

Celebrating a Banner Year and a Wonderful Career with Nicole Johnson at Premier West Stables

By Jenny Grey

Celebrating her 10 year anniversary in business this year, Nicole Johnson of Premier West Stables in San Diego ended her show season in spectacular fashion. At the Morgan Grand National in Oklahoma this year, her four riders achieved two Grand National equitation championships, two equitation world championships and the coveted AMHA Western Seat Gold Medal as well as multiple top ten ribbons in competitive classes. An early introduction to the world of horses, determination to succeed in all she undertakes, solid business experience and an extraordinary ability to lead, communicate and share her expertise have defined Nicole Johnson's outstanding career.

Introduced to horses when she was four years old, Nicole has been involved with a number of breeds over the years. When her sister rented a house at a boarding facility, she learned to ride mostly on naughty ponies and soon began competing at local gymkhana events riding an old Quarter Horse.

Self-taught during the early years, Nicole had her first formal lesson at age 13 while showing horses as diverse as Appaloosas and Saddlebreds, competing in almost every division. Her first horse, a former Arabian national champion in western pleasure, joined the family when she was 15, becoming almost unbeatable in the saddle seat discipline after Nicole taught him how to trot.

Always willing to try something new, Nicole branched out yet again, successfully competing in barrel racing and rodeo queen pageants where she was named Miss Rodeo Ramona and second runner-up in the Miss Rodeo California pageant. This experience in the world of cowboys would serve her well in the future.

Nicole met her husband, Joe Chait, 19 years ago when on a family fishing trip. Nicole's mother wanted to go sport fishing for her birthday, choosing The Conquest, Joe's first commercial fishing boat. Nicole's grandparents, who owned a 'mom and pop' fishing business, introduced their family to sport fishing many years ago, spurring an interest in the next generations. Joe, a native of St. Louis, moved to California with his family while still in grade school. Working on boats in Malibu through junior high and high school, he attended the Maritime Academy, earning his captain's license with over 1,000 hours on the water when he was only nineteen years old. A fascinating fountain of information about the world of big game fishing, he draws many parallels between his own chosen profession and that of being a horse trainer. Now owner of The Pegasus, a 65' luxury sport fishing boat that sleeps 22 people, his customers have been movie stars, athletes, corporate clients and everything in between. His most unusual client came from a remote region in Africa with a goal to cross big game fishing in the Pacific Ocean off his bucket list!

On meeting Nicole for the first time, Joe was drawn to her enthusiasm and enjoyment of the sport. "She chooses her bait and baits her own hook. She's a very quick study and fun to watch. Whether with horses or on the boat she gives 110 percent. She has such a passion and drive for everything she does; she's meticulous, she listens and absorbs new material quickly...I didn't know much about horses when I met her but when you live with a trainer you get a crash course. Now I haul horses and help with set up at the shows." Joe is known for being a wonderful supporter but he is quick to point



Nicole Johnson met her husband, Joe Chait, 19 years ago on a family fishing trip. Joe, a commercial fisherman, owns The Pegasus, a 65' luxury sport fishing boat. When at home together they enjoy the outdoors and simple pleasures that include walking their dogs Toby, Reina and Boston.

out that it works both ways. There were many years when he was away at sea a lot while Nicole was helping him run the charter operation.

Joe tells a great story about Nicole on the day she had her most successful big game fishing trip. They encountered a school of huge tuna weighing between 80 and 100 pounds each. By the time the day was over, she landed five of them. Anyone who has ever fished can appreciate how exhausting this must have been but with the same enthusiasm and determination she applies to her work with horses, she was not about to give up.

Before becoming a full-time trainer, Nicole was a successful medical assistant and practice manager while teaching lessons at their home after work. Realizing horses were becoming a more important part of her life, she was fortunate to be offered a position as Anne Speck's assistant at Rancho Del Mar. She describes the six years she spent there as a life-altering experience. It was her first introduction to Morgans as well as an opportunity to learn the fine points of equitation from a master.

After leaving Anne Speck's stable, she and Joe enjoyed some of their happiest times, taking more than a year away from work to recharge their batteries. They camped down on the Baja in their travel trailer, visiting tourist destinations and hiking to places they would otherwise never have seen. "It was a nice transition and a year of fun adventure. We think about it all the time," Joe reminisced. "There's definitely an RV in our future!"



Nicole has a special gift for matching great horse and rider combinations that include Emma Pedersen's winning mounts T-Towne Talk about me (left, with Emma) and Dragonfire Timeless (right, with Nicole).

Originally starting Premier West at the Rancho Riding Club in Rancho Santa Fe in 2005, Nicole did not have a specific direction in mind. With six western/trail horses, she was focused on getting the club members to negotiate the trails safely. Soon approached to teach saddle seat, Morgans were her breed of choice for their beauty, versatility, work ethic and demeanor. "They are great for our active environment and the perfect family horse," Nicole said. Her key criteria when matching a horse with a client is that the new mount be safe, sound and uncomplicated. She is not only finding horses that meet these criteria, she has a gift for finding wonderful performers with the personality and athletic ability to succeed in the show ring.

Shanna Gish of Indian Creek Farm first met Nicole in the early days of Premier West when Indian Creek Broadway Joe CH was purchased for one of the clients. Shanna was impressed with Nicole's organizational skills and clear knowledge of the kinds of horses she needed to buy. Nicole has since returned to Indian Creek on several buying trips, often bringing the Premier West families along. The two women have become great friends over the years, talking frequently on the phone and catching up in Oklahoma each year.

Shanna noticed early on how well Nicole works with children. "She's super-talented with the kids and buys them the right horses. They see her as a 'cool' person and she communicates at their level. They want to be at the barn every day so she spends a lot of time with them and is constantly looking for ways to improve her program. I can't say enough good things about her. I can talk to her about absolutely anything. She's a great friend who fosters good riders and owners; she's good for this business and treats people right."

When we interviewed Nicole for a previous article in 2011, she had grown her program to 40 horses, increasing her business exponentially while buying and selling 12 Morgans that year. Her goal at the time was to continue to grow her lesson and Academy program. Over the last four years, however, she has learned rapid growth may not be the most effective way to run Premier West wisely saying, "I can only work so many and be really good at it." She finds she can devote the right focus on each of her students when she teaches 35 to 40 lessons a week with a class A show string of about 12 to 15 horses.

Premier West operates from two different riding clubs in the San Diego area in a somewhat less traditional business model. She works with trail

horses at the Rancho Riding Club but keeps her show horses at the Fairbanks Ranch Equestrian Center where she also gives lessons to club members. The club owners are responsible for everything to do with horse care whereas Nicole is responsible for training, instructing and showing. Both barns close at 5 p.m. so Nicole works from 7 a.m. until closing time along with her assistant, Megan McDaniels, who she has known since she was a baby when their families fished together. Gerardo Godinez, an invaluable resource for the past five years, does everything from grooming to training and setting up at shows.

Nicole came to the Fairbanks Riding Club in 2013 after the club manager, Susan Ellner, watched her instruct a group of kids riding in all different disciplines. "I was amazed!" Susan remembered. "They were totally engaged but having so much fun. The more time I spent with her the more impressed I became." Susan always wanted to ride bareback so watching some of the young people having such a good time working their horses in bareback pads inspired her to try it too.

"She's a joy to work with and such a team player. There is absolutely no ego," Susan stated emphatically. With 56 stalls at the Fairbanks Club there are multiple trainers and many different opinions. Nicole provides the calm presence that diffuses potentially tense situations, explaining her point of view in such a logical manner that nobody is offended. "The clients love and respect her. She believes everyone has the right to a drama free barn so she tries to promote peace and tranquility. I'm so very grateful she came into my life and I'm thankful for her every single day. I can't think of anything negative I could possibly say about her. She's a super person."

Nicole is not only a gifted trainer/instructor in the Morgan horse world, she also takes responsibility for a large group of cowboys who belong to The Rancheros; an organization focused on keeping the cowboy traditions alive. They meet to ride and camp with as many as 800 to 1,000 men participating in the course of a year. Ronald Reagan and several others in high leadership positions have been members of this elite group that operates by invitation only for the first three years of ridership. Nicole and her team condition the horses and prepare them for the long day rides and other activities that include sorting cattle and roping. Her early days in the rodeo world make her uniquely qualified for this aspect of her job. She applies the same meticulous care and attention to this group of riders and horses as she does to her show string.



Katie Myron, who just moved up from the walk-trot division this year, conquered the 13 and under division winning the Classic Saddle Seat Equitation 13 and Under Grand National Championship and the Classic Saddle Seat Equitation Junior World Championship with Tamarisk On Target.



Nicole teaches 35 to 40 lessons a week at the Fairbanks Riding Club. The littlest riders may be lucky enough to ride Lightning, who is both a lesson horse and a family pet.

2015 was a banner year for the Premier West show string. Emma Pedersen, who has ridden with Nicole for the past seven years, was victorious this year as the AMHA Western Seat Equitation Gold Medal winner as well as the undefeated Western Seat Equitation World Champion riding T-Towne Talk About Me. She also won the Grand National Hunt Seat Equitation 17 Year Old Championship aboard MEM Look at Me CH. The day Emma became the gold medal winner, Nicole celebrated her birthday on an occasion to remember for the rest of her life. Not only did Emma win an AMHA Gold Medal in her last year as a junior exhibitor, it was also a first gold medal victory for Nicole as an instructor.

"We are still walking on clouds!" exclaimed Emma's mom, Lisa Pedersen, who has watched Emma blossom from a shy little girl who was not sure that showing was her 'thing' to the confident young woman she is today. "Nicole made her feel at home. She started her slowly and never pushed her; she lets kids learn at their own pace." There were plenty of fun activities at the barn to keep the young people interested and engaged including family fun days, costume parties, horse games and birthday parties but when Emma was ready to go to her first show on a school horse, she was hooked.

"Nicole believes in taking baby steps with a high regard for safety. She gained Emma's trust in a controlled environment and she never stepped back. Her barn buddies had the same experience. They traded off winning and everyone had a moment to shine in friendly competition. Nicole is great about making them set their own goals."

Nicole is aware that showing is as much a mental exercise as it is an ability to ride and she makes her riders focus on specific goals rather than worrying about their competition. The goal may be as simple as that of making a good

pass. This has proven to be a winning strategy. She emphasizes, "It's not the ribbon; it's the ride!" For each show, every rider sets one goal at a time, one class at a time. At the end of the show they review their performance and challenge themselves with a new set of goals. It keeps their minds focused on what is important. "I want them to find their own strengths while they build a relationship with their horse," Nicole observed. "I expect each of them to give maximum effort, regardless of their ability."

Lisa describes Nicole as a very nurturing person and a great role model – the kind of person you want your child to spend time with. At shows she might decorate the inside of the sitting area with words of inspiration and give personal letters to each of the competitors. "She has given Emma so much confidence. She's sure of herself and of her horse. She and Nicole had a plan and Emma stayed so focused through the process."

Lisa is as impressed by Nicole's ability to deal gracefully with the tougher times that occur in any venture as she is with her ability to create successful horse and rider teams. Every business has its challenges but Nicole deals with these realities with equanimity. "She's a person of faith who is sure of who she is and where she wants her mind to be. She's not 'gossipy'. She holds her head high, focuses on the job and never hangs on to negativity."

"All the stars were aligned this year," said Joe, who has watched Emma's story unfold since she was 11 years old. "It couldn't have been better or sweeter and it happened on Nicole's birthday. She's my wife and I love her dearly. I'm her biggest fan!" he declared with great pride.

Joe often reminds Nicole she is too humble about her achievements at Premier West. She reached the pinnacle of success with her equitation riders this year and has earned her place as one of the nation's top instructors. Her goal for the equitation riders was to have them qualify for the medal and equitation finals which they have done for the last two years. That in itself was a huge achievement but winning world championships in this fiercely competitive environment makes everyone realize how gifted she is as a trainer/instructor.



Cassidy Herschak, at her first world championship show and in training with Nicole for only a year and a half, earned strong top-five finishes in the Saddle Seat Junior Equitation World Championship and the UPHA Junior Challenge Cup finals riding Soft and Stunning.

In addition to Emma Pedersen, Katie Myron, who just moved up from the walk-trot division this year, distinguished herself in the classic saddle seat equitation division. Under Nicole's direction, she previously won multiple Grand National championships in hunt and saddle seat walk-trot in 2014. Superbly well trained, she conquered the 13 and under division this year, winning the Grand National Championship in Classic Saddle Seat Equitation 13 and Under early in the week, then following up with an exciting victory pass as the Classic Saddle Seat Equitation Junior World Champion. Recalling the moment when she was announced as the Grand National winner she remembered saying to herself, "Oh my gosh. I really can't believe I'm here. I didn't believe I won until I was all the way out of the gate!" Her graceful style and rapport with her horse were evident again when she earned world championship honors.

Katie and her mom, Kathlene, both agree she was extremely well prepared to compete. In fact they felt ready to take on Oklahoma as much as six months ago. Katie, who began riding very young, has ridden jumpers, competed in barrel racing and tried many different disciplines but she is ideally suited to riding in the saddle divisions. She came to Premier West because she and her mom liked Nicole's training techniques. They also enjoy the friendly family atmosphere at the barn



Colin Parker, showing MCH Remington for the first time at the Morgan Grand National, scored an excellent third place ribbon in the Walk-Jog Western Seat Equitation World Championship.



Nicole Johnson and the Premier West clients enjoyed an outstanding Morgan Grand National show this year. Emma Pedersen won the AMHA Western Seat Gold Medal on Nicole's birthday and was the undefeated Western Seat Equitation Senior World Champion in her final year as a junior exhibitor.

and the smaller size of the show string which allows each rider to get the right level of individual attention.

Nicole expects her riders to focus and do their best at each lesson which may include lunge line work or a lot of riding without stirrups but everyone who observes these lessons sees that the kids are having great fun while they are learning and setting new goals. She keeps the atmosphere light but still achieves great results. "She never gives up," said Kathlene, remembering when they were having challenges with one of their horses. "She really worked hard with him and was willing to try new things. Things evolve and change."

Colin Parker and Cassidy Herschak, also competing at Oklahoma this year, made Nicole very proud by earning top-five world championship awards. These achievements are made even more significant because Colin showed MCH Remington for the first time in Oklahoma and Cassidy, taking her first trip to the Grand National show, has trained with Nicole for only a year and a half.

Cassidy's mom, Marie Ericksson, emphasized the impact Nicole has made in her children's lives. Cassidy, who was sometimes reluctant to try new experiences, now embraces these opportunities. "Nicole has such dedication, caring and patience. She's always thinking about how to make something happen and puts the kids before herself," Marie observed. For a while Cassidy wasn't sure she was ready to compete in Oklahoma but Nicole worked hard to convince her she could do it. Cassidy's younger sister, Ella, also rides with Nicole. "My kids have developed and grown and are so much better as people. They love and respect her," Marie stated with gratitude. Now with five horses at Premier West, the Ericksson/Herschak family is firmly committed to the sport.

Alexis Parker has enjoyed a similar experience since her son Colin began riding with Nicole. "I decided to have Colin ride with her not only for her expertise but for her honest and kind heart. She has a wonderful way with children and great patience. She teaches a rider in a way they can understand that is appropriate to their age." Alexis pointed out Nicole's deep love for horses as well as her passion for teaching children the joy of learning to ride while at the same time creating a special bond with an animal. "We've had a blast riding at the barn," she added. She is so fun, loving and caring. She is not only my son's trainer, she has become one of my most favorite people in the world. She makes you feel like family and that's exactly what we all are."

Premier West also has students who do not show and perhaps never will. One such person was a child born prematurely with a low chance of survival. "She's a smart kid but learns differently," said Nicole. "Teaching her is inspirational and really fun." She appreciates the trust placed in her by the parents to keep their child safe. "I want to work more at understanding people and the way they learn," she reflected.

When the Premier West parents entrust the children to Nicole's care, they know she is not only teaching them to ride, she is giving them skills to make them successful men and women. Similarly, in the early days of Joe's charter operation, parents of teenagers would drop their offspring at Joe's boat where they would work all summer. "If you impact lives in a positive manner and send young people down a straight path, then you have done your job," Joe stated, summing up what he and Nicole both believe.

Determined to maintain balance in her life, Nicole treasures the time she spends with Joe in activities as simple as taking their dogs for a walk or spending precious family time with sisters who live close by and a brother who lives next door. "You can get too wrapped up in this business and lose sight of what's important," she observed. While in Oklahoma this year she removed herself from the stress of competition by spending time away from the fairgrounds with Joe, watching the show and swapping stories with friends and fellow contestants. As for the future, her goal is as straightforward as Nicole herself. She wants Premier West to thrive. She may also consider broadening her horizons by becoming a judge so that she can learn something new and gain a different viewpoint from inside the ring.

Nicole's progression from a small child riding naughty ponies; training her Arabian national champion who became unbeatable in the saddle seat division; moving on to the rodeo world; gaining a strong business background then gradually becoming a respected trainer/instructor in the Morgan horse community with the unqualified support of her husband, Joe, have all been factors in what Nicole has achieved. Building on her success each year, everything came together with the stars in alignment at the 2015 Grand National show.

Winning major awards is every trainer's dream and the parents of Nicole's students are beyond excited to witness their children taking national and world championship victory passes. Perhaps more important, they recognize qualities in Nicole that have shaped the lives of their offspring by her emphasis on the value of hard work, determination, setting goals and living with a sense of purpose. Her rapport with these young people and her ability to communicate with them in terms they respect and understand is giving them a skill set way beyond riding that will last for a lifetime.