



Pony stars on parallel paths into the junior ranks.

by Pam Maley & Jackie McFarland • photos by McCool Photography

Boldly galloping into the world of Junior Hunters, Augusta Iwasaki, 12, and Lexie Looker, 16, have taken the leap into horses with the same dedication and determination that earned them tremendous success in the pony ring.



During the Blenheim Spring Series in San Juan Capistrano, each posted big wins in both divisions. Still performing on ponies with gusto, they are also enthusiastic to compete on horses with bigger courses, earning top calls in the Small Juniors as well as the Large Juniors. Both girls have embraced the transition with their eyes on the prize, seemingly not nervous about how many hands high their saddle sits or how many inches higher the jumps may be.

The contest for the Blenheim EquiSports Romfh Equestrian Apparel Leading Rider honors in the Junior Hunter division was neck and neck between these two young talents. They battled it out all the way through the final day of competition, when Augusta edged out Lexie for the top honors.

In the pony world, Lexie took the WCHR Week of the series by storm, earning the SmartPak Grand Pony Hunter Championship on her large pony Centerfield's 13th birthday. The two tend to trade top ribbons in the Large division, while Augusta is still of the age and size to compete in the Small, Medium and Large Pony divisions. Also named Leading Pony Hunter Rider of the Spring Series, the pre-teen was thrilled to be recognized at the end of the four weeks.

Horses and Life

Both girls started in the saddle at a young age, which certainly helps in advancing through the ranks. Riding has always been a family affair, each with an active and knowledgeable horse show mom, so their passion for the horses and ponies is a part of daily life. Liz Reilly, Augusta's mom, is co-owner and head trainer at Makoto Farms in Agoura Hills. Tonia-Cook Looker, a competitive amateur rider, owns Woodland Oaks Ranch in San Dimas, where all of the Looker horses reside.

When asked what was the best advice her mom has given about horse showing, Lexie was full of praise. "My mom is my number one supporter when it comes to horseback riding. She has always encouraged me to try my best, never give up and have fun. Her advice, in my opinion, is very important not only with riding, but in many other situations and sports as well."

For Augusta, it was encouragement when things haven't gone well. She says her mom reminds her, "There is always another horse show." Short but succinct words explaining that you need to

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look ahead and not behind when having an off day. After a few years of working on ponies and now horses together, Augusta and Liz spend valuable time at home focusing on what may have gone wrong in the show ring.

Young equestrians have to learn early on to strike a balance between horses and academics. With show time away from home and afternoons spent at the barn, it becomes an increasingly important balancing act as they get older. Having been on the road for several years, Augusta has already honed the skills of making time for homework among the hours of barn life.

Lexie, now well into high school, has a solid plan. “Academics have always been one of my biggest priorities. I am planning on finishing high school one year early, so I am very dedicated to completing my school work,” she explained.

One of the benefits of being a horse show kid is the extra set of friends gained over the seasons. Along with riding, Augusta really looks forward to seeing her horsey friends at the barn and at the shows. Lexie, too, has garnered a host of good friends, but also loves spending time with the conglomeration of animals at her barn, including turtles, fish, a miniature Brahma bull, Pygmy goats, miniature pigs, donkeys and miniature horses.

Looking Back and Jumping Ahead





As experienced pony riders who soon will also be veterans in the Junior arena, we asked the girls what advice they would give to up-and-coming riders. Augusta told us that, “Looking back, when I had a not-so-great show, I realize now that it’s part of learning.” And for Lexie, “The most important advice I have to offer is to never give up. Although horseback riding, whether you’re on a pony or a horse, can be very challenging, it is a very rewarding sport as well.”

Never giving up is another way of saying riding takes commitment and hard work. Although both of these California girls are lucky to have these opportunities, they are often up early and on a horse before most kids have had breakfast. With a focus on horse shows and not camps or vacations on the beach, both are ready to excel in the summer.

Goals for each include the Zone 10 Pony Challenge in June and the USEF Junior Hunter Finals West Coast Championships at Showpark in July. And when school kicks back into gear for the 2016/2017 year, these two will be back to the balancing act as they both have plans to head East for Indoors. Having been to the East Coast on ponies, this year Augusta and Lexie plan to compete in the Junior Hunter division.

We asked their mothers to weigh in about what it’s like to shepherd their talented young daughters through the ponies and into the juniors.

“Lexie takes it all in stride,” Tonia Cook-Looker noted. “She still loves the pony ring as much as any other. We have a great set-up at home and we both enjoy working with a variety of trainers at the horse shows. I think getting coached by several trainers has helped Lexie a lot when it comes to transition.”

That list of trainers includes Mark Bone, Jamie Taylor, Rose Carver and Don Stewart.

“Gussie is one of those kids who loves a challenge,” Liz Reilly explained. “She doesn’t get nervous, she just gets in a zone, that place where all she focuses on is what is happening underneath her. Horses and ponies love that, and go really well for her. She is in many ways beyond her years with that skill. It’s made the transition to bigger jumps less nerve-wracking for me!”

Not only do they avidly support their daughters, Liz and Tonia are also friends and support each other. While the girls often compete in the same class, the moms collaborate and offer help at and beyond the back gate.

These girls have a deep love for horses and ponies, and an innate ability to bond with them. Add to that an abundance of natural talent, an affinity for competition, and a determination to win, and you have the makings of a champion in any arena. These talented young girls are ones to watch in the coming years, as they continue to pursue the top call from coast to coast.