

FUTURE FORUM

The Up and Coming of Young Trainers

by Leeann Mione

This is another segment in a Saddle Horse Report series featuring the stories of young trainers from across the country. There isn't a school for horse training outside of the "school of hard knocks" so it's interesting to follow the paths taken by these young professionals as they pay their dues in their quest for making a successful career out of their passion for horses.

This week we are featuring Tori Heck who is the trainer at Skyuka Stables, LLC in Statesville, North Carolina.

Give us a breakdown of where it all began for you. How did you get involved in horses and at what age?

TORI: I began riding horses when I was eight-years-old. A year prior to starting riding lessons, my brother had passed away and my mom thought horses would be something that could help us heal. She and my dad had Quarter Horses before they had kids and she wanted to be around them again so I began riding at a family friend's barn, and shortly after, began showing.

At the age of nine, we bought a horse from Tattersalls, and boarded him at a barn close to our house. Every day after school my mom would take me to the barn and I would work my horse and my mom would clean his stall. We went on to buy and sell a few horses and I got older and more competitive.

When I was 13, I was approached by Brent and Jane Jacobs, with whom I began taking my first professional lessons. I rode with them for the rest of my junior exhibitor years in equitation.

What made you decide to become a professional trainer?

TORI: I knew from the time I was eight that I wanted to be a professional horse trainer. I never experienced anything I loved more, so I focused everything on horses.

Have you worked under any other trainers? If so, who?

TORI: I worked under Smith, Alexandra, and Sandy Lilly for eight years.

Who are your role models/mentors? Why?

TORI: I would certainly say I was very fortunate to have the Lilly family as my mentors for the last eight years. They taught me the definition of hard work and what it takes to succeed. I learned that it's not just about learning how to put a world champion in the ring, but how to dig out a manure spreader when it gets stuck, or change a tire on the way to a horse show. They always held me accountable for my best work and I couldn't be more thankful for the way that shaped me as a person, and as a professional.

What is your favorite thing about being a trainer?

TORI: There are so many things I love about being a horse trainer. I love watching young horses develop into show horses. Just learning each one's personality and deciding how to fully bring out each individual's full potential.



What is the hardest thing about being a trainer?

TORI: The hardest thing about being a trainer for me is trying to balance the needs of each horse and customer and trying to do what's absolutely best for each.

What advice do you have for the younger generation who have their eyes set on becoming horse trainers?

TORI: I think it's very important to go work for someone who has proven themselves and someone you respect. I think it's important not to have high expectations when you go to work for someone, but to work hard, stay humble and prove you are worth good opportunities.

Learn to excel at even the grunt work because it will make you a better leader.

Also, try not to compare yourself to where other people are at in their careers. Just focus on what you are doing and where you are going.

What do you think is essential for the industry to focus on to ensure its success?

TORI: I think it's essential to continue to get people involved in Saddlebreds and show them what an amazing breed and community it is. I think we need to focus on how to get more spectators in the stands and also find jobs for Saddlebreds that are not going to be show horses.