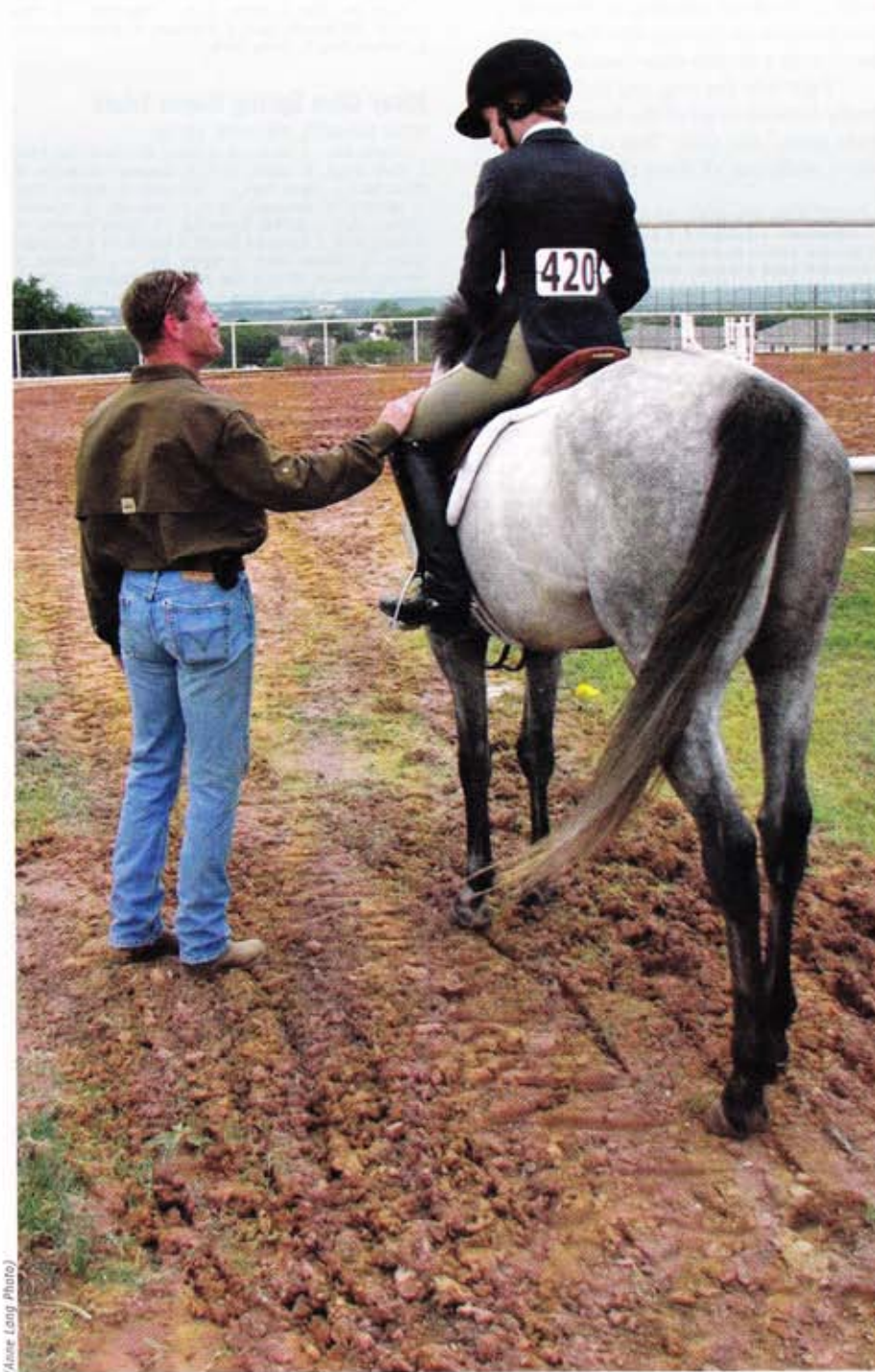




A Father's Day Tribute To Horse Show Dads Everywhere

One grown-up daughter fondly reflects on a father's role in a child's riding life—and observes how little has changed a generation later.

Anne Wakeman Lang



(Anne Lang Photo)

ONE OF MY DEEPEST REGRETS in life dates back 34 years to a horse-related event involving my father. It was 1975, and I was wrapping up my sophomore year at a Midwestern women's college, with plans to transfer to a larger university in the fall.

My parents had come to watch me ride in the big year-end horse show—a glitzy, nighttime affair held in the school's indoor arena, with everyone (spectators and exhibitors alike) dressed to the nines.

That night, I was lucky enough to win the formal hunter hack class aboard a handsome gray gelding named Trackman. To present the trophy, the college president and several regents were on hand—lined up on a strip of red carpet, looking properly dignified in tuxedos and gowns.

Before posing for pictures, I was handed a giant blue ribbon, a bouquet of roses and an enormous silver platter. I recall wondering just how the heck I would manage to juggle all those items while leading the expected victory gallop on a rambunctious Thoroughbred.

The next time you spot your dad waving to you from the rail after you've won a class, seize the moment and hand him the trophy.

Photos finished, I turned Trackman toward the rail. There, right in front of me, was my delighted father—leaning over the arena wall and applauding more loudly than anyone (even whistling, I think).

Now, the noble thing to do would have been to ride right up to him, unload my prizes in his arms and give him a quick hug. The obvious message, for all to see: "Thanks, Dad, for supporting my horse habit for the past 15 years. And for everything else, too."

Rarely does anyone get the chance to honor a parent so publicly. My dad's heart would have soared with pride.

So, why didn't I do the right thing? Why, instead, did I just smile vaguely in my father's direction and canter off—fumbling to keep my grip on the platter, the flowers, the ribbon and a set of double reins?

That's a question I still cannot answer, and the split-second choice I made on that night saddens me to this day—especially since it turned out that my father would only grace this earth for seven more years.

Today, as a parent myself, I'm utterly amazed when I analyze an even earlier

Dads play a huge but often overlooked role in the horse show world.



memory of my dad. I was 13, and had fallen off a runaway pony while stupidly jumping with no tack or helmet (supervised only by an equally irresponsible friend).

The naughty pony had made a beeline for a nearby road, where he thoughtlessly dumped silly me onto the asphalt. Naturally, I banged my head pretty hard upon landing. My father, coming to pick me up that day, turned down the road just in time to see me lying on a stretcher. Paramedics were loading me into an ambulance while my guilt-stricken friend stood by.

Why does this memory amaze me?

Because even after such a jolting scare, followed by a weeklong hospital stay for my fractured skull, my dad (and more reluctant mom) not only let me ride again upon doctor's clearance three months later, he also bought me my first horse right then. Frankly, I'm not sure I could have been so forgiving and brave for my own daughter, who inherited my equestrian gene and has ridden all her life.

Other memories of my dad's part in my riding history are of a lighter variety—like the incredibly bad pictures he used to take at horse shows! There were countless snapshots of empty jumps because my horse hadn't even entered the frame yet, or flat-class images of only a rump and tail going by in a blur—no rider.

But I don't have a single memory of my father griping about the cost of horse shoes, horse shows or horse stuff in general—all the accoutrements and activities attached to our sport that can end up costing a small fortune.

Private lessons, vet bills, new saddles, shipping fees, sale commissions—Dad would just gamely write the checks. I did sometimes hear him jokingly lament to his friends about how his daughter was more interested in horses than in boys, which I admit was quite true until later in my life. Yet I never heard him complain for real.

► The Torch Is Passed

Two decades later, my husband took on the role of horse show dad to our oldest daughter—a part for which he never willingly auditioned, but grudgingly came to accept as inevitable. And bless him, because like my dad, he also was a (relatively) good-natured writer of large equine-related checks, and a tireless ringside cheerleader.

In the early years, when terms such as "swapped leads," "chipped in" or "handy hunter" sounded like a foreign language to him, my husband determinedly strove to find an amiable niche for himself at our daughter's lessons and shows. He usually ended up hanging out with other dads in

the stands or in the tack room, where they could slip into the much more familiar conversational territory of football scores or stock market trends.

No doubt there are horse show dads who, while enormously proud of their offspring's riding achievements, might secretly wish that their children played mainstream team sports, the rules of which generally make a lot more sense to the average male.

Some riders *do* play such sports, of course, but it seems to be the exception rather than the norm. Now that our college-age daughter rides on a varsity equestrian team in a realm that's largely governed by NCAA rules, I've seen a marked rise in enthusiasm from my husband, because this is the closest he's ever come to finding his comfort zone in the strange and complicated world of horse sports.

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At regular circuit shows, other dads may find their own comfort zones by volunteering to pick up meals, operate the camcorder, tip the grooms, etc. There's definitely a special place in heaven for these placidly patient fathers, who, unlike the majority of their counterparts, those very hands-on horse show moms, often hover on the far outer fringe of the action, no matter how much they might inwardly desire to be more involved.

Of course, attempts at such involvement can be tricky, as we've all serenely observed at one time or another. There's the dad who's called upon to temporarily hold his child's show horse, standing there gingerly clasping the very tip of the reins while the liberated animal gobbles forbidden grass.

The dad who mistakenly starts whooping before a jumping round is over, totally mortifying his kid. The dad who loudly snaps open a folding chair as a hunter approaches a nearby oxer, inadvertently triggering a violent spook. Or the dad who innocently follows the trainer right up to the in-gate as his child enters the show ring, obliviously chattering on about random subjects as the child is navigating her course.

I vividly remember one of my first horse shows with my friend Ruthie, the

summer when we were both 8. Mounted on our ponies, wearing dark woolen hunt coats under an unusually hot Michigan sun, Ruthie and I had to wait an interminable amount of time for an equitation class that kept getting delayed.

In sympathy, Ruthie's dad kept bringing her Cokes to drink, which she gratefully accepted, chugging down every one of them. Well, you can guess what finally happened: Ruthie spectacularly vomited just a few feet away from the judge, who had chosen that precise moment to finally show up at the ring. Ruthie's dad was understandably chagrined.

But we do so adore him, this particular type of horse show father (and indeed *all* types, including the fully knowledgeable ones) because everything he does is motivated by the very best of intentions. How can we possibly fault that?

So girls and boys, ladies and gentlemen: The next time you spot your dad waving to you from the rail after you've won a class, seize the moment and hand him the trophy, or at least blow him a kiss. You don't even have to wait until Father's Day to do it. And trust me, you'll both remember the moment forever. 🐾



A Much-Needed Improvement

Kudos to the U.S. Equestrian Federation and the new High Performance Eventing Owners Task Force ("Should The Event Horse Ownership Model Change?" April 10, p. 14). We are so fortunate in this country to have such an organization with the foresight and the insight as the USEF.

As a former owner of high performance horses who had a negative experience, this task force is a much-needed segment of our three-day eventing world. The task force can vet out the ability, honesty and integrity of the riders, removing that obstacle for the owners.

Would I be an advanced horse owner again? You bet, under the auspices of the USEF High Performance Eventing Owners Task Force.

*Sally Lilly
Prospect, Ky.*

What About Pony Club?

I think Susie Schoellkopf's Between Rounds article "Think 'We' Not 'I' To Succeed In This World," (April 10, p. 46) was excellent but sad.

How about Pony Club?

One healthy way to get back to basics and hard work.

*Bubbles Moore
Media, Pa.*

Appreciates Wofford's Wisdom

I'm writing to commend the Rolex Kentucky Preview (April 17) article by James C. Wofford "It Could Be Dutton's Year Again" (p. 14). I'm not a keen follower of eventing, but I couldn't stop reading this article for its incisiveness, wit, and multiple lessons in horsemanship.

Paired with the photos, I read slowly, fearing to miss a bit of his wisdom and

beautifully phrased observations. I thank the author for this gift shared with the readers of his years of experience and reflections on the sport. It's timeless in its usefulness.

*Sue Ellen Marder O'Connor
Southampton, N.Y.*

A Breath Of Fresh Air

What a delight and pleasure it was to see the "Guess Who?" pictures in the May 22 issue (p. 40). It was like a breath of fresh air to see young riders who were actually *riding* their horses.

What a comparison it made with today's youth, who, although impeccably turned out, always look like they are mere passengers, lying on their horses' necks with their hands in handcuffs.

To see the straight line from rider's hand to the horse's mouth—a sight rarely seen nowadays! Except for eventers, of course, after all, they need to be in control of their mounts.

There are many lessons to be learned here.

*Dorothy Little
San Diego, Calif.*

We're Killing The Sport We Love

Eventing is in serious trouble, in case anyone hasn't noticed. I attended Jersey Fresh as a spectator and watched another brave, good horse die (May 22, p. 94).

It's almost now the exception at an FEI-level event if all of the horses go home.

I saw my first three-day at Ledyard (Mass.) in 1976, which hooked me on the sport. For more than 25 years I was an avid eventer and even served as chairman of Area 1 in the mid '90s. Accidents

happened, but fatal accidents used to be the rare exception.

For the past few years, as I've watched more and more horses and/or riders die, I've followed the debate and asked a lot of questions about what has gone wrong. While some falls are clearly rider error, there's obviously also something wrong with what we are asking our horses to do at the higher levels.

While watching at Jersey Fresh, I was struck by how much cross-country now looks like a series of sprints across twisty terrain with riders pulling up to almost show jump a series of technical jumps.

When the three-day included roads and tracks, the additional element brought enough into the overall competition that cross-country needed to be not much more than a test of bold horses galloping to big fences.

Today's courses with the beautifully built jumps are technically challenging, easier to watch, cheaper to run—and killing the very sport we love.

*Hope Greenfield
Califon, N.J.*

Happy Father's Day!

I'm among the many who can vividly relate to what Anne Wakeman Lang described in her article "A Father's Day Tribute To Horse Show Dads Everywhere" (June 12, p. 58).

Flash back 25 years to my father, who was equal parts chauffeur, groom, counselor, mechanic, cheerleader, organizer, moving man, jump crew, braid remover, tack cleaner, boot wiper, and eventually, yes, even trainer!

We primarily went to one-day shows without stabling, which meant my father spent a lot of time hand-grazing or otherwise keeping an eye on the horse (rain or shine) while I was off to seek out friends.

At the end of the day when I was tired and spent and I know he was too, he would cheerfully relieve me from unloading and cleaning duties. He lovingly rebuilt our used trailer and kept it meticulously clean and even waxed.

His involvement went beyond horse shows. Eventually, he became co-DC of our Pony Club (Brush Run) where he helped run our one-week summer camp at which he was essentially dad to many.

So to you and all of the other dads who made the horse show life possible financially and logistically, Happy Father's Day!

*Cortney Martin
Blacksburg, Va.*



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