

# Foster Farms

## Teaching Life Lessons and Championship Riding



Stephanie Corbin and Nicole Foster head the Foster Farm program.

BY ANN BULLARD

She has traded the snowy regions of Minnesota for the Texas plains (with stops in California and Ohio.) Nicole Foster, her now ex-husband and son settled in Texas where she has followed her childhood passion. In nine short years, she has gone from teaching a few lessons a week to having a team of staff, horses and riders that more than hold their own on any stage.

Lovely enough to be a model, Nicole successfully balances being the mother of a nine-year-old son with a demanding profession. Still, it gives her more flexibility than holding down a traditional job in interior design or another field. That became particularly important after her divorce. And she does it with a quiet smile and a humble spirit.

A native of Minnesota, Nicole began her riding 'career' in academy competition at the Tanbark Horse Show. She was 11 years old. Her mother, Barbara, became a Saddlebred fan who would eventually write for several of the publications. Nicole and her sister, Natalie Payne, fell in love with the breed after the first show.

However, her first horse was an Arabian she boarded across the street from Bob Jensen's show barn. That proved to be a perfect spot from which to launch her riding career. Early on, she was successful in equitation.

"She was the best damn kid," Jensen said, looking back on the young lady who initially rode primarily with his wife. "She was very serious about her lessons. Nicole had a vision and worked really hard. She got to be a very pretty rider – and she could horseback. Nicole didn't always have the nicest horse, but she was able to cover that up with her talents and ability."

Jensen says he is not at all surprised at his former student's success. "She has everything: personality, ability and is pleasant with people. Everybody likes her. She's always been very, very nice to everybody. She doesn't care if you have a nickel, or have nothing. She's positive, not cocky."



Nicole won many equitation classes aboard Fancy Fran in the early 1990s.



Riders and their families enjoy congregating at the Foster Farm tack room. Pictured (l-r): Stephanie Corbin, Katie Rich, Jake Carrell, Bryn Anderson, Nicole Foster and Lauren Raines.



Foster Farms won a number of Texas, TASHA and ASHA High Point Awards for the 2014 season. Celebrating the awards are (back, l-r) Alan and Sarah Rich, Rene Raines, Rachelle Shore and Katie Smalling, who was Nicole's first lesson student, (center) Katie Rich and Lauren Raines, third row Nicole Foster and Stephanie Corbin and in front, Whitney Shore.

**Nicole showed CH Highpoint's Syncopated Rhythm as a three- and four-year-old. They won the Junior Three-Gaited Stake at River Ridge in 1999.**



**Stephanie works many of the horses, at home and at shows.**



**Elly Brown gets last-minute instruction from Nicole before her Academy ride on Highpoint's Margarita.**

Nicole worked briefly for Andy and Lynda Freseth at Hollow Haven Farm. In 1995, she and Natalie began Foster Farm, leasing stalls at a dressage barn where they trained their own horses.

"We had a lot of friends as we grew up in the business," Nicole said. "If we had a problem, we could call Monty Wallen or Judy Jensen and tell them we couldn't get a horse to do this or that. They would tell us 'bring it over and we'll work with you for a day or two.' We were very lucky to have such good folks around us; back then there weren't many amateur-owner-trainers. I was 19 or 20 and Natalie was two years younger than I."

It was a natural progression for Nicole and Natalie to go from showing to buying young horses. They were a popular and successful pair.

Jensen recounted one of his favorite Nicole stories. It had nothing to do with horses.

"At one time, she dated the baseball player David Justice, who played for the New York Yankees. At one game, while she was seated with the players' wives, some people who spotted her started yelling 'Halle, Halle!' People thought she was Halle Berry (Justice's former wife.) She got scared and security took her out."

Actually, Justice played a huge part in Nicole's life. In early 1999, the couple got engaged and had a son later that year. David, Jr. now lives with his father in California. She says he is a super-athlete, especially with football and basketball and very, very smart. After she and Justice separated, she and David, Jr. moved away from Ohio, where she had done some modeling, and continued her Art Of Design, an interior design business in California.

"My work was mostly residential," she said, adding she started the business in 1998. "It was the first time I got paid by another person. I worked mostly high-end projects, working from blueprints on my largest project."

In 2003, Nicole married attorney Willie Briscoe. She and David, Jr. left sunny California and moved to Dallas. She continued to work in interior design until her second son, Mason, was born.

She giggled when she talked about her sons. "Mason is with me and on the honor roll; he's allergic to horses but keeps me company at the barn. David used to ride and even showed some but his real passion is football where he's a star quarterback."

"Mason is the reason I started the barn," she said. "When he was born, I didn't want to go back to work. I thought I could teach a few riding lessons and would have more time to spend with my boys."

Right. Instead she opted for one of the most challenging and often time-consuming professions there is. Initially, the business was Foster Farm South with her sister running the northern



**Katie Rich and CH La Bella Marietta are a formidable team in the Walk and Trot Division.**

'branch.' When Natalie closed the Minnesota operation, Nicole dropped the suffix.

Instead of simply having responsibility for her sons, Nicole has dozens of other 'children,' mostly girls. She also has a 'little sister,' better known as Assistant Trainer and Instructor Stephanie Corbin.

Interestingly enough, Debbie Graves, now an instructor for Jack Magill, played a big part in both Nicole and Stephanie's careers.

Nicole's showing a horse for Debbie more than 10 years ago led to her helping with students.

"I had wanted to work with her; however, when she got hurt and eventually quit, I had to do it on my own. I really didn't want to be a horse trainer; that wasn't my goal, my intent. When Mason was born, I didn't want to go back to work. I thought I could teach a few riding lessons and wouldn't have to get a real job," she said, laughing at the memory.

When Mason was three-months-old, Nicole acquired a lesson horse and did just that. She found an open door at Park Lane Equestrian Center, right in the heart of Dallas. It would have been hard to find a better place for a new lesson program. In time, however, the facility became multi-disciplinary, with hunters, jumpers, dressage and western horses dominating the scene. Nicole moved back to Rockwall. It wasn't long before she had a need for a good assistant. Stephanie Corbin filled that bill.



**Nicole and Stephanie celebrate with Sierra Sarmiento after Sierra's 2012 UPHA Exceptional Challenge Cup Overall National Championship win. It was the second of her three national championship victories.**



**Nicole quietly coaches her riders.**

Stephanie is Texas Saddlebred through and through. Three generations of her family have kept Saddle Horses and other show breeds 'in their shoes.' Being part of the Joe Bradshaw clan first provided Stephanie with riding lessons. Joe Bradshaw traded out shoeing with Janie Hamilton for his niece's lessons. Later, she began riding with Milligan Stables.

Like Nicole, Stephanie rode with Debbie Graves, showing "whatever they pulled out of the field." Debbie paired her with the mare Begin The Times in the early 2000s. Her highlights during that time included blue-ribbon drives in the Youth Pleasure Driving Challenges at Pin Oak Charity and Oklahoma Centennial and earning a ribbon in that class at Louisville. At age 17, she had made her first trip to Freedom Hall.

When Debbie operated her own business in suburban Dallas, Stephanie worked with her part-time while finishing high school. She remained there until Debbie joined Jack Magill's staff. At that point, Stephanie traveled for a bit before joining Nicole's program seven years ago.

Success came steadily. Present show riders Elizabeth Gersch, Loren Raines and Sierra Sarmento all began riding at the Rockwall facility. It seemed Foster Farm had found a permanent home; however, when the barn owner was killed in a drunk-driving accident, the property was sold.

"We had a pretty large program with 20 horses and had to move within 30 days," Nicole said. "We went back to Park Lane, always struggling to get arena time from the jumpers."

Even though Park Lane is an excellent location from the standpoint of attracting people to the Saddle Horse business, competing for arena time was a major problem. The Foster Farm team kept looking for a place that could accommodate their growing program.

Two years ago they stumbled upon Buena Vida ranch, 30 private acres located 15 minutes south of downtown Dallas. The facility features trails, pastures and two barns, one for the reining-horse trainer who works with the owner's children, and a 24-stall barn that's all Nicole's. Their customer base followed.

Bill Marple has had horses since he was a child in Indiana. Some of his show stock remain with Mike



*Nicole and Stephanie join Whitney Shore to celebrate one of her many wins on CH Harlem's Miss Abigail.*



*Stephanie's 'other vocation' is gymnastics. She enjoys flying above the ground on a trapeze or on a horse's back.*

McIntosh in his home state; others are housed at Foster Farm. And while he does most of the training of his own horses, he is in an excellent position to evaluate the Foster Farm program.

"I am happy to be part of the Foster Farm family," Bill said, explaining he has three horses there. "They're in a brand-new facility, with a nice, wide concrete aisle and a beautiful wash rack. They are knowledgeable about our horses, about feeding and all the other stuff that goes on. They do a really good job with what they have in terms of horses and riders.

"They both have a very good rapport with the kids. They've had a bunch of littler ones; that core has grown up a bit. Both do really, really well with the little ones and with those with special needs. To me, that is something special. Nicole has a really nice way with them; she's tough but not gratuitously. She has a good way about her, and keeps a good sense of humor with the kids. Stephanie does as well. They're like two peas in a pod.

"They prefer to buy older horses that know what they are doing; it's too hard to teach a kid and the horse at the same time. They haven't had anyone come from a horse family and could ride. Their riders have started from scratch.

"It's a happy, lively place," Bill said. "Kids are enjoying themselves immensely and the parents are, too. They're nice to be around. I will look around and wonder where the kids went. They're out on the trail riding bareback with halters. It's comical."

Elizabeth Gersch started in Academy while Nicole still was in Rockwall. Today, the 16-year-old shows Denmark's Encore in the Park Division. They won the Amateur Park qualifier at the recent Pin Oak Charity Horse Show and tied reserve in the championship, earning his CH status at the show.

"Nicole and Stephanie are good all-round trainers," Nicole Gersch said. "They're people the kids can relate to and enjoy being around. Nicole is not a yeller, but is quietly confident. She's not afraid to speak her mind, that's for sure."

Nicole Gersch smiled as she spoke of one 'riders' award' at Foster Farm. The annual Dusty Bottom Award goes to the person who has fallen off the most

during the year. The wall of fall keeps track of each rider's 'progress' in the contest.

Bryn Anderson has been a student of Nicole's since she was just four years old.

"Bryn was one of my very first students," Nicole said. "She has followed me all along the way and still rides with me today. She is more of a daughter than student to me. Bryn is a vibrant young lady who really loves her horse! She earned that (the Bullseye) award for just being Bryn."

In 2014, 13-year-old Bryn won the Bullseye Award, presented to one rider each year who exhibits extraordinary success, grace and compassion. The award is one that is very near and dear to Nicole's heart as it is named after her rescue turned lesson horse, Bullseye.

Petite, blond haired, blue-eyed Whitney Shore has been riding with the Foster Farm team for a little more than three years. She and CH Harlem's Miss Abigail have been a team since 2012. Most recently, she won the Junior Exhibitor Country Pleasure title at Pin Oak Charity Horse Show and a reserve in the very competitive 'open age' Country Pleasure Championship.

"She pushes me," Whitney said of her trainer. "She gives me a challenge that pushes me to the limit."

Lauren Raines and Gospel Song are no strangers to the winner's circle. She began riding with Nicole in Rockwall just before her sixth birthday.

"She just wanted to learn to ride. We weren't on a mission to know American Saddlebreds much less do so much showing," Raines' mother Rene said, adding she finds the breed magnificent and exciting.

Lauren began showing in Academy, graduating to walk and trot pleasure. She moved into canter at the UPHA/NTASHA Fall Classic. She won her championship class against a double-digit group of more experienced riders.

"I did cry," Rene said.

Another highlight of Lauren's career came while riding Academy. Nicole took a group of riders to Minnesota to show at Tanbark's Cavalcade of Roses.

"She won there," Rene said, calling it "an amazing trip. She was so little; I could see the love in her eyes, she was so proud of herself."



*Stephanie gives her son, Eden, a driving lesson.*

Rene had nothing but compliments for her trainers. “I can’t believe the loving but firm patience Nicole and Stephanie have with the kids. It’s really confidence-building. Most of the time, Lauren has ridden with Stephanie, although the last couple of years she has trained under both of them. I’m very confident with the ladies at Foster Farm.”

Teaching children is an art. Teaching, bringing an ‘exceptional rider’ to national championship level requires a degree of skill and patience far beyond that of the ordinary instructor. Stephanie and Nicole coached Sierra Sarmiento from Academy to winning the Exceptional Challenge Cup National Championship for three consecutive years.

“We started with them seven years ago,” Sierra’s mother, Glenda, said. “Nicole had a good reputation so we decided to go there. However, Stephanie has done most of the work with Sierra.”

“They’re both wonderful and very caring. They are about more than riding horses, but care about helping each rider become all they can be. They give encouragement, direction in life.”



*When she has a few minutes’ break, Nicole enjoys just spending time with her horses.*

As Sierra has won the Exceptional Challenge Cup three times, she no longer is eligible to compete in that discipline. However, she wants to keep riding, and has both Shot-A-Scotch and a Western horse, King of Krackers, waiting for her.

Sierra continues to experience major health problems which kept her out of the show ring last season. “She is improving,” her mother said. “She gives every day her best; it breaks my heart to see the pain she is in. She doesn’t get to ride as much as she would like; sometimes she just walks and feeds her horse; sometimes she rides him. Everyone has been incredibly supportive. Nicole and Stephanie aren’t just horse trainers but coaches for life.”

“That’s the biggest highlight in my career thus far,” Stephanie said. “Sierra’s wins are the proudest moments I’ve ever had professionally. I primarily have taught her; Nicole handles her clothes; her horse is my horse. The challenges she has inspire me. No matter what, she keeps going. And she is only 17.”

Things are good. The barn is open six days a week, although Stephanie comes in some Sundays to work with her daughter and niece. Saturdays are show horse day; Nicole takes Mondays off while Stephanie takes Tuesdays. That gives each of them the chance to work with all the horses.

“My daughter wants to do barrel racing; I can do stuff like that with her on Sundays. It’s something she and I do together; something no other kid can take away from her. I don’t care what kind of horses she does. She’s only nine and has done some Academy showing. She doesn’t want to give up Saddle Seat but wants to focus on barrels for a while,” Stephanie said.

There’s another, very different side to Stephanie Corbin. She is passionate about the trapeze ... and often can be found flying high above the ground, standing on her head or doing gymnastics on a horse’s back. From November until March, she teaches trapeze two evenings a week.

“I love it,” she said. “I don’t have to be great at trapeze; I do it for fun. Because of my horse skills, I often can get people who are afraid to swing from a trapeze to overcome their fear. I want to be at least as high off the ground as a horse’s back and being as high as I can get is fine with me. Some people think I’ll run away and join the circus, but I have a six-year-old and Lily. There’s no way I can go anywhere.”

“I know who I am,” she continued. “I love to do this because it’s an adventure, not because it’s a job. I do it because I love horses and I love kids.”

While Stephanie likes to spend her off-time flying above the ground, Nicole is more of a homebody.

“I enjoy relaxing, reading and movies,” she said. “I still dabble in interior design; I redid our whole house when I first bought it last year. I have a kid who needs his breakfast served, his lunches packed.”

Stephanie says, “Nicole is so quiet. She keeps to herself for the most part. She really is good at what she does. She has a knack for putting things together that look good. She can put a rider on the right horse, in the right suit and make them look amazing. She is able to do this part of the business so much better than I could ever imagine.”

During the summer, Foster Farms teaches 60 to 70 lessons a week. They may bring 20 or more horses to a local show.

“We have a nice-sized lesson program,” Nicole said. “A dozen kids routinely go to shows. Most of those own one or more horses; It’s nice-sized for what I want. I want to be a boutique barn. There are times I’ve had a little more than I’m comfortable with. I’m more satisfied bringing six to eight I know are really good.”

“It’s working,” she continued. “I have the best clients in the business. I grow them organically and don’t seek others’ clients. If someone is riding hunt or western, I don’t look to change them. My passion stirs something I’m proud of in my riders. The students that I’ve started are still part of this world. If it hadn’t been for Foster Farm, they might never have stepped into Saddlebreds. They’re doing Saddlebreds because of little old Foster Farm.”

Nicole summed up her life, her passion in a few words. “I’ve been a customer and written big checks. I have a different expectation of what that entails. I know how I want to be treated. In college, I worked for Chanel cosmetics. I’m customer service oriented, that’s my stich. Horses are a natural progression.

“It feels very right.”



*Foster Farm is more than work. Nicole and Stephanie took Katie Rich, Whitney Shore and Lauren Raines on a hike during their trip to Kentucky.*



*Whitney Shore and Stephanie often travel together.*



*Nicole and her sons, David and Mason, enjoyed seeing the White House on their Washington vacation.*