

Shortcuts not part of the program for young Los Angeles professional.

by Kim F. Miller

It's often surmised that some professionals don't ride in clinics for fear of being criticized in front of peers and students. Twenty-eight-year old hunter/jumper trainer Nikki Husky's been riding in George Morris clinics since she was 13, so she didn't consider stopping when she turned professional.



This month's clinics with the legendary horseman will be among the few in which Nikki has not ridden. In her view, it's for the best possible reasons: The horses that she might have ridden have had a full season helping clients to what she describes as a "dream" medal season and they needed a break. She'll be on the sidelines for the Dec. 6-8 sessions at Archie Cox's Brookway Stables, notebook in hand, as two of her amateur students, Courtney Harrell and Jessica Smith, boldly enter the master's realm.

"I am the biggest proponent of clinics and anything else that furthers our education, for myself and my students," says Nikki, who runs her Husky Stables in West Los Angeles with an integral assist from her mom, lifelong horsewoman Kevan Husky.

December 2016 - CPHA Spotlight: Nikki Husky

Written by Kim F. Miller

Thursday, 01 December 2016 19:20

Growing up on the hunter/jumper show scene with mentors including Cha Cha Jago, Alan Waldman and Jeni Brown, Nikki always wanted to be a trainer. She earned a teaching credential from Pepperdine University, but knew she wouldn't use it in a conventional classroom. Since stepping out on her own in 2010, she's been thrilled with her program's steady growth. With about 12 clients, some with multiple horses, she's able to maintain her mission of giving everyone equal attention, from the walk/trot newbies to the 3'6" medal contenders.

Nikki knew her equestrian professional destiny working as a pony camp counselor, yet she was not in a rush to make it big. "I took my time learning the ropes." Assisting Cha Cha Jago was followed by working for dealer Alan Waldman in Europe for a few months. When she returned, she underwent the United States Hunter/Jumper Association's Trainer Certification Program.

Auditing a George Morris clinic was a familiar part of the certification process, but learning detailed conformation specifics, another component, was not. "I poured over the books they gave us to help prepare for that test, and I really think it's helped me develop a well-rounded background." Nikki wishes the TCP were mandatory for all trainers and she's preparing to renew her certification.



Along with her experience and TCP certification, Nikki has cultivated mentors among the sport's best. Her former trainer Jeni Brown and top coaches Karen Healey, Archie Cox and Jim Hagman are among them. She's never shy to ask advice of those she admires. "I have a lot of people I can reach out to to ask how they would handle a certain situation," she says.

Her students' strong finishes at this season's medal finals are a proud milestone. That's especially the case with Rollin and Reeve Sykes, both of whom came to Husky Stables as walk/trotters. Fifteen-year-old Rollin is now making her mark in the "Big Eq" classes and Reeve finished eighth in the Onondarka 12 & Under Finals and was Reserve Champion in the San Fernando Valley Hunter/Jumper Association finals. The sisters' progress parallels the kind of steady progress Nikki is proud to be making with her business. The Sykes' loyalty as they advance in the sport reflects positively on the manner in which the business is growing.

No Ego

Cultivating the right clientele is a tricky business, Nikki acknowledges. "I was cautious early on and I tried not to have an ego about it. If I felt that I couldn't provide what a prospective client needed, I referred them to someone else."

As word of mouth and show accomplishments attract more attention, Nikki looks forward to slowly building up to about 25 horses. She's careful not to get sucked into the mentality that more is better when it comes to students. "I've always had a clear vision for what I want Husky Stables to be," she says. "I don't want a massive business. I really want it to be about every person having an equal amount of attention."

Emphasizing all-around horsemanship is a non-negotiable. Her students, especially juniors, are encouraged to do as many horse care tasks as their schedules allow. Weekend hang-out time revolves around that and, even on busy weekdays, kids are expected to check their horses' legs for heat and swelling or other signs of pending problems as they prepare for lessons. "I want our kids to know more than the average rider," Nikki explains. "That kind of time really helps to develop a bond with our horses."

The program embraces the hunter and jumper divisions, but she views equitation as the root of success in any arena. "Look at any rider at the top of the hunter or jumper sport, and they have a strong equitation foundation."

Even her youngest charges are familiar with the USEF equitation tests and medal class-style work-offs are often part of daily lessons. The learning is enhanced by well-schooled horses

December 2016 - CPHA Spotlight: Nikki Husky

Written by Kim F. Miller

Thursday, 01 December 2016 19:20

capable of giving beginners the feel of a balanced counter-canter or shoulder-in. The combination of quality horses and good training continues for the amateurs who lease show horses, often as a precursor to owning their own. She and Kevan import horses from Alan Waldman regularly. They are top quality to begin with, then get Nikki's development and often competition mileage with some of her more experienced amateur clients.



Another advantage is expert care from grooms and brothers Martine and Monaco Navarro. Martine knew Nikki as a pre-teen and followed her professional ascent. "It was a stretch (financially) to take him on when I first started developing enough clientele to justify it," she reflects, though she never doubted the wisdom of hiring him. Horses coming in from other programs "become quieter and calmer" under Martine's hand, she notes. Bringing his brother on staff was another smart move.

Kevan's significant role at Husky Stables includes hauling their horses and those of outside owners, which helps fund importing of a steady string of new prospects.

This time next year, Nikki hopes to have riders excelling in the 3'6" medals and maybe even a few doing well back East on the Indoors circuit. But not everybody has to have lofty show goals. The trainer is an equally big supporter of high school age students whose show budget starts and ends with the Interscholastic Equestrian League, a program the IEL alumna strongly supports.

Whatever their goals, abilities and ages, Nikki's clients enjoy each other. "There is a lot of hanging out at the barn on the weekends. You would think that the kids don't want to watch the 'old' peoples' lessons, but they love to.

They all seem to be good friends.

“We do whatever we can to promote that camaraderie and to provide a positive environment.”

In her own riding, Nikki wants to continue bringing horses along in the hunter and jumper rings—sometimes both. Grandeur, for example, did well at the Santa Barbara Mini Prix in October and is also excelling in Hunter Derbies. Freedom, owned by Kevan and sourced by Mariano and Nina Alario, also does double duty very effectively—going nicely for Nikki in the Hunter Derbies and placing in all of the five regional medal finals he campaigned in with amateur Jessica Smith.

In her monthly column on page 60, Karen Healey shares industry frustrations over young professionals hoping for shortcuts to success. Nikki Husky isn't one of them. In fact, she's a young trainer the veterans hope to see more of.

About the California Professional Horseman's Association: the CPHA provides a forum, voice, and many valuable programs and benefits for equine industry professionals throughout the region, including those who live elsewhere but compete and/or work within it regularly. Members can be trainers and anyone else who earns at least half their income from working with horses. CPHA also hosts prestigious medal classes and finals for juniors and amateur members. For more information on the organization's good works and getting involved, visit www.cpha.org.