

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 Katy Sterba who is the trainer at Famesgate Stables, LLC in Troy, Virginia.

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

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

KATY: My mom loved horses from a young age and her passion never stopped. When she and my dad were a young couple, they went to the south valley in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she saw her first Saddlebred and from that moment on she was a dedicated Saddlebred enthusiast who turned me into one as well. I showed in my first lead line class when I was two years old and have not stopped.

What made you decide to become a professional trainer?

KATY: I went to the University of Virginia with the intention of working in some type of international medicine. After college, I joined the Peace Corps and moved to Senegal, West Africa where I worked as a health education volunteer thinking it would lead to a career in international development.

I finished my 27 months as a volunteer but realized it was not the direction I saw myself heading long-term. I moved to Washington, DC and started working for a bi-partisan lobbying company and of all things I did before training horses, this was the closest I came to finding an alternative career. However, I kept coming back to horses as the thing that I was most passionate about.

I took a weekend and went with my mom and Smith Lilly to Kentucky to look at young horses and Smith asked quite a bit about my job and somewhere on that trip he mentioned the idea of training horses. It started a small thought in my head that made me think harder about my career choice. That Christmas my brother and I had far too much wine and a very lengthy talk about "life" wherein he urged me to follow my passion.

Soon after I called Smith to discuss and he said something I will never forget, "There will always be an open cubicle somewhere". Albeit a depressing thought, it had a profound impact on my decision to move to West Virginia. I could not get rid of the horse bug and here I am almost eight years later.

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

KATY: The first trainers I worked for were Smith, Alexandra and Sandy Lilly. It was eye-opening to realize how much I did not know and there truly are not words to describe my gratitude to Mercer Springs for their teaching and patience with what I am most certain was a very annoying 20-something-year-old version of myself.

After about two years, I moved to Kentucky to work under Bret and Susi Day. This was an amazing opportunity in a very different setting. I met and made relationships with people whom I likely would not have gotten to know before. I also met my husband while working in Kentucky so personally it had a significant effect on my life.

After two years, I began working with TJ Santaferri at Stachowski Farm where I was exposed to quite a few young horses and learned a ton.

Who are your role models/mentors? Why?

KATY: IMy parents. My mom was compassionate, kind, and never failed to see the good in anything. My dad is hard-working, too smart for his own good, and dedicated to whatever he puts his mind to.



Professionally Smith, Alexandra, and Sandy Lilly had the greatest impact on my training philosophy. Being the first trainers I worked with, they shaped me from the very outset and I learned different aspects of a training operation from each of them.

What is your favorite thing about being a trainer?

KATY: Figuring out how to help a horse reach their full potential whether it is a young horse just learning how to long line/jog/ride or pairing a seasoned horse with an amateur. Every horse is different and it is extremely satisfying to make progress with something new.

What is the hardest thing about being a trainer?

KATY: Making sure that we make the right decisions for our horses and customers. I tend to be a bit high-strung and can get frustrated when it seems like things are not going right. I'm getting better at taking a step back and breathing but my type-A personality makes that hard on occasion.

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

KATY: Put in the hard work first and go learn from someone whom you respect. This is not an easy job and there is so much to learn - take advantage of those with expertise and knowledge because I have found most everyone is willing to share and help you grow.

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

KATY: Getting more people into the business. Our farm is in an area that is predominantly hunt seat and even those barns have noticed a decline in new riders and owners. This is an expensive sport which limits some people in what they can afford to do but there are some great lesson programs that have introduced new people to the industry and I hope that we can be a part of helping that side grow at Famesgate.