

New owner of Wildflower Farm has ambitious plans for his own riding and the sport itself.

by Kim F. Miller

Alan Smith chose “Fortuna Del Charro” as the new name for his home ranch when he purchased Leatherdale Farms West in Rancho Santa Fe last year. That translates to “lucky rider,” and that’s exactly how the 48-year-old retired Wells Fargo Advisors senior vice president and father of two feels about getting back into equestrian sports.



After riding a little as a kid, he returned to it last summer. In February, Alan began jumping with coaching from Jasmin Stair, who moved her business to Fortuna Del Charro. In April, he competed in the 2’6” jumper division and his year-end goal is 1M. His long-term aim is Grand Prix and, with the resources and dedication to pursue that path, he’ll likely get there in record time.

Reaching his own riding goals, however, is only one of Alan’s ambitions. Early this year, he

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bought Wildflower Farm, the eight-acre public boarding and training facility in Encinitas, formerly owned by Grand Prix jumping rider Simon Nizri. This summer, Alan is working with the Wildflower-based hunter/jumper trainers to launch a “developmental” riding program that he sees as filling an important niche locally and in the sport as a whole.

He’s also looking to buy another property in San Diego, ideally in the 50-plus acre range, on which to stage events for all disciplines and offer rehabilitation and retirement services. He assures that residential development is not the plan for his current or upcoming equestrian property purchases.

It’s a big vision for anybody, let alone a newbie to the sport. But Alan isn’t a newbie to successful business models. After 25 years as a financial advisor, he left that field over frustrations that “the system was skewed to profitability and sales goals versus really helping the client.” He formed San Diego Capital Management Services, LLC., a private equity alternative investment company headquartered in Solana Beach and specializing in “a diversified portfolio of superior commercial real estate properties in San Diego County.”



Alan sees his genuine passion for equestrian sports as equally important to his corporate experience and success. His mother, a therapist, told him years ago that the secret to choosing the right career was “asking yourself what you most want to do when you get up on Sunday morning -- your off-day. Figure that out, then find a way to make a living around it.” At Alan’s career crossroads, that was riding.

Details Matter

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Already a lovely facility, Wildflower will embody his conviction that a commercially viable equestrian facility should be managed with the same priorities as a high-end resort. “The motto is that you get the same great service from the guy in the restroom as you do from the guy in the restaurant,” he shares. “In the airline industry, research has shown that it takes seven good things to offset one bad thing” in a customer’s experience. “I don’t want a rusted bolt somewhere on the property to take away from somebody’s experience with the great trainers and facilities at Wildflower.” With the help of operations manager Nicole DeGraan, “Our strategic plan involves improving every corner of the property. Details matter and there is always room to improve.”

Wildflower is home to several A circuit hunter/jumper programs: Wendy Thompson’s Coastline Hunter Jumpers; Mark Bone & Scott Taylor’s Huntover; Rose Carver’s Touchstone Stables; Jill Richardson’s Opus Equinus Farms and Michael Savage. It is also the base for Mexican Grand Prix rider Mauricio Ortega.

The Farm is already a profitable business model “that can be made more efficient,” the new owners says. He’s not looking to “suck the profits out, but rather put them back into the facility.” There are currently enough open stalls to accommodate a new, small-scale training business, but Alan says he’d prefer to leave those open and help the existing trainers grow their businesses. After many years helping clients and mentees identify what they want from their lives, their investments or their careers, he’s confident he can help trainers identify and reach their goals. And that will help Wildflower reach Alan’s goals for it.

“I don’t claim to know everything,” he acknowledges. “I believe in a team approach and I have enough people around me to guide my desire, drive and ability to make it happen and at the scope I have in mind.”

Alan, his wife and two teenage sons live in the upscale neighborhood that surrounds Wildflower Ranch. He’s shocked how many neighbors consider it “an upscale private facility that is not really open to the public. These are people who live one street away! They are ideal clients for the competitive hunter/jumper training programs at Wildflower.”

Coupled with a dearth of welcoming entry points to the sport, that perception gets Alan’s goat and spurred him to apply an outsider’s perspective to the sport. “It’s an exciting business right

now, but I see some stagnation. I think the trainers are all marketing the same thing to the same riders. I want to make the sport grow.”

From a marketing standpoint, Alan sees parallels between equestrian sports and the fitness industry. Reducing the sense of intimidation that can come with jumping in is step-one. “The whole equestrian world can be very intimidating,” he notes. Many professionals advertise themselves in a way that doesn’t appeal or make sense to people who aren’t already in the sport, he adds. In Alan’s model, value is more important than price and “selling it as a long-term relationship” is key. Involvement with horses “is not something you’re going to sell to a new person on the spot.”

A Place To Fall In Love

Hence the idea of a developmental riding program at Wildflower, where newcomers are induced “to fall in love with the sport.” The emphasis will be thorough horsemanship education in a setting that fosters confidence-building experiences with quality lesson horses. Students can move to the next level by leasing these horses and training with one of Wildflower’s professionals.

Having helped the very affluent manage their money throughout his career, Alan observes that “It’s not a matter of whether they can afford it. It’s that they want value as much as anybody else, but at the beginning, they may not know what that is in our sport. Do they need a \$5,000 horse or a \$500,000 horse? And having the heavy front-end costs of owning a own horse at the outset is scary, even to those who can afford it.”

In his view, “The disconnect in the hunter/jumper industry lies between the enormous number of potential new and existing riders, versus the organic growth rate in the industry now. I believe our program will address this disconnect.”

Wildflower’s trainers are on board with the idea and brainstorming a program that will start with a four-week introduction. “My goal is to bring new clients at all levels to our trainers,” Alan explains. “I want to partner with them to create successful businesses. Wildflower is nothing without our trainers and as their businesses grow, so does Wildflower.”

Meantime, the newly-minted equestrian entrepreneur exemplifies the passion for the sport he hopes his investments will help cultivate in others. He and his wife, Ameer, are remodeling the home at Fortuna del Charro. Even before he enjoys the convenience of schooling in his own backyard, Alan is riding two or three horses a day, one of them a former Grand Prix jumper. At a recent show in San Juan Capistrano, he contested 11 rounds in one weekend.

He's grateful to have found Jasmin Stair as his coach and especially as the resident trainer at Fortuna del Charro. The United States Hunter Jumper Association Certified Trainer is a San Diego native with a strong track record in the show ring and in establishing a solid horsemanship foundation for her students. "We were looking for someone extra special for this place, because it's our home," says Alan. "They needed to be a good rider and good business person, but most of all a good person. I place a high value on personal integrity and she has that."

At a time of consensus on the urgency of growing the participation base of equestrian sports, Alan's outsider's perspective is a welcome addition to that cause.