

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 Sarah Russell who is the owner and trainer of Sarah Russell Stables in Wesley Chapel, Florida.

Give us a breakdown of where it all began for you.

How did you get involved in horses and at what age?

RUSSELL: My mother is a veterinarian and a "horse girl" herself so horses have always been a part of my life. I grew up showing in local 4-H shows with my grade pony. We would show in every division we could – saddle seat equitation and pleasure, western pleasure, trail, dressage – you name it.

A local trainer named Jodi Higdon brought her American Saddlebred, Blackberry Blues, to do a demonstration at one of our 4-H shows and I fell in love. That's when I knew Saddlebreds would be a part of my life forever. I took lessons with Jodi and she gave me a fantastic start. She taught me what it was like to be an equestrian.

What made you decide to become a professional trainer?

RUSSELL: I always juggled the ideas of being either a horse trainer or a veterinarian. After graduating with my Bachelor of Animal Science, I had an interim year while I awaited vet school applications. I moved to Kentucky and began working what was meant to be a temporary job with Nelson Green. He offered me a permanent job and helped to reaffirm what my heart always desired, to be a horse trainer. I've never looked back.

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

RUSSELL: Yes, I have worked under several other trainers and I've learned something from every one of them. I would say the majority of my training ways and the way that I teach have come from my time spent at Nelson Green Stables and from my time riding for and also working for Kathy and Erin Boggs of Cape Cod Farm.

Who are your role models/mentors? Why?

RUSSELL: I have a few: My mother has always been my biggest role model. She amazes me with her work ethic, her morality, and her love for her family. She has taught me the value of hard work and how that turns into success. I value all of the lessons I've learned from her, whether I always realized that or not.

I have also always looked up to Kathy Boggs as a mentor. I grew up riding at Cape Cod Farm, a place that she built. I have aspired to turn my program into something as close to that one as I can. My memories from Cape Cod are some of my most cherished and I hope to provide that for every student that rides at SRS.

I also admire and respect Kathy's daughter, and one of my great friends, Erin [Boggs], for continuing the legacy at Cape Cod and building her own barn family as successful and happy as anywhere in the country.

What is your favorite thing about being a trainer?

RUSSELL: It's hard to choose just one thing but if I have to I would say watching my hard work and efforts pay off. Whether that be putting a three-year-old that I bred in the ring for the first time, equitating a horse, or having success with a "project" horse. It's really fun to look back on what you had when you started and the finished product that you have produced.

What is the hardest thing about being a trainer?

RUSSELL: The hardest part for me has been anytime something has gone wrong for a junior exhibitor. Most of the time as adults, trainer or owner, we can handle the tough blows that the horse industry sometimes has to offer. It's harder when children are involved. I have to say some of my most trying times have had to do with things like that, whether it be an injury or



a loss of a horse or just an unexpected outcome, helping my students through those times have been some of the hardest times for me. I would do anything to always be able to "make it better" for them. Luckily I've also got some pretty great kids and we have always pulled through together!

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

RUSSELL: Make sure you are not afraid of hard work! Make sure you know the difference between being an accomplished equestrian and a horse trainer. I had a lot of success as a junior exhibitor but when I became a groom and then eventually an assistant trainer I learned that there is so much more to it than just being a good rider. Learn how to care for a horse before you learn how to train one. Put your time in and work for people you admire and respect, work hard, and listen.

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

RUSSELL: I think our industry has some excellent leadership right now and we are on the right track. I think right now we need to focus on how best to emerge from this pandemic successfully and to help save our professional members that this has taken the biggest toll on. It has been amazing to see people come together and support each other.