

Knowledge, skills and work ethic distinguish graduates of Julie Winkel's innovative program.

by Kim F. Miller • photos by Tricia Booker

No matter what hat Julie Winkel is wearing – hunter/jumper trainer, judge, USHJA leader, educator, breeder, young horse raiser, facility manager – the owner of Maplewood in Reno is known as a straight shooter. That's why she called her school the Horse Industry Training Program. An immersive working student experience combined with formal, quantifiable education in multiple aspects of the business, the two-year program is exactly that.



HITP grew out of Maplewood's long-standing working student program. It reflects Julie's lifelong dedication to educating the next generation of horsemen and answers the industry's many-years lament about the lack of well-educated, well-rounded young people coming into the sport. HITP earned a unique distinction in 2016 when it received a provisional license from Nevada's Commission on Postsecondary Education. Julie expects the arduous process of earning this status will culminate in attaining a full license this fall.

Along with validating the curriculum's efficacy, value and credibility, the license is one important step on the path to enabling students to use grant and financial aid funds toward the Training Program's \$1,000 per month fee, which includes tuition and housing. It's designed as a two-year program and students can also enroll in shorter stretches.

Just as in most equestrian professionals' career, riding is only one of many skills required to succeed in the program. Classroom work and hands-on learning cover grooming, horse health, working with vets, farriers and other practitioners, training horses, teaching students and barn management—at home and at shows. Students hit the A hunter/jumper circuit throughout the West Coast with Maplewood training clients and are often sent to apprentice with professionals throughout the country to gain additional insights, experiences and/or more depth on a subject of special interest.

The Perfect Campus



At 150 acres, Maplewood is the perfect campus for learning all facets of the business. The Winkels' breeding program enables practical experience with collection and stallion and mare management, supported by classroom studies on producing good matches. Learning to develop young horses – from newborns to horse-show readiness – is one of HITP's most unique and valued components as it fills a long-noted void for horsemen with the knowledge and patience to bring along tomorrow's equine stars.

Although Julie and her son, Grand Prix rider and Maplewood assistant Kevin Winkel, are best known in the hunter/jumper world, the Training Program provides an education applicable in any discipline. Among the many professionals with whom Julie networks to place her students for new experiences and permanent jobs, the biggest current demand is for barn managers, she says. "So much of what we offer is learning about horses – how they think and learn, how to train them, etc. As a result we offer preparation for a wide range of potential careers." Event management, course design, judging and farm and venue management are just a few of those.

Students come from an equally wide range of backgrounds, experience levels and aspirations. One current student recently graduated Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts, where she had parlayed her A circuit junior experience into the reserve national championship in the Individual Open Equitation Over Fences at the Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association Nationals. She

Written by by Kim F. Miller

Thursday, 31 August 2017 22:16

had plenty of riding experience “but joined our program because she wanted to learn the nuts and bolts of the industry,” Julie explains. Another came with relatively little riding experience. She sought to become an equine bodyworker and wanted to learn more about horses and their lives to enhance her effectiveness in that capacity.



Seattle area native Conner Hinckley represents another path to the Training Program. “I was your typical junior growing up riding in the junior hunter and equitation ranks, with some jumper experience. My mom has a small training program and we showed lightly, but not too seriously.” During a gap year after high school, he competed as an amateur and began community college classes. “I was a little stuck and not sure what I wanted to do. I knew that I loved horses but was not sure if I wanted to get a real job so I could afford to ride or if I wanted to make it a career. Honestly, you could say I was almost uninspired.” He became suddenly unstuck and fully inspired on his first visit to Maplewood, where he’d taken a sales horse from his mother’s program. “I went to kind of check it out, then I didn’t leave. My mom sent my car down full of my stuff.

“I was shocked by how much I learned in just one weekend,” Conner goes on. He continued learning for the program’s full two years and felt confident he was well prepared to succeed in an equestrian career. He has special appreciation for the opportunity to work with young horses, encouragement to volunteer in the sport and to get hands-on experience with making a horse business work financially.

A typical weekly HITP assignment is “mocking up events in terms of expenses, income and potential profits,” he explains. One of those brainstorming sessions generated Maplewood’s

now legendary “Ride & Whine” adult weekend camps, which feature education, riding, fitness, fashion, fun and, of course, wine. Access to Maplewood’s regular clinics is another HITP advantage. Young horse training, course design, sporthorse conformation and judging are frequent clinic topics. (See What’s Happening, page 74, for upcoming clinics at Maplewood.)

Post-Graduate Prospects

Conner graduated in 2014, stayed on for another six months as an employee, then moved to Dallas where he worked with “some awesome trainers” who were part of the extensive network of professionals linked through the Maplewood endeavor and Julie’s connections in the sport. He then worked at his mother’s program briefly before landing an assistant trainer job with another Maplewood graduate: the first, actually: Amelia (Esqueda) Cuevas.

Amelia began with Julie 15 years ago, before Maplewood’s working student program began its formal education division with the HITP. From the Palm Springs area’s La Quinta, she first worked for Julie when the trainer maintained a barn near the old Indio show grounds. The young rider worked with Julie’s young horses there, helped out during the HITS Desert Circuit, then moved to Reno after high school. She worked for Julie there while earning a degree from the University of Nevada, riding young horses and campaigning hunters. Simultaneously, she took on a young horse of her own: Rebelle. Amelia bought the mare as a 2-year-old and brought her along to the 1.3M jumper division, then sold her to professional Leslie Wright, who began her Grand Prix career with the mare.

Amelia had thought about a pre-med path, but her time with Julie solidified her desire for a long-term career with horses. Her first solo assignment was through East Coast trainer Mindy Darst, who needed a solid horseman to work privately for a client family with three daughters and several ponies. With Julie’s continued support, she later landed a post with renowned hunter rider Louise Serio, before deciding that East Coast winters “weren’t for me.” She spent eight months attending graduate school out West, but not riding and “I couldn’t stand it.” At that point, Julie called about a position with another family, this time in the Seattle area’s Fall City.

Today, Amelia still works for that family and bases her own training program, Fuerza Equestrian, at their stable. Within a year, Amelia had built her program to 14 horses, along with the family’s several horses, and to managing a busy schedule on the A hunter/jumper circuit in the Northwest.

While most students won't spend as much time with Julie as Amelia has, their coach/mentor relationship reflects the extent to which Julie wants to know and trust the young professionals HITP sends out into the world. The HITP currently has two assistants, but its founder continues to teach as many sessions and work individually with every student as her busy schedule allows. "When they do graduate, I want to have a good sense of who they would do well working for," Julie explains. "It's not just about finding them a job. It's about helping them find the right professional to work for."

Amelia is grateful to Julie's mentorship throughout her career and especially so in finding Conner. "When I needed help I really wanted to find an assistant with my same background. That could ride, groom, teach, etc. We have the same, very basic approach to horse care and that has made things so much easier. We see eye to eye."

Grades are pass/fail for each component of the Horse Industry Training Program, but that shouldn't be confused with it being an easy endeavor. "It's tough," Amelia acknowledges of another of the program's benefits: helping students determine if a career in the horse world is right for them. Not everybody completes the program, but those who do graduate have the knowledge, skills and work ethic necessary for their own success and to contribute to the industry's future.