

At-home horse keepers and breeders win big on the A circuit, but draw biggest joy from the journey.

by Kim F. Miller



Wyatt Laughlin is the odd man out. His sisters, Keely and Dalan, and his parents, Donelle and Peter, all ride and the girls keep, care for, train and ride their horses, some of them homebreds, at their home barn.

Wyatt is a freshman studying business at UC Berkeley. He loves surfing, water polo and other sports, but he didn't inherit that equine gene. Yet he'll pick up a pitchfork, help load a horse or saddle up for family time on the trail or a nearby beach when needed. The fact that a cool, young guy will do that is one of several indicators that this family is doing something right.

"They're just awesome kids," says the girls' first trainer Toni Venza. And she says it repeatedly, amidst adjectives echoed by others. Hard-working, horse-centric, humble, down-to-earth, competitive, talented, self-sufficient and great students are common descriptions of these up-and-coming equestrians.

The girls know first-hand that the privilege of horse ownership comes with responsibilities. During the school year, the Laughlins have help with their horses in the morning, but afternoons and evenings are balanced between rigorous high school studies and stall mucking, schooling and caring for their horses. The life includes breaks from AP Statistics spent nuzzling a warm muzzle in a cozy stall. It also includes any-hour emergencies in which the girls are first

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responders. They're well versed in basic veterinary care and what to do until the vet can get out to their Gentry Hill Farm in the Monterey area's Carmel Valley.

Saying that horses have taught her responsibility is "probably a typical answer," acknowledges 16-year-old Dalan. "However, I have realized how important it really is. From a young age, I have dealt with such fragile and valuable horses. These horses needed to be cared for properly and if I failed to do so there would be major consequences. Also, just things like packing up the horse trailer. If I fail to remember tack, feed or anything, I would have to make the most of my situation."

Along with providing most of their horses' care and pursuing ambitious academic tracks, Dalan and Keely are making their mark on the A hunter/jumper circuit. Fourteen-year-old Keely's most recent victory was the NorCal 3' Medal Final last fall. She won it on the family's homebred GHF Hyde Park, a 7-year-old by Hunter (W2 Holsteiners) and out of Donelle's retired eventing mare, If You Prefer, a Dutch/Argentinian Thoroughbred. Donelle started Hyde Park and Keely took over the ride when the Holsteiner was 5. Dalan had good finishes in the regional medal finals and continues steady progress in the higher jumper divisions.

The Mothership



Donelle brought the horse gene to the family. She grew up in Newport Beach, playing with Breyer models and pining for a real horse. As a teenager, the upside of her parents' divorce was a move to Palos Verdes, where she was able to pursue an equestrian path that led to World Championships-level Western Pleasure successes under top trainers including Larry Gimple and Frank and Cindy Craighead.

During college at UC Davis, Donelle first sat in an english saddle while trying polo. She went on to play for the Aggies in national collegiate competition and later as a pro. Donelle met her husband, Peter, through his sister Kirsten Strain, a UC Davis polo squad teammate. Peter wasn't a horse guy then, but he converted. He now plays polo internationally and is fully engaged in the girls' equestrian endeavors.

During medical school and residency, Donelle kept a few young polo ponies at her mother, Faye Campbell's, house, riding casually whenever she could. She established her first practice, as an OB/GYN, in the Paso Robles area, where she was introduced to eventing. "I was always horse crazy and I hadn't tried jumping, so I thought, why not?" she recalls. "It was pure adrenaline fun!" A relocation to Carmel three years later made it logistically difficult to get in cross-country schooling and that's when she turned to the jumper ring.

Like Paso Robles, Carmel's rural nature allows Donelle to keep horses at home and be close to work. "I deliver babies and I have to be able to drop everything and get to the hospital in 20 minutes," she explains. Gentry Hill Farms sits on five-plus acres and features an arena and pastures. It has easy access to 500 acres of coastal mountain trails and it's just a mile from the beach.

As with her approach to other disciplines, Donelle went all in for jumping. She's a naturally gifted rider who just needed more technical skills for the jumper ring, recalls trainer Tracy Cotchett. Tracy worked with Donelle and Keely at their home stable for about five years, always emphasizing that jumping is "just flatwork with speed bumps."

In 2012, Donelle earned a berth on the NorCal 1.2M team for Spruce Meadows, in Calgary, Canada. There, she made it to the final four with the Holsteiner, Ready To Rumble, bred by Kirsten and developed by Donelle from the age of six months.

Around the same time, Dalan and Keely were poised for big jumps in their own riding. "It became a bit too much trying to coordinate all three of us," Donelle explains. She reined in her show goals to support the girls', yet continues to ride and develop the family's young horses at home.

In her "free time," Donelle drives the family's six-horse rig. She hauls to shows, where Dalan

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and Keely meet up with their respective trainers. And she makes the periodic treks to Sacramento for Dalan to work with the Leone Equestrian team, and to Petaluma, where Keely lessons with Nina and Mariano Alario at Estancia Farms.

Even without showing herself, Donelle maintains an awe-inducing working mom schedule. “I recall being in a middle of a lesson and Donelle getting a phone call from the hospital about one of her patients,” Tracy recalls. “She’d ask, ‘How far along is she?’ then say, ‘OK, I can ride another 15 minutes.’ She’d go deliver the baby and come back and get on another horse.”

It was a fun, fast-paced lifestyle that required a “go with the flow” approach, Tracy says fondly of her time working with the Laughlins.

Keely

GHF Hyde Park appeared one morning when Keely was in third grade. “He was a month early,” she recalls. “We were super surprised that morning when we woke up and there were two horses where there had been just one.” From astride her pony, Keely watched her mom put “Hippo” through his first under-saddle paces, then progress steadily. He was unusually mature by 5, and with Donelle confident of his safety, Hippo became Keely’s first horse.

“It’s been really fun for me to see him grow up and a good riding experience to help teach him how to do things correctly.” With guidance from Tracy, Keely taught her future equitation star lead changes and, over time, the more sophisticated maneuvers needed for the discipline’s various challenges.

Riding as a family is great, Keely reports. Just 18 months apart in age, she and Dalan go for it when competing against each other in jumper classes, but never at the expense of their relationship and shared fun. “We’re always happy for each other and we’re never mad at each other, win or lose,” Keely explains. “Being close in age, we share a lot of the same friends and we like hanging out together.”

Shared riding time at home involves swapped observations, suggestions and opinions, but

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actual coaching is left to the coaches. “We like to critique each other, but it’s more of a collegial effort,” Donelle notes.



The extended family includes Aunt Kirsten, the liaison to Keely’s current trainers at Estancia Farms, with whom she’s been training for the last year. Keely camps out with Kirsten in Petaluma when working with Nina on equitation and Mariano for jumpers. “They have both helped me tremendously and taught me a lot of more technical things about riding.”

Keely’s success with horses builds on her success with ponies. In 2012, she won the USEF Pony Finals Individual Jumper Championship and the NorCal Pony Finals. “Keely is a natural talent and a hard worker,” Tracy reports. “She’s one of those kids who always wants to know how many horses she can ride in one day.”

“She is super committed,” adds Nina. “It’s a seven hour drive, round trip, to come for lessons with us, and Keely makes the most of it. She always wants to push herself and it’s clear she works hard on everything when she’s at home.” She’s a sweetheart, too. “She’s kind and considerate to everybody, and although she’s quiet, she has a wit and humor that seems to come out of nowhere!”

Dalan

Last-minute lamenesses and horse swaps before equitation finals over the last few years were frustrating, Donelle shares, but Dalan has only positives to point out. She is targeting a 7-year-old Argentinian import, Refugio Latino, for the 3’3’ medals and continuing steady, upward progress in the jumper ring.

“Fufi” arrived doing the 1.2M jumpers, but “he just looked the part of an equitation horse,” Dalan says. “He has a very relaxed way of going. I think he likes going for an elegant round, rather than running around in the jumpers.” Counter canter and stride adjustments top Dalan’s current lesson plan for the youngster.

In the jumper ring, Dalan had solid success aboard Ready To Rumble, Carl Casim (leased from Peyton Warren), and before that, with Orchidee, a mare Donelle campaigned earlier and who is now in foal to the Holsteiner, Capone. Her next jumper is unknown at moment, but their eventual plans are likely to be ambitious.

Living with her horses and sharing a range of experiences with them is the ultimate luxury, says Dalan. “I think they trust me more and our bond is greater because we spend so much time together.” Trail and beach rides also help make “steady Eddys” of their horses come show time.

Leone Equestrian trainer Jill Humphrey sees the many upsides to at-home horsekeeping. “Dalan knows her horses from the inside out, so she can anticipate what to expect of them. For example, when to show them a particular jump before starting the course.”

As a rider, Jill describes Dalan as a balance of “lovely form, effective riding and bravery.” But it’s her personality the trainer praises most. “She’s so sweet -- always thankful for what she has and what she gets to do and to all of us. She’s compassionate toward her horses and toward everyone she comes across. She jumps right in whenever anybody needs help, whether it’s cleaning a stall, showing a for-sale horse or setting a jump.”

Dalan is also a JustWorld International ambassador and hopes to keep up with high school activities including a fashion club and track and field.

Babies Galore

Donelle realized her passion for young horses during her polo years. She adapted several off-the-track Thoroughbreds to the sport, and bred some of her own ponies. “I spent a lot of time with 2- to 4-year olds, giving them a new career,” she explains. “I guess it’s like with kids: you

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feel very accomplished when they listen to you and learn something.”

She and her sister-in-law, Kirsten, have partnered in a handful of youngsters over the years. “It’s very gratifying because the horses really bond with you and learn to trust you. If you can take your time, they develop into being good horses. And I like knowing where our horses come from and how they’ve been handled.”



Extra excitement surrounds the upcoming foaling season with a baby due out of Pariska and by Mr. Whoopy. Pariska is a former Grand Prix mount of Richard Spooner and Mr. Whoopy is...well, Mr. Whoopy!, Duncan McFarlane’s longtime Grand Prix star, now in Saer Coulter’s stable.

Holsteiners have dominated the Gentry Hill lines thus far, but Argentinian lines are on the rise. Keely’s current jumping mare, Gama Grifa, was spotted by Donelle while accompanying Peter on a polo trip in Argentina. (“I got a text while I was at school that my mom had found a beautiful black mare for me,” Keely relays.) Donelle anticipates the competitive, speedy mare will excel up to the 1.4M ranks, then make a great broodmare, with plenty of substance and bone to bring to her offspring.

The Laughlins are “small scale” breeders, typically one or two foals a year, and admit they’re hopeless about the sales part of the equation. “They’re like our children or our dogs,” Donelle laughs. “We haven’t sold any yet.” With Dalan and Keely poised to pair up beautifully with such promising bloodlines, there’s little incentive to sell. Plus, the breeding and raising bring a valuable dimension to the girls’ experience.

Old Fashioned Family Values

The ribbons will likely keep racking up for Keely and Dalan, but that's never been the priority. "I try to keep my head very clear, and my daughters' heads very clear," says Donelle. "The blue ribbons are exciting and very fun, but, for us, it's about the horse and our love of the horse. There's always going to be somebody with a fancier horse, or who keeps their heels down better than you. We try to keep it in perspective." Raising and training horses that are safe, sane, sound and successful is a point of pride for the whole family. "It's about the whole process."

Dalan and Keely started with the Pebble Beach Equestrian Center-based trainer Toni Vanza, on her lesson ponies. They were a little timid, Toni recalls, yet took quickly to her program's horsemanship-intensive approach and were never shy about working hard and getting dirty. "They're like kids used to be, you know what I mean?"

"Peter and Donelle both work really hard to let their girls blossom as individuals," observes Toni. "It was a little hard for Donelle, because she knows so much about horses, but they both let their kids make their own decisions and they don't micromanage them." The kids are given a lot of freedom and they use it wisely, adds the trainer, who remains close with the Laughlins.

And the result? Toni ends where she began: "They are just awesome kids, Wyatt included, and an awesome family."