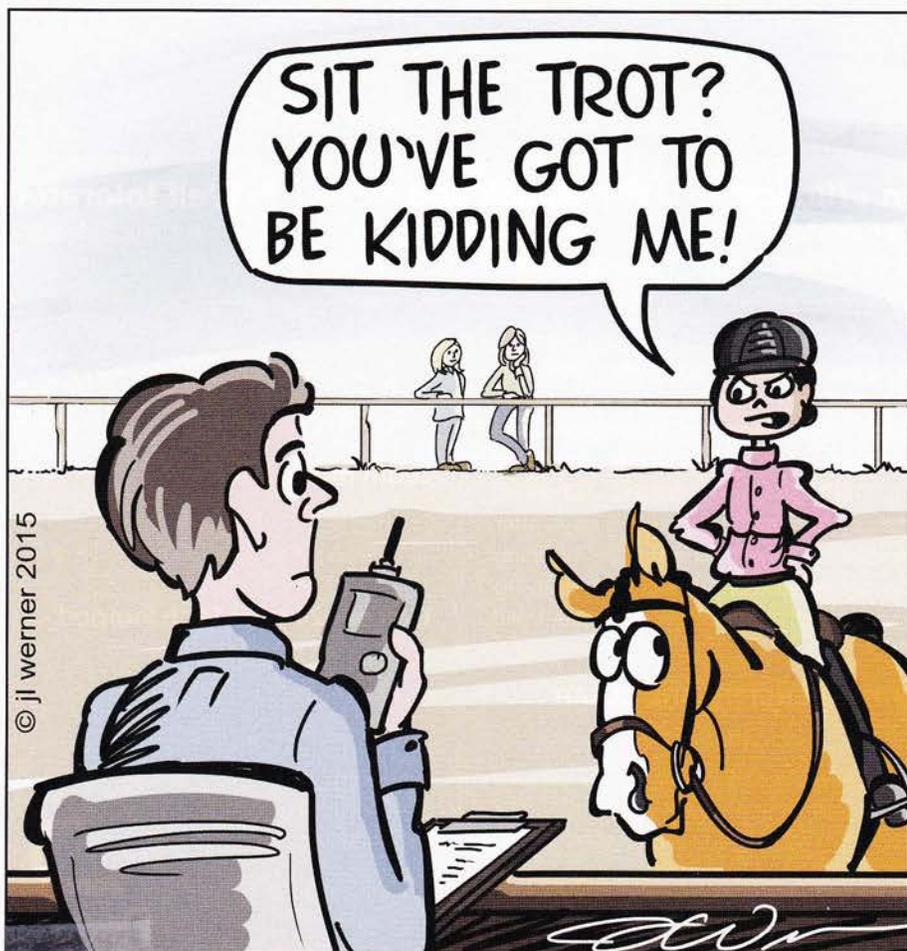
I was trying to be supportive, but I was also pretty stern. Finally she got it, but at the first jump in the show ring, she let the horse duck out to the left. I called out, "You need to pull on that right rein!" She tried again and got over that jump, but the horse ducked out left again at the next jump. The lady fell off, and she landed (unhurt) on her back inside the oer rails. I swear I don't remember doing this, but people tell me I marched out there and asked her, "Now, what side of the jump are you laying in? I told you to go to the middle, and you're on the left side again!"

She looked up at me and said, "Yeah, but before we discuss that, do you think you might help me stand up and climb out of this jump?"

Fortunately, she and her horse stayed with our barn, and now they're an experienced pair who jump around just great. And both of us still laugh at that memory.

### I'm Outta Here

I had a beginner rider, about 6 years old, whom I'd started from scratch on



the longe line. At her first horse show, she was entered in walk-trot and short-stirrup. We'd practiced doing classes at home so she could get a feel of what the show ring would be like, and she was ready and excited. She had a perfect old pony, and when she went in for her first flat class, we had people stationed all around the ring to remind her to keep her heels down, change her diagonal, et cetera.

Well, the girl had ridden no further than the far end of the ring when she suddenly just threw herself off the pony, onto the ground, as hard as can be! The whole class came to a halt, and the pony just stood there staring at her. A team of people leaped over the fence and ran to her. I asked her, "What happened? Are you OK?"

She said, "Yes, I'm fine. But I looked around and thought, 'I've gotta bust out of this joint,' so I just got off." She calmly walked out of the ring and never rode again! It was the oddest, yet funniest, thing.

### A Not-So Clean Effort

In the summers, my teenaged nephew used to come and stay with me as a working student. One year, we went to the Bromont Equestrian Center in Canada to show. My nephew was leasing a jumper, and for the show ring, he loved to dress up and look very neat and tidy. The first day, we got up early and did the barn chores in our work clothes. My nephew would be riding in the first class, which was a classic for the juniors. The big Bromont field (where the Olympic show jumping took place in 1976) had just been manicured, and my nephew put on his nicest white breeches, coat and tie. He was the first entry to go, but when they sounded the horn at the in-gate to start the competition, my nephew's horse spooked, and he fell off. He landed on his rear end, smearing red clay all over his breeches. He still had one minute of allotted time to remount and start his round, so he did that and had a clear trip—ending up in second place overall. But I knew it was very psychologically painful for him, such a polished and proper young man, to ride that beautiful course with mud all over his breeches. I was filming him and laughing so hard that tears were running down

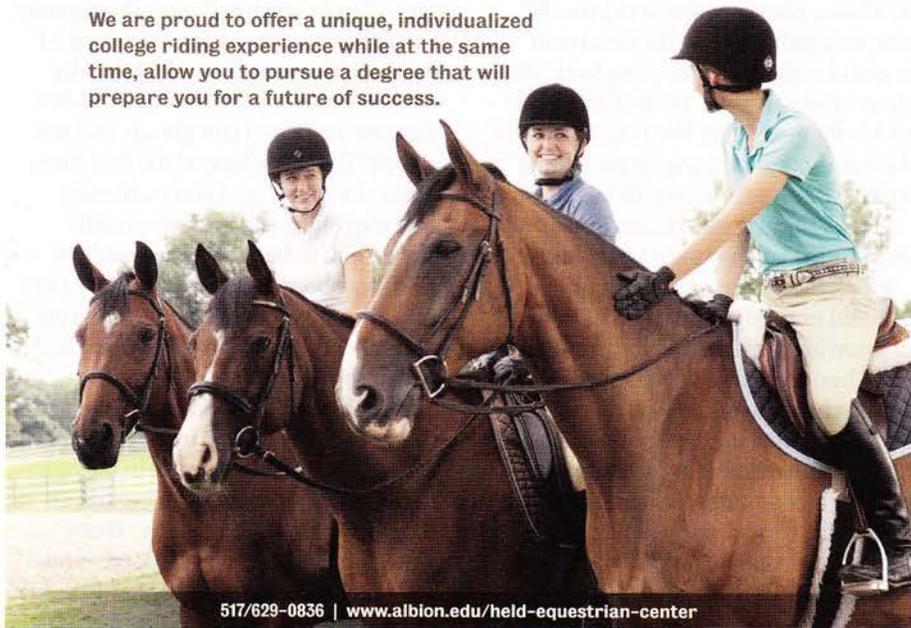


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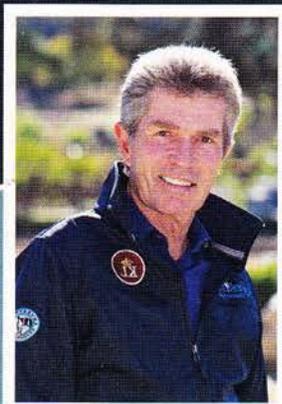


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my face because I knew how bruised his ego was. So, in the end, he went clean—but not *completely* clean, if you know what I mean.

### Doggone It

At a horse show one weekend, the dad of a pony kid went into the tack room to grab a cold drink and some food. We always keep an assortment of snacks on a table for everybody from our barn. The dad came out munching on something crunchy, with a frown on his face.

“Hey, I think these cookies have gone bad,” he said. “They taste kinda funny.”

I took the cellophane packet from him and noticed right away that he’d unknowingly grabbed a bag of dog treats. I told him so, and he was horrified! Adding insult to injury was the fact that there happened to be a whole bunch of us sitting on the aisle at that moment, so our laughter was uproarious. The embarrassed dad turned about six shades of pink, but eventually he had to laugh, too. We never let him forget that incident.

### Say That Again?

In the Maclay class at a very prestigious horse show, a student of a friend of mine laid down a flawless trip in her first round. I mean, she was winning by leaps and bounds. As the girl was waiting to enter the ring for the flat phase, my trainer friend advised her to drop her stirrups down one hole. Then he joined the rest of us in the stands to watch.

Well, it turned out the only words the girl heard from him were “drop your stirrups,” instead of “drop your stirrups *one hole*.” She even took it a step further and came in with the stirrups completely removed from her saddle. So right away, she went from being at the top of the class to not even being in contention. I’ll never forget the pained expression on my friend’s face as he helplessly watched his student riding around the ring as the only one without stirrups. She rode the flat phase beautifully, but of course it didn’t count, and afterward she was understandably upset. I guess that’s just a memorable example of how even the smallest bits of miscommunication can sometimes lead to devastating results.

### Heads Up, Everyone!

We had a hunter in our barn that was

a spook, especially when it came to rolltop jumps covered in AstroTurf. On his opening-day class at a big show, the course was set in a very large field. The horse went in and jumped the first fence, but right away he happened to spot a bright green rolltop at the opposite end of this enormous field. He stopped dead and threatened to rear. His rider circled him and came back around, but this time he reared straight up, and she slid off. The horse lapped the field three times at a gallop, including whizzing past the rolltop that had supposedly scared him so badly, then jumped the field’s low border fence—still at a flat-out run. He jumped into the schooling ring and galloped the length of it, wreaking havoc, then jumped out of *that* ring. Still at full speed, he ran down the road before turning to jump into yet another ring where a limit rider was in the middle of the best round of her life, as her trainer sadly told us later. That’s where our horse finally stopped—and the announcer said over the loudspeaker, “Well, I’ll bet *THAT* one’s for sale!” The only person from our barn who was not too ashamed to walk over and retrieve him was a young pony rider. But things eventually got better for that horse when a novice lady bought him, because she only jumps him over crossrails and low verticals.

### Fair-Weather Rider

A rather nervous and timid adult amateur student of mine was waiting her turn at the in-gate of the show ring. Above her, but behind her line of sight, black storm clouds were rapidly gathering, so I knew she had a very brief window of time to get her round done before the clouds broke open. I didn’t tell her about the approaching storm; I just said, “You have to go in now. Right now!” She went in, but as she was doing her circle, she looked up at the sky, then she yelled over at the judge, “Oh my God, honey, I can’t ride in this storm! I’ve got to go!” And she simply trotted out of the ring.

### Wardrobe Malfunction

One of our juniors was riding under saddle at a big show in an open-entry class called a hack-off. The purse was pretty big, so there were a lot of horses

in it. One by one, the judges would point to the horses they’d eliminated, and those horses would leave the ring. Ours was a very good mover, so we figured it had a decent shot to win. But before the class, the braider finished late, so we had to scramble to get the horse tacked up and over to the ring. As our rider was going around, it soon became clear that we should have made one more girth check, because the saddle pad was steadily inching backward. Every time our rider went by, we’d wave our arms to signal that she should stop and walk out. But she misunderstood and just waved back, grinning like, “Yeah! Don’t we look great?”

I think part of the reason the judges left her in was that they were just dying to see if that pad would finally come all the way off! They did end up pinning the horse second, but by then, the pad was completely loose and flapping on the horse’s butt. When our rider came out and realized what had happened, she was totally mortified—as any teenager would be.

### Dignity In Defeat

Many years ago at the USET Medal Finals (part of what is now the USEF Show Jumping Talent Search), there was a little-known rider who made it to the top four in the ride-off against an elite group of juniors. This girl rode the socks off everyone until almost the very end. She was nailing the course when all that remained was a single, then a five-stride to a triple. It was sunset, and when the rider came off the turn, a blinding ray of sun was reflecting off the plank single. The horse stopped and slid, tearing down the whole fence, and the girl ended up on its neck. But somehow she managed to regroup, jump the triple, and leave the ring. Clearly, she’d moved down to fourth from first.

The amazing thing was that as she came out, instead of crying or falling apart, she just said calmly to her trainer, “It’s OK; I just didn’t have enough leg.” It was such a poignant moment, and many people who overheard what she said were in tears. She never got another shot to win something that big. But to this day, that young rider’s display of grace and maturity represents every part of this sport that I love. 🍷