

Three jobs and a challenging horse enable young rider to fulfill A circuit ambitions.

by Kim F. Miller

Valqueria's stall looks out over the stable parking lot and whenever the mare sees Mikayla Vosseller, she whinnies a welcome. It's a tingles-inducing moment familiar to many equestrians and it carries added significance for the 17 year old San Diego hunter/jumper rider. Mikayla and Valqueria were teamed up by trainer Wendy Thompson, who recognized in the young rider an unusual combination of talent and willingness to invest endless hours, effort and elbow grease in pursuit of a life with horses.



A straight-A high school senior, Mikayla works three jobs to help support her riding. She works at Yogurtland part-time, braids at shows and is a working student for Wendy. Six days a week, "I pretty much do anything Wendy needs me to do," Mikayla relays.

“I help with grooming, riding, body clipping, mane pulling, publicizing clinics, etc.” Catch riding is another detail on her resume.

Summer camp as a second-grader provided Mikayla’s first horsey encounter and she was hooked instantly. Formal riding lessons were not in the family budget, but a Christmas gift of lessons on a family friend’s horse fueled the spark. Mikayla found her first working student position at Margaret Bennett’s Benridge Farm at Seabreeze Farms. There, she paid for one weekly lesson and worked off the cost of an additional two sessions.

Based at Seabreeze at the time, Wendy noticed Mikayla’s riding and work ethic and found ways to help her. “I saw her work so hard,” Wendy recalls. “She’d be at the barn at 6 a.m., turning out the horses and doing other barn chores before she went to school. And then I’d see her back after school doing more.” Wendy gave Mikayla a few lessons and recognized her natural riding abilities and an attention to detail that has enhanced those abilities as a rider and an overall horseman.

Riding lesson horses for her first several years, Mikayla felt the A show circuit might not be within reach but that didn’t diminish her desire to keep working and learning as much as she could. The big-time show scene became a possibility when Wendy let her ride and campaign a First Year Green Hunter, Valentino. The 8-year-old was not quite “finished,” but a well-trained, high-quality horse on which Mikayla made a successful entry into that circuit. Valentino was also for sale and when the inevitable transaction took place, it was a rough reality for the young rider.

Enter Valqueria

That’s when Valqueria came into the picture, but she wasn’t the healthy, happy mare recently seen at the Del Mar National in the 1M jumpers with Mikayla. Having come from another program, the mare was seriously underweight, suffering from ulcers, nervous, spooky and not confident over fences even though her background was as a 1.3M jumper in Mexico.

Wendy has a soft spot for troubled horses and, moreover, she saw plenty of potential. “I thought she was a very sweet horse and that, with some care and attention, she could be very good.” Not a perfect horse for a relatively inexperienced student like Mikayla, but available and

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affordable. The horse's owner, Cristina Arvizu, then a new client of Wendy's Coastline Hunter/Jumpers, agreed to provide Valqueria to Mikayla with a feed lease arrangement that entailed the Vossellers' paying for the mare's feed and board.

That was March of 2016 and Mikayla had her work cut out for her. "The mare was extremely sensitive with a lot of nervous energy," Wendy relates. Conversely, Mikayla's experience riding school horses had helped her develop an "electric seat" to keep them lively, but on Valqueria she needed to "sit like a church mouse."



"Not only did she work three jobs to advance her riding, she had to work with a difficult horse. She had to really focus and pay attention," Wendy explains. "Valqueria is a lovely horse, but not an easy one."

"She had so many mental scars and was nervous and not very trusting when we first got her," Mikayla remembers. Within two months, however, she'd gained weight, overall health and confidence and "really blew us away."

"She used to be very picky about her food and she was timid," Mikayla continues. "We used a magnetic blanket on her and she was very spooky about it. But now she loves people and is always begging for treats." For the riding part of Valqueria's recovery, Mikayla started her in the equitation and hunter rings, even though they knew she was a jumper. "It was fun and it strengthened our partnership so that when we transitioned to jumpers, she was super confident. That was a huge breakthrough and now she is such an amazing horse!"

In her last year of junior eligibility, Mikayla tries to compete once a month. "We target the shows where Valqueria and I will have the best experience and be the most competitive in the division we're doing." They were thrilled to win a 1M Childrens Jumper class this past spring in San Juan Capistrano and were looking forward to the Del Mar National last month.

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The ribbons are great, but the bigger priority is a daily life with horses and learning all she can. Mikayla is set on entering the trainer's profession and will first head to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo for a degree in animal science. "I would love to go straight into the horse world, but I know that college is really good preparation. It will teach me about physiology and nutrition and go in depth into subjects that will help me refine my methods of caring for horses as a professional."

She plans to check out Cal Poly's IHSA equestrian team and pursue working student opportunities with a Central Coast training program.

Hands On Learning

Cal Poly is appealing because of its emphasis on "hands-on" learning, which will add to the opportunities that Mikayla has made the most of during her two years with Wendy. "She wants to understand each horse individually and I want to incorporate that in my program."

Wendy is one of several professionals who've helped and encouraged Mikayla. Margaret Bennett at Seabreeze Farms in Carmel Valley was "a huge help to me," as was Benridge instructor Lisa Klink. EquestrianCoach.com founder Bernie Traurig offered an inspiration when she cliniced with him. "He asked me if I wanted to ride in the Big Eq classes and told me there's always a way if you work hard." Good fortune also played its part. "I've been so blessed to have met the right people at the right time and things have all fallen together."

Mikayla says her mom, Leigh Vosseller, "has been super supportive." As a non-horse person, she was a "little iffy" when her daughter embarked on this expensive sport, but she has since "backed me 100% of the way."

A bold, outgoing nature can be helpful in seeking working student opportunities, but Mikayla admits to being somewhat shy. "I learned to overcome that when I meet new people because I realized I really have to go get it if this is what I want to do." Her non-horsey job at Yogurtland has also helped. "It's a good job for working with customers' needs and understanding what they want."

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Wendy has been happy to help Mikayla. She's exactly the type of young person the veteran trainer would like to see join the profession. "She's such an inspiration because this is a hard sport to break into if you don't have the money," Wendy explains. "She'll be great at whatever she chooses to do."

In the meantime, Mikayla looks forward to these final few months of welcoming whinnies from Valqueria before going off to college.