

LAURA O'CONNOR

For many successful young riders, the indoors is a stepping stone to a professional career. One such rider is Laura O'Connor whose championship in the AHSA Medal Finals at Harrisburg led to Grand Prix success and riding internationally. Laura is now in New York where she is busy teaching and training.

By Ann Jamieson

Grand Prix rider Laura O'Connor is now based in North Salem, New York, after many years on the west coast and then in Wellington, Florida. She is available on a free-lance basis for teaching, training, riding and clinics.

Teaching Tactics

Laura's goal is to turn out equestrians who are competent riders and knowledgeable about their horses, not just passengers on a professionally prepped horse. Her hands on, individual approach ensures that riders know not only what they are doing, but why they are doing it. Laura tailors her teaching to the individual horse and rider. She develops a rider's "toolbox," starting with a solid foundation and teaching riders what to do in every situation to be effective and safe. Her approach is always personal; riders are not handed off to a less experienced assistant.

In her training, Laura stresses proper education for the rider, and focuses on the needs of the horse. "The main goal," she states, "is to have a happy horse."

To accomplish that, riders need to know what type of bit their horse is wearing, what the bit's action is and why it is appropriate for that horse. They should learn how shoeing affects the way the horse goes, what medications are needed to maintain the horse's health, and what saddle is appropriate for their horse, as well as why.

In addition, they should know how to wrap, poultice, tack up and groom. They should be not only riders, but horsemen, all-around equestrians.

Riding Background

Growing up in Weston, CT, Laura rode with the legendary Ronnie Mutch and Timmy Kees at Nimrod Farm. Under the Nimrod banner she won the AHSA (now USEF) Medal Finals, and then went on to ride at Fairfield County Hunt Club with Olympian Leslie Burr Howard. Laura was a fierce competitor under Leslie's watchful eye. "Leslie has nerves of steel," states Laura. "She taught me to believe in myself and my horses over big jumps."

When Laura moved to the west coast, she was coached by Will Simpson. An Olympic Gold Medalist, Will says of Laura, "I had the opportunity to work with Laura for a couple of years when she first moved out west. I was impressed with her accomplishments (she had just won the Medal Finals) and very impressed with the way she tailored her riding and training for each individual horse. I love to see that. She had a lot of different horses and she adapted her ride to suit the horse, she didn't try to make the horse adapt to her style. She's very cool under pressure, and great at mapping out a strategic plan to produce the best results."

Competing at the Grand Prix level, Laura represented the



Laura and Andrew Biancur, Jr. on their wedding day



Proud coach Laura with student Peyton Wadley

← Laura competing on Pressurized at Fairfield in Grand Prix

U.S. in international competitions in Monterey, Mexico, and Calgary, Canada. Laura was Leading Lady Rider at Spruce Meadows in Calgary for an unprecedented three consecutive years. Riding her stallion Oskar, she won the Queen Elizabeth II Cup on Saturday, and the Chrysler Derby on Sunday, a performance no other female rider has ever achieved. Her equitation horse, Glen Owen, was recently inducted into the Canadian Hall of Fame as the winningest equitation horse of all time.

Sharing Her Knowledge

Laura teaches her students the importance of developing relationships with their horses. "Horses are always talking to us, always saying something with their eyes. There's nothing better than having a relationship, to go into the ring with your partner, to be a team."

Laura believes that no two horses are alike, and neither are any two riders. Each horse and rider have their own individual strengths and weaknesses. Laura tailors her teaching to fit the horse and rider's specific needs.

While Laura embraces the education she's had, she is also "always learning, evolving, leaving myself open to new ideas. The past is great, but living in the moment is so important when you work with horses. Being present is crucial."

"Riding," adds Laura, "is not just show jumping; it's life. You learn so many life lessons while riding."

Member of the elite "Million Dollar Club" (for money won in professional hunter divisions) Peter Pletcher has known Laura for over 20 years. "I've done business with her buying and selling. She's very responsible, she's a good teacher, she's very good at matching horse and rider, and she's a really good rider as well."

Top horseman and judge Carleton Brooks says of Laura, "She is extremely enthusiastic, focused, and has a huge well of knowledge to draw from. And she is in it for the longevity of horse and rider and not for instant success."

One-On-One

When a new client first meets with Laura, she takes the time to listen. She gets to know them, their horse and their goals. "It's so important that kids and adults get matched with the right instructor and the right horse so they're safe and they can accomplish their goals. I sit down and talk with the riders and find out what they want, what their expectations are. Many clients tell me no other trainer has ever bothered to ask them these important and pertinent questions before."

One of the skills Laura prides herself in is being able to match horse and rider. "To do that correctly you have to look at all the variables."

And as tough and competitive as Laura is as a rider, as a coach her style is just as much fun as it is serious.

One of Laura's current students is Peyton Wadley who moved east from California. Laura found Peyton the perfect horse in Wellington: Falandor van den Brosrand, aka "Fred," an 18.1 hand equitation horse. Laura and Peyton set a goal to qualify for the PHA Finals with Fred, and they just reached that goal. Fred is already a favorite of the Wadley's and Peyton's dad Mark can often be seen grazing the horse.

Recently married to her longtime boyfriend Andrew Biancur, Jr., Laura is excited about a new path she is pursuing: getting her judge's card. Carol Molony is mentoring her in the process.

To contact Laura, check out her website www.locequestriantventures.com or email her at locequestrian@gmail.com. Ω

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