

THE BUSINESS OF EQUITATION

As Seen By the Master of the Art

An interview with Crystal Farms' Mary Carlton on teaching equitation, selecting show horses and competing at the top levels of the Morgan show ring.

By Alicia Fraser

It would be impossible to have a conversation about equitation within the Morgan breed that does not include Mary Carlton.

From her early days as a fierce equitation competitor herself, to her more recent triumphs as the instructor of numerous world champions in multiple seats, Mary lives and breathes equitation.

That is not to say that she is not a phenomenally gifted trainer as well. Mary's 2011 season saw her capturing wins in everything from junior horse classes to Ladies English Pleasure and Open Hunter Pleasure World Championships, with countless victory passes in between.

It is only fitting that someone who studied the art of equitation as a young lady would go on to be living proof of the strength of the form to function principals upon which all equitation schools are built. Mary is not just a phenomenally talented trainer, she is an exquisitely beautiful rider.

And fortunately, she is blessed with the rare ability to not only do, but to teach.

As a life long student in the art of equitation myself, I was all too happy to accept the challenge of writing up an equitation interview with Mary Carlton. I found her to be articulate and

An emotional moment on Indian Creek Bali Ha'i in 2011 when Mary won the Hunter Pleasure World Championship for the fifth time.



Photo © Howard Schatzberg

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entertaining, and I am thrilled with the knowledge she was kind enough to share with me that I, in turn, get to pass along to all of you.

Read it once, read it twice, read it 20 times. This is the stuff from which world champion equitation riders are created.

First things first. The majority of your riders haven't ever sat on a horse when they come to you. How and where do your students come from, and how do they find out about Crystal Farms?

We do some advertising locally, and we are partnered with our local school's recreational department. They send students out for a one-day camp, several times a year, and we get to introduce 30 or so kids to our horses and our program. Once they find out about us, a lot of them learn more about us through our website. From there they will often call and schedule their first lessons.

How many lessons do you give in a typical week?

Thirty to 40 lessons a week. I don't do the majority of the beginner lessons. I have a super assistant, Danni, who handles most of that. When I do get to do some of the beginner lessons, I find it is a really nice break from the show riding lessons. It is exciting to watch them get their first trots and their first canters, but I primarily handle the show riders and that piece of our lesson program.

How do you select which students will move up from the beginner lesson program into your advanced show rider program?

The biggest thing for me, even more important than having a

ton of natural talent, is having passion for the sport. We tend to take a special interest in the kids who show a genuine passion for the horses. A lot of times the kids who have a little more natural ability get more excited about progressing to the show ring all on their own, and it is always helpful when the ones who are really into it are also gifted. We give those students more of a challenge earlier on,

maybe introduce them to some of the nicer horses, move them into some private lessons. We start individualizing the program, begin selecting and refining which seat is going to best fit the rider, when we identify one who wants to do the extra work.

How do you go about that, deciding which seat would be the best for each student? What do you look for in a saddle seat rider versus a Western or hunt rider?

All three seats require a ton of body control. Body type and personality are things I use to help determine where I think a student can go the farthest competitively. I like my saddle seat riders to be longer limbed and taller in frame. A super short one I would be more likely to steer into hunt seat or Western. If they aren't really aggressive, we look to the Western

division. The more assertive and energetic kids will usually end up going saddle seat. But all of our advanced kids, regardless of what seat they show in, ride all three seats at home, and they look forward to that, especially over the winter. We won't switch a saddle seat rider to practice hunt seat during the show season because the posting and hip angles are so different, but it helps keep a student fresh mentally and physically to do something different in the off season. Western follows very closely to saddle seat, so those riders switch back and forth beautifully. Moving them around and having



Mary shows her versatility winning the 2011 Ladies English Pleasure World Championship aboard Zanetti.

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them try different things and ride different horses makes them more well-rounded as a rider, regardless of where they compete.

Which of the three seats do you think is most challenging in terms of creating the perfect horse and rider pair?

I am going to say Western because the smoothness of the horse is paramount. You can't hide anything in Western. They are moving slower down the rail, so there is more time for the criticism of details and steadiness. And a hunter has to be smooth too, because of the sitting trot. With saddle seat you can use speed and ringmanship to help the horse that is a little rougher gaited or inconsistent.

So you have selected a seat, you have developed the rider... How do you get them to go to the first horse show and when do you have the conversation about buying the first horse?

We do a small show in our barn. We don't have a tournament program very close to us, so we have to hold the horse show ourselves, which actually has some advantages. We can do whatever we want! They can be on school horses

or show horses, we can split the kids up any number of ways, we can add what classes we need to and change it again for the next show. It is nice that the kids don't have to own their own horses to start, but they get to our little show and see some of the other kids on their show horses. The adults start mingling, and at the end of the day, you have parents who are starting to ask the right questions, which is an easier lead in to that conversation than me going to them with a statement about purchasing a horse. I find that riders often hit a plateau in the lesson program. They aren't challenged any more, and they are ready for more specific and specialized instruction that

our school horses aren't helping them get, and that is when I start to push for the purchase of a horse. I don't like leasing so much. I feel like the attachment of the child to the horse is important for the development of the team, and when the student knows that this is a partnership based on time, not achievement, it is a lot harder to get the student to stick with the horse through the inevitable

rough patches. I want that emotional investment. Also, when we are having those first conversations about buying a horse, I will show the customer actual bills: vet bills, show bills, farrier bills, all of it. I don't want to get someone into a situation where they buy a nice horse or two and then can't afford the monthly bills or can't afford to take it to a horse show.

When you are shopping for a horse, do you try to fit the rider to a particular horse, or do you try to make a horse for a particular rider?

There is an obvious advantage to having a horse in the barn that you have been working. I know what it is like on its good days and its bad days. The trick is in the timing of having a rider that is ready to buy that also suits a horse you are training

and happen to be trying to sell. That doesn't happen very often. It is tough when you have a great horse and wish someone in the barn would step up and buy it, but you don't have that rider ready just yet. It is a timing issue. When the rider is ready to buy, we look in our own barn first, and if we don't have "The One," we go shopping for that perfect fit. I want a horse that is going to be a challenge. Now, it has to be an attainable challenge, and it must be attainable within a reasonable time frame, but I want a horse that is going to push the student in terms of horsemanship. Never settle. If it takes a year, it takes a year. I can't say it enough. Never settle.



Mary aboard LR Ami Beauregard with her mentor Sandy Sessink and Calvin Sessink in 1991 when she won the Morgan world's saddle seat equitation "triple crown."

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It is more important to me to match personalities than it is to create any one “look.” Obviously, a taller rider needs a bigger horse, but if I really like a horse and think it will work for the rider, I don’t hesitate to go against conventional wisdom and aim at matching personalities over creating a cookie cutter picture.

Also, our kids don’t stay with the same horse for their entire careers. I think owning several different horses makes for a more well-rounded rider, and I want to make the best horseman at the end of their careers that I can, and no one horse is diverse enough over a course of years to push the rider to learn new things. I love having a rider compete in many seats and many divisions. Showing in pleasure makes you stronger in equitation and visa versa.

Where and how do you go about shopping for horses?

I am always watching horses at the shows. If there is a horse I have always loved, I will keep it in mind for years and wait for the right rider to come along to go buy that horse. Even when we aren’t buying, we are shopping. There are certain trainers I am quicker to go to when I am ready to buy. I like a trainer who schools the horse with sound equitation principals, teaching the horse to bend, teaching the horse to go straight, a sound mind, an understanding of a good canter departure, and that the trainer can tell me those kinds of things about their horses. They understand that what I need in an equitation horse is different than what I need in a pleasure horse. That doesn’t mean I need the horse equitaded, either. In fact, I prefer to do the pattern work myself. And there are some trainers that I have purchased from before that I was able to follow really well, so I am quicker to go back to them the next time around.

No matter what you do, or how careful you are, it is inevitable that you sometimes make a “bad buy.” How do you handle that in a way that helps the customer recover financially and keeps them willing to move forward with another horse?

Unfortunately, that does happen often. You are dealing with horses and kids, two things that are constantly changing in big

ways. Maybe you get the horse and discover that the horse isn’t really suited for equitation. The first thing I do is try to find a job that the horse truly enjoys and can do very well so that we can be sure that the horse goes on to have a good home and a successful career. I promise all of my horses that if they are good citizens, I will find them a job they like; if they tell me what they want to be, I will find them a good family. And if you can find the horse a job he is good at, that is the first step to recovering financially because you can then market the horse in a positive direction. Another thing that happens is I get the horse home and the personalities just don’t work. I like to challenge my riders, and once in a while I do bite off more than my rider can chew. Sometimes I think the student needs a tougher

horse to push them to the next level, and then I discover that isn’t the case, or the kid fails to step up for whatever reason. In that case, I try to adjust accordingly when I am shopping for their next horse. I think the most important thing is being honest with people. When I know it isn’t going to work, I straight up tell them that.

How do you go about handling a student who appears to be losing interest?

That is a tough one. I have been lucky that I haven’t lost many, but it is hard every time it happens. I will talk to the parents, but



Aboard Graycliff Miss Liberty who won the Hunter Pleasure World Championship in back to back years, in 2007 and 2008.

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more often than not, I will sit the student down and ask them what is going on. Sometimes it is that the horse is too hard, or that they are not enjoying the pressures of competition, or the program is simply too serious. So we get a different horse, or we go to different shows, or we switch divisions. Those are all issues I can help them overcome. But sometimes it is a social thing; they want to do more things at school, or they want a car, or they have discovered boys. Those, sadly, are the ones I have to make myself let go.

Let's talk a little about your actual lesson program structure and rider development methods. First off, do you prefer group or private lessons?

I like both and we do a lot of both. Group lessons are great for the advanced rider to practice with other horses and for practicing ringmanship. Group lessons are also good for the equitation horses. They get to practice patience in the line-up and practice leaving the group to go perform their pattern. I use private lessons for making the specific, detailed corrections, and also for tackling long standing bad habits, or correcting a recurring mistake. We may have a whole lesson where all we do is pick up a left lead canter. You can't really do that in a group setting. I do more private lessons when I have a new team that I am trying to get to "click." But eventually, they have to go into the group program. It is the only way to practice the show ring setting.

Tell me about your lunge line lessons. What are some of the exercises you like best? And do you have different exercises for the different seats?

I have an awesome assistant, Dani, who has a strong background in vaulting, of all things, and she does our lunge line lessons with a vaulting surcingle, not a saddle. So the rider is essentially riding bareback. She will sometimes have two or three kids riding together, which they think is great fun, but her methods also correct a crooked or a twisted rider. If I have a student who is hanging up in one stirrup, or badly dropping a shoulder, she can help them find a strong center of balance again using the bareback lunge lesson. It is amazing how much a bareback lesson can help straighten a rider. And Danni will go to extremes to correct that. She will tie a weight on the too high hand, or put a weight on one ankle and then give an entire lesson that way to help center a crooked rider. We don't adjust our lunge exercises too much for the different seats. We want a strong core and a balanced seat from all of our riders. They all need to be able to ride well in their balance

seat, without stirrups, and free of reins.

Anyone who has taught equitation knows that there are riders who naturally "get" diagonals, and riders, who regardless of talent, find them to be very challenging. What do you do for the student who struggles with diagonals?

This hits close to home for me because I was not very good at diagonals myself until an embarrassing age. I think for some of the kids it is easier to teach them to come up with the correct shoulder because a lot of riders can't see whether they are correct or not once they pick up a random diagonal. Diagonals can hurt confidence because it is one of the few things where we can look

at it, and it is right or wrong, black or white. If I have a student who is working diligently and they have an extra hard time with it, I don't overemphasize it when they miss it. Ultimately, I would rather have a confident pleasure rider than an equitation rider who feels like they have failed because they can't find diagonals well. Their self-esteem is more important than their division, and we work at it until they get it, but maybe don't compete in equitation until they can do their diagonals well.

Once you are at the horse show, how do you prepare a rider for their equitation classes?

We are fortunate that we can take a lesson horse to the shows with us. Sometimes we will do a practice ride on the show horse at the beginning of the week. But I really like them to get into the main ring on the practice horse.

We always walk the pattern, mark our points in the ring, and we also practice the pattern back at the barn. We talk about the pattern; they have to repeat their pattern easily and often, so that when they get to the warm-up ring before the class, we can focus on the rail work.

How do you handle a nervous rider?

I find that the adult amateurs get more nervous than the equitation riders. Regardless, the best thing for a nervous rider is that practice horse. Ride time on a horse that I don't have to worry about tiring the day before the class is a huge help because they can ride a lot and go through the motions until they feel good again. It reminds the rider that they do in fact know what they are doing. Once I know I have an unusually nervous rider on my hands, we do more group lessons when we get back home and I make them practice maneuvering around the ring all the time so that moving off the rail becomes more second nature, and they are more likely



Photo © Ken Martin

Mary relaxing at home.

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to do that even when they are nervous.

True or False. A saddle seat rider has to emphasize show ring strategy more than a Western rider.

True. And I would say that a hunt seat rider has to be almost as aggressive as a saddle seat rider. I still have the conversation with my Western riders, but it is different. I want my Western riders to be able to work well off the rail, but we do that to reposition, not to make a pass. We had a really slow Western horse a few years ago, very beautiful, but very slow, and she had to ride him like a saddle seat horse and use her midpoints, and cut her diamonds. That was an exception because her horse was so slow she wouldn't have gotten seen at all otherwise. With a saddle seat rider, or a hunt rider, they have to cut their ring. They have to leave the rail. They have to go down the middle. They have to get out there and demand to be noticed.

How do you "teach" attitude and expression?

We don't, really. I teach ringmanship and I teach them how to cut the ring. I feel like that attitude comes from being strong and confident. So I work on making them fit, well-rounded riders who know how to use a ring. That comes off as having an aggressive attitude and that is what gets rewarded by the judges.

How do you prepare a rider for their first Grand National? What do you do differently to prepare a rider for that level of competition as opposed to, say, their first horse show?

You have to have some goals. I think goal setting at that level is key. "Our goal is to make the top ten," our "Our goal is

to make the Medal Finals." We set the goal before we leave for the show, which I think frees them up to focus on what they need to do before they get caught up in who they need to beat. We are pretty intense going into Grand National. We do more private lessons, more frequent lessons, more pattern work, and we talk a lot about how to work through the three judge system.

It is important to me that they understand the three judge system and that they have three people in front of whom they need to look right. We also encourage our riders to go to the gym, and we ask them to build up their cardio training because the classes are longer. I also love yoga for my riders because it emphasizes the same concepts that we work on in equitation; holding a pose, balancing and stretching the body. I want them to be fit and athletic when they want to compete at the highest levels.

I have to ask, because every instructor has them, what are your pet peeves within each of the three seats?

That's easy! With Western, I don't like a forced, unnatural elbow or an overarched back. I want a relaxed, beautiful picture. I

want smooth, not stiff. With hunt seat, I dislike a lower leg that is forced away from the barrel of the horse. The calf should be against the horse with a deep heel, propelling the horse from the seat. In saddle seat, a rider with too high hands drives me nuts. It isn't effective and it hurts the overall picture. At the end of the day, I want a balanced rider with a lot of body control who understands their horse. I want a rider who is confident in their skills, and confident in their mount. If the rider is centered, comfortable and confident, and has a horse that tries to help, all of the other pieces fall into place. ■



At home at Crystal Farms where Mary makes it all happen.