



JUNIOR
& PONY

Campers, Calgary And Crockpot Meals: Growing Up As A Trainer's Kid

What's it like to experience a youth that's virtually 24/7 horses? A trio of grown children of renowned professional horsemen share their stories.

BY ANNE LANG

Liza Towell Boyd has heard the tale of her first day on earth many times. On April 24, 1979, her very pregnant mother, Lisa Towell, was watching husband Jack shoe a horse. Blacksmithing was something the then-emerging trainer did for extra income during the couple's early years in North Carolina.

"Suddenly my mother said, 'Jack, my water just broke!' But my dad said: 'You'll have to wait just a minute; I've got to tack on this last shoe.' I was born that day, and the barn was the first place my dad stopped on the way home from the hospital," said Liza.

"He set me on top of a horse and held me there. So from the very beginning, he sort of had it planned out that I was going to be a rider," she said with a laugh. "I'm not sure I had a choice!"

But, of course, Liza did have a choice, and she decided to follow in the footsteps of her father, Jack Towell, 59, who has trained multiple national champions. Like Liza, Nick Dello Joio, 23, also followed his father, Norman Dello Joio, 55, an Olympic bronze medalist in show jumping and still a winning grand prix rider, into the horse business. And Molly Braswell, 18, is the daughter of Bobby Braswell, 53, whose riders have been winners at all of the major equestrian finals and garnered numerous titles at top shows.



Now one of the best riders on the show circuit, Liza Boyd started out riding and training with the help of her father, trainer Jack Towell, and mother, Lisa Towell—and still works with them today.

Nomadic Adventures

Today, Liza, 33, trains alongside her father and her brother, Hardin, at the family's Finally Farm in Camden, S.C. (with a winter base in Wellington, Fla.). But some of Liza's earliest memories trace back to a small black pony named Cash And Carry who taught her and her younger siblings, Hardin, 23, and Ned, 30, to ride.

"You could slide off of his tail and do anything on him," Liza said of the pony. "I don't think he did lead changes, but he was great, and he was safe. He would just pat the ground instead of taking long spots. I'd love to find a pony like him for my [3-year-old] daughter today."

In those early years, Liza, now one of the country's top hunter riders, said, "My mom actually taught me more riding than my dad did. She brought out the longe line, and we rode with no stirrups and hands up in the air. You know, all those balance lessons."

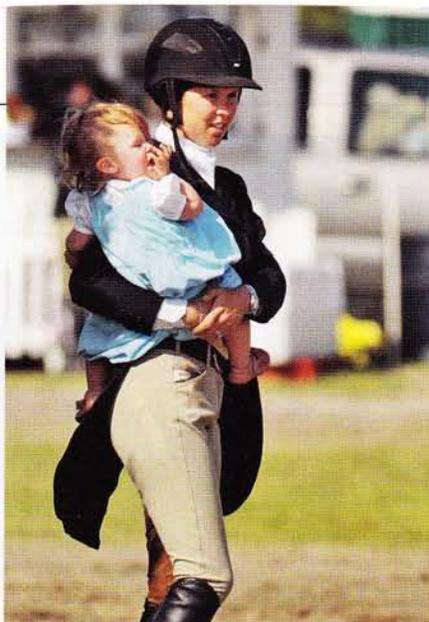
As Liza progressed through the pony, children's and junior ranks, she learned not only from her parents, but also from such highly acclaimed trainers as Ronnie Mutch (who had been her father's mentor), Tom Wright, Missy Clark and Chris Kappler, among others.

Liza's formative years often involved traveling from show to show in the family camper. Cooking family meals in the RV was sometimes hit-or-miss.

"We still laugh about my mom's frozen lasagnas that she would fix when we stayed in the camper," Liza said. "I didn't blame her; we'd come home late from a horse show, and it was easy to just put a frozen lasagna in the oven. But she'd always cut up some greens to serve with it, and she used the crockpot for a lot of our dinners."

"The RV was fun," added Liza, "but there wasn't much privacy, especially with five of us in there. And my bed was under the table, so even if I was sleepy, I couldn't get to it until everyone was done eating. I loved it when I got to spend the night with friends! But those were the early days. Eventually, we upgraded to a camper that had bunk beds in the back. And when I was in high school, we finally got out of the camper and would rent places to stay."

Liza especially enjoyed going to the Devon Horse Show (Pa.). "I mean, what



"Now that I'm a parent myself and look back, I think I took my parents for granted a lot," said Liza Boyd, shown with daughter Elle. (MOLLIE BAILEY PHOTO)

kid doesn't love Devon?" she said. "But I had a good time wherever we went. There was always a group of kids who were children of professionals. At Blowing Rock [N.C.], we'd go on trail rides through the mountains and eat blackberries in the woods."

She recalled that her birthday always coincided with the Aiken Horse Show (S.C.). "We'd have birthday cake and balloons back at the barn," she said. "At some shows, we'd stage people-jumping contests, which were really fun. Back then they didn't have those fancy miniature jumps that look like the real thing. We'd jump over chairs or anything we could build ourselves."

However, life wasn't always fun and games—especially when it came to school. Unlike the children of many trainers today, who attend on-site schools at the winter circuits, study with private tutors or take classes online, the Towell children attended public school in their hometown. Juggling schoolwork with so much time on the road was sometimes a challenge, as was maintaining any kind of social life or extracurricular activities.

"My mom did an excellent job of keeping a balance between school and horse shows," said Liza. "I went to prom, I did cotillion, I went to overnight camp. I wasn't able to do sports, but I really never felt like I missed out on that many activities. I tried out for cheerleading one time but



"Many times, I've been asked about the pressure or expectations of accomplishing what my dad has accomplished," said Nick Dello Joio. "I'm going to work as hard as I can to be as successful, and more so, if I can be." (MOLLY SORGE PHOTO)

decided it wasn't for me. And I don't remember missing that many days of school except when we were in Florida for the month of February, and I had a tutor there.

"I missed a little bit of school for indoors," Liza remembered, "but I didn't even miss that many Fridays. Horses are the second-biggest industry in Camden, so my principal really understood the situation, but the school still expected me to keep up with my work. I always came home from Florida ahead of everyone else because of the private tutoring, so it was never a problem. Of course, this was a long time ago, when there weren't as many horse shows as there are now."

A Healthy Balance

Mother Lisa Towell was adamant about making sure her family was home for big holidays like Christmas. "We were never on the road for that, and my family won't ever be, either!" Liza declared. "At some point, you have to say: 'OK, the barn needs to slow down, because it's family time.'"

Family time occurred at horse shows, as well: During off days on the road, Lisa Towell's love of history meant that her children visited museums and

toured historical sites. Every Fourth of July, the family would travel to the beach in Wilmington, N.C., where the children's grandmother rented a house.

"We also went to Europe, years ago," Liza said. "Sometimes those trips were a little bit horse-related, but we mainly toured and saw the countryside. We also went to Canada. My mom always tried to have a family trip planned."

At home between shows, the Towell children had a daily routine. "We had responsibilities," Liza explained. "After school we'd ride, then we'd clean our tack and do our homework."

Often, Jack would ask Liza to ride a pony or horse for prospective buyers. But she said she never felt nervous in those situations.

"Riding was what I enjoyed doing," Liza said. "I don't remember feeling any type of pressure at all. Looking back now, I'm surprised I didn't feel nervous, but sometimes the less you know as a child, the better. I never thought: 'Oh my gosh, someone's looking at this horse and there's money involved.' As a kid, you're not oriented to think that way. And my parents never put that type of pressure on us, or pressure about showing, either."

Liza said her mother never let her

know how many points she needed for a championship, or where she stood in the country. "She kept me extremely naïve on all of that," said Liza. "I'm really glad she did that. And when the show was over, she'd say: 'Now you go and congratulate the little girl who was champion.' That was a valuable lesson to learn."

Valuable lessons, her parents knew, could also be taught by other trainers. "My parents were teaching us the exact same things, but maybe in different words, so they really encouraged me to ride with other people," said Liza.

"Ronnie Mutch started helping me when I was on small ponies," she added, "and he became like a grandfather to us. The things he taught me when I was a pony kid, and then a junior hunter kid, were things that I teach now, every day. Missy Clark helped me as a junior, too, which was great, because it meant that I could go off to some of the horse shows by myself and gain a little independence. You learn a little bit from everybody, and then you eventually mold it into what works for you."

Liza admitted that she felt a bit of riding fatigue during one brief phase in middle school, "but never to the point where I wanted to quit riding. I remember thinking that I just wanted

to go home after school, or to someone else's house, and just hang out or go swimming, like everyone else. But I never got to do that because I had responsibilities. I had ponies to train and horses to ride."

She found salvation in a friend whose life outside school was equally specialized. "My best friend was a cellist," Liza said, "and she had to go home every day and practice the cello, so we had that connection in common. Having that friendship really helped. She went on to The Juilliard School [N.Y.], and music is now her career, and horses are now my career. So today we appreciate having had all that training, but at the time we kind of complained to each other."

Life After The Juniors

Like her musician friend, Liza went on to college, choosing the College of Charleston (S.C.). "I had taken a year off after my junior career, and then I went right into the professional ring [in 1998], which was a real eye-opener," she noted. "You go from sort of being the child rock star to being way down the totem pole again. So I was really ready to go to college. You feel like you're going to be forgotten, and you're going to miss so much at the horse shows. But Missy Clark told me: 'Liza, the horses will still be here. All the same people will still be here.' And she was right."

While Liza still made weekend trips home to ride and occasionally showed her jumper, she embraced the whole undergraduate experience.

"I really wanted to go to college and just be known as Liza Towell, not Liza Towell the horse person," Liza explained. "I joined a sorority and made some of my best lifelong friends. In the beginning, a lot of people didn't even know I rode horses. I just sort of set aside that part of my life and took those four years to do other things, meet new people and have different experiences.

"And I definitely learned some good people skills," she added. "I think you learn just as much from a variety of people as you do from a variety of animals."

After graduating in 2002 with a degree in psychology, Liza resumed her role as

a professional rider. "College was a great opportunity," she said, "but once the horses are in your blood, you can't stop."

In 2006, she married Blake Boyd, now an agent with EMO Horse & Farm Insurance. Their daughter, Elle, was born in 2009. She owns a miniature horse and competes in leadline. Blake often ships Liza's horses to shows and helps her set up, with Elle in tow.

"They're my best cheerleaders," Liza said, "but then Blake goes home with Elle during the week. So it's a little different than the way that I grew up. I was at the barn all day and night because both of my parents did the horses, so that was the way it had to be. With my own family, I try to say: 'OK, it's the end of the day, so we're going to talk about and do different things.' That's a little bit of a challenge, but it's been good."

Liza feels fortunate to have grown up as the child of professionals. "As a kid," she said, "I think you take a lot of things for granted, especially the things that are right in front of you all the time. It was all I knew. I

didn't realize how lucky I was, that there were many other children who would've loved to have the opportunities I had and still have. Now that I'm a parent myself and look back, I think I took my parents for granted a lot, too. I realize what a lot of time, energy, work and dedication it took.

"I also realize how lucky I am to have a ground professional like my dad around me, because there are a lot of young professionals who have to do it themselves," Liza said. "I'm so appreciative when he's there to help me, because he's really busy doing clinics, judging and training other people. He's one of the best horsemen I know, and I've learned so much from him."

Since she had the opportunity to learn from other professionals, Liza also feels she owes it to other professionals' children to help them. "I like giving back," she said. "A lot of young people are shy and maybe a little scared to approach top trainers, but they're surprisingly willing to help, more than you can imagine."

Quick Study

Nick Dello Joio grew up on a horse farm with a set of equestrian parents that included his renowned trainer dad. But he was 15 before he became interested in riding. (Nick's sister, Daniela, now 24, showed as a pony rider but didn't pursue the sport in later years.)

While attending private high school in Boca Raton, Fla., Nick enjoyed roller-hockey, golf, surfing, tennis, lacrosse, football, soccer, scuba-diving and fishing.

"I liked to watch [horse sports] here and there, but I was typically preoccupied with other sports," said Nick, who now competes around the world and helps his parents run their Wembley Farm in Wellington.

The turning point for Nick occurred in 2005, while he was traveling with his father, who was showing in the Netherlands. Nick simply decided one day to give riding a try (having only ridden casually on a few occasions in the past), and Norman was all too happy to oblige. He asked friends Nelson and Rodrigo Pessoa to give Nick a lesson on one of their mares, Radieuse. That lesson took place at a rather daunting venue for a novice rider: the Valkenswaard Grand Prix field.

"We jumped around some of the five-star course that had just finished," Nick explained, "but set as crossrails." The experience helped Nick decide to pursue riding, and he exhibited a natural talent right away.

"I contribute my rapid progress to a lot of learning done by watching," he said, "and to great training from my parents."

Back in the United States, Nick began showing Radieuse in schooling jumper and children's jumper classes. He continued playing several of his other sports but dropped all of his school team commitments in order to make room for riding.

By the following summer, Nick found himself competing in the high junior jumpers at Spruce Meadows (Alberta). ("I just tagged along wherever our barn went," said Nick.) That same year, he also trained with Missy Clark and qualified for all of the 2006 major equitation finals.

"I was very fortunate to have had Missy Clark and John Brennan take me under their wings," Nick declared. "I learned a lot from both of them and had such a good time. Frankly, I wasn't in the position to be a 'contender' for them, being that it was

literally the start of my riding. But as I said, I learned a lot, and I'm very grateful."

Before he began riding, Nick usually didn't travel to shows with his father during the school year. Instead, he remained at home with his sister and his mother, Jeanie. "My mom was never at the shows," Nick recalled. "I wasn't forced to travel like a lot of other horse-show families. We lived in Wellington; we had our life and our house down in the [Florida] Keys that we would always go to.

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—NICK DELLO JOIO

"Dad would be in and out," Nick continued, "depending on what was on his plate. I really feel fortunate not to have to grow up on the road. My parents made very sure it was never like that for my sister and me."

If Nick someday becomes a husband and a father himself, he said, "I would

make sure my kids are raised the way I was raised, as far as not being on the road. I feel it's very important to have the balance of an outside life with your obligations in the horse show world. That seems to be the hardest thing for people to do."

An Inner Drive

Of course, Nick's life shifted a bit when he began showing. "When I started riding," he said, "I just had to manage my classes and my time so that I was able to be where I needed to be. Luckily all of my schools were very understanding of my commitment."

A regular summer highlight for Nick was showing in Canada, where the family rented a house instead of staying in a hotel (or in a camper, as they had done in Nick's younger years). "I loved going to Calgary as a kid," he said, "because it's a great circuit where everyone becomes very close for five weeks and has a great time."

However, he added, "I didn't really know that many kids from the shows at all. Some family friends' children and I played together as young kids, but growing up and to this day, most of my close friends are still from outside the shows. And I don't get to see them as much as I would like to."

Even before he started riding, Nick was a young entrepreneur at the summer shows. "I used to sell carrots and make an absolute killing," he revealed. "I guess I played the young-and-cute card and would sell them for a dollar apiece. That was usually the highlight of my show-going days as a kid."

Nick's newfound passion transcended time in the saddle. "For me," he said, "it was never an option not to be involved with every aspect in the barn. Learning became easy just by being there to watch and help. A lot of kids these days don't want to learn. But at the end of the day, you can tell the difference in the ones who do and the ones who don't, and frankly, the ones who do will be the ones leading our sport in the future."

Nick appreciates the benefits of riding so many different horses, ranging from super-green to super-made. "Being the son of a pro means you ride a ton of different rides," he said, "but in the end, it's the best thing for you. It will teach you to ride any type of horse. Also,

being the child of a trainer is fantastic because you can never really fall off track with your riding without it being seen immediately. And you have the constant discussion and learning on a day-to-day basis rather than on a lesson-to-lesson basis."

While riding, showing and training horses with Norman consumes much of his daily life, Nick is also working part time toward a college degree at Florida International University in Miami. But he views college as a steppingstone to a continued career in the equestrian world.

"My goal is to stay in the business and to compete at top international competitions, such as the Olympics," he said, "and to run a successful business. Many times, I've been asked about the pressure or expectations of accomplishing what my dad has accomplished. I'm going to work as hard as I can to be as successful, and more so, if I can be.

"I would love to compete on teams with my dad in the future," Nick added, "but if we don't, I enjoy him being there to help me just as much."

Loving The Life

Molly Braswell gives a candid answer when asked if there are aspects of being a trainer's child that she doesn't like.

"Having to share my father and his attention with many other students!" admitted the daughter of Bobby Braswell, who trains out of his Terrapin Hill Farm in Ocala, Fla. Despite not having Bobby all to herself, Molly, who is wrapping up her senior year as a home-schooled student, became a standout in the national equitation ranks. And it all started on her first mount, a pony named Pooh Bear.

"He was ancient when he came to me," Molly said, "but he was very special. He sparked my love for riding." That spark may have been genetic as well, since mother Anne is a judge and former star hunter rider.

Molly attended public school through the fifth grade. An only child, she and her mother would meet Bobby at the shows on weekends. But as Molly's riding and showing advanced, her parents switched her to a home-school

program, which fit the family's increasingly mobile lifestyle. As a result, Molly says, "Most of my close friends while growing up were from horse shows."

Between horse shows, Molly and Anne would engage in their mutual retail hobby. "My mother and I are shopaholics," Molly confessed. "We would always find shopping wherever we were. Or, when we were in Washington [D.C.], my mother and I would go to the National Gallery of Art. And as a family vacation in the April off-season, we would travel to Vail [Colo.] to enjoy some spring skiing." Those vacations were offset by beach trips in the summer, and one time, a barge trip in France.

But when it came time to train, Molly was all business. She says she never went through a phase where she wanted to quit riding or even cut back. "I was lucky to have access to many nice ponies and horses to ride," Molly acknowledged. "I have to say, I took it for granted, because it's what we do. But I was reminded daily how lucky I was.

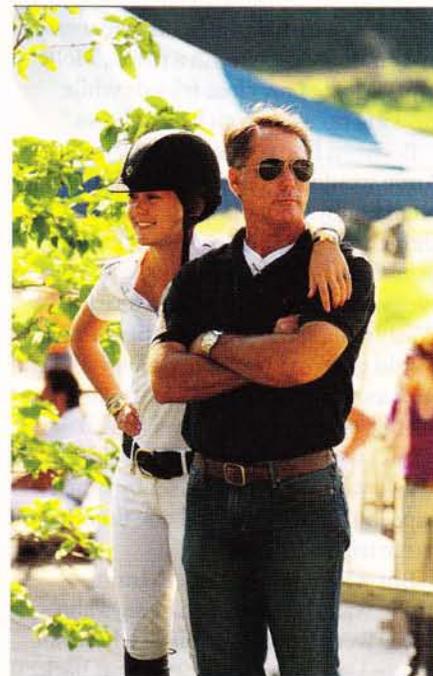
"I was reminded daily how lucky I was."

—MOLLY BRASWELL

And there's no question that the more you practice, the better you get."

Sometimes Molly trained with Bobby, sometimes with Terrapin Hill Farm assistant trainer Courtney de Hechavarria and sometimes with outside trainers, such as Missy Clark. "I always wanted to please my dad," Molly explained, "and I know he always wants the best for me, but sometimes it could get too personal. [Occasionally] I needed another voice."

Molly jokingly lists a few of her father's rules for life, which include: "All men are pigs; if you're a teenager and your lips are moving, you're lying; and never leave out



Molly Braswell has enjoyed the benefits of being immersed in the horse show world with her father, Bobby Braswell. "I was reminded daily how lucky I was," she recalled.

(DAVID MULLINIX PHOTO)

[strides] to the combination." More seriously, Molly says her parents raised her to always tell the truth.

One of the best things about being the child of a professional was that "I always felt very comfortable at horse shows and at the barn," Molly said. She also appreciates having knowledge of horses from the ground up.

"Maybe I'm not the best stall cleaner," she admitted, "but I definitely know what thrush smells like. Many kids rely on grooms to do all the horse care, and they are missing out on a huge part of horsemanship."

Lately, Molly has cut back on showing to focus on schoolwork, although she still rides three horses a day. She sees herself at a crossroads: not yet sure if she wants to attend college next year, or start riding full time, or do something else.

"I know horses will always be a part of my life," Molly predicted, "but at this moment, I'm not completely sure what the future has in store for me. There are so many options; we'll see what the future brings." 🐾