



Horses as a healthy habit is a hoped-for foundation of the “new normal.”

by Kim F. Miller

Jim Hagman immediately took the coronavirus seriously. The founder of Elvenstar, the multi-faceted hunter/jumper program in Moorpark, Jim shut down their riding school in early March. A friend in Wuhan, China, had relayed the severity of the scene there. “I had a gut feeling about it and I paid attention to what was going on,” Jim reflects of the relatively early warning. A few days later, California governor Gavin Newsom declared statewide activity restrictions.

Stable quarantine for 17 days, then creation and implementation of protocols for owners to return safely to the barn, for limited time slots, followed. In early May, Elvenstar surveyed clients regarding interest in traveling out of state to compete in the foreseeable future. “100 percent said ‘no’,” Jim relays. “These are not alarmists. They are very even-keel people, but they get it.”

Although Elvenstar students are a regular force on the “Indoors” A circuit and medal finals in the

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East every fall, Jim is grateful for this unusual season when the program has no contenders in their final junior year. Surveyed Elvenstar families “made it clear there was no chance they’d want to go to any championship held indoors.”

In-state travel to shows is a possibility most of his clients are open to, Jim shares.



Silver Linings

Jim is a keen student, observer and leader of the sport. While he describes himself as “4.8 on a scale of 5” worried about the immediate and long-term impact of COVID-19, he also sees a silver lining. “Youth have been impacted to such a degree. I think parents are going to want their kids to do more things outdoors, in nature, and in less crowded quarters. They are going to want them to do things that involve health and there’s nothing more healthy than being with horses.

“With the stresses of a shut-down world, I think more parents will want kids interacting with something more than the electronic box in their hand. And, I think this will open people up to the premise of being with your family, and not racing to the next social activity.”

With many career paths no longer viable after the worldwide economic crisis, Jim hopefully predicts that more people will choose a path inspired by their passion, including horses and, equally important, horsemanship education. “We can capture that by educating people in a real environment of learning how to teach. There is a system for teaching, involving early childhood development, psychology and becoming certified. There is technical knowledge in knowing how to communicate these things, and in learning to communicate with parents. We skip all that in our industry. In my mind, this lack of foundational basics is the main reason our sport is not what

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it could be.”

Too often, he continues, families seeking an experience with a horse get fast-tracked onto a show path. Along with being too expensive for many, this route omits many of the most gratifying, educational and character-building aspects of a life with horses.

“Ninety-nine percent of Elvenstar’s clients did not come here to do the Maclay Medal,” Jim observes. “Their kid just wanted to be near a pony.” Fostering a love of learning about horses needs to be the foundation of the sport. “Everything above that is gravy.” He hopes that the “new normal” may facilitate such a shift in the industry.

New Ideas

Georgy Maskrey-Segesman sees these unprecedented times as perfect for a new idea set for a trial run May 22 at her Whitethorne Ranch in Ventura County’s Somis. She’s been pioneering education and horsemanship-based programs for several years and the tentatively titled “West Coast League” is the latest.

Details were still being ironed out at press time, but the basic idea has training barns competing against each other as a team comprised of an amateur, junior and professional rider. Before the first of two jumping rounds, the rider and trainer will introduce themselves to the judge -- Equestrian Coach’s Bernie Taurig on May 22 -- sharing their goals and challenges. After the round, they get the judge’s evaluation, then a chance to implement the suggestions in the warm-up ring and during a second round in front of the judge, followed by more feedback.

“Don’t practice until you get it right. Practice until you can’t get it wrong,” is the league’s working motto.

Judging criteria is intended to reward correct riding and to factor out the quality and capabilities of the horse ridden, Georgy emphasizes. “The rider on a Quarter Horse with a limited stride is not going to be penalized for doing five strides where others are doing four,” she says. If executed effectively, this keeps the rider on the same level as another on a fancier, scopier

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stead.

A \$150 entry fee and an emphasis on education is all about value that Georgy and an enthusiastic Jim feel will be all the more important in the post-pandemic era. “So many people have horses to ride and they can do two or three shows a year,” she explains. “But the majority don’t have access to people who are judging medal finals and the chance to get their feedback. It’s always nice to get a new perspective and the idea is to make the sport more inclusive.”



Team Approach

Tabulating points for the barn over an individual will foster more learning and a team approach to better horsemanship, Georgy and Jim hope. “You can learn a lot by being around other people,” Georgy says. “I myself have learned a lot just by eavesdropping!” Jim adds, “We all do!”

Embrace of educational opportunities is sometimes stymied by reluctance of the rider and/or trainer to receive criticism -- even constructive -- in public. Georgy acknowledges the West Coast League may not be everybody’s cup of tea. She sees a bright spot, however, in the unexpectedly positive response to the judges’ feedback that is a central component of the Whitethorne American Tradition of Equitation Excellence launched in 2017. “That surprised me!”

Getting feedback is important to education and is a priority for parents, Georgy and Jim note. “There will always be some who resist learning in this public way, but there are plenty of people like us that embrace it out there,” Jim states. “And, it’s the parents who will drive this. They want feedback for their kids in whatever they’re doing.”

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Along with Whitethorne and Elvenstar students, trainers including Carolyn Biava, Michelle Pacyna and Kathy Megla were among the inaugural event invitees who welcomed the chance to participate. Georgy reports that some of the country's top equitation judges are on board to participate in the future. The format works as a one-day, stand-alone event, or piggy backed with a one-day competition. The hope is that it can be staged at large private or public facilities, and that it may help rebuild a pipeline of development shows suitable for varying abilities and budgets.

Georgy is organizing the event on her own without the help of or sanctioning by any governing bodies. She welcomes the freedom and independence that provides for the moment, and the longer-term prospect that the concept might be made more broadly accessible with an organization's help.

The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at kimfmiller1@mac.com.