

DEVON HORSE SHOW WHERE CHAMPIONS MEET

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“I think if Devon ever moved, unless we built a place that looked exactly like the Devon that we all know and love, it would just be another horse show,” says show manager David Distler. *LAURA LEMON PHOTO*

Struggles Of The Standalone Horse Show In A Mega-Circuit World

Shows that run just one or two weeks are being forced to change to survive, but what do the losses and evolutions mean to the health of the sport and its culture?

By **Laura Lemon**

For almost a century, the greatest hunter riders gravitated to the Warrenton Horse Show in Virginia's Piedmont region, where the sport's fanciest horses were on display in one ring.

"When I was a little girl, when we first came to Virginia to show, to come to the Warrenton Pony Show and the Warrenton Horse Show was like going to the Magic Kingdom," National Show Hunter Hall of Famer and Warrenton Horse Show board member Betty Oare says. "It was really very, very special, and it was a big A show. There was the Virginia circuit in August; you started in Staunton, then you went to Hot Springs, back to Richmond for Deep Run and over to Warrenton. This was in August, and it was called the big four. And people from all over—I mean, Ohio, Kentucky—came to those shows, but particularly Warrenton."

But by the late 1990s, with its Labor Day date falling just after the qualifying cutoff for the fall indoor horse shows, Warrenton's entries were on the decline. The sport was reshaping as the industry leaned into bigger business, multi-ring shows. The word "circuit" no longer meant a culmination of weekends at various locations, but many weeks spent at one.

"It's a very, very expensive project these days to even go to a horse show," says Oare, who lives in Warrenton, "but to put on a horse show when every single thing has got to be perfect, if you don't have the best footing in the world, the best stabling in the world, or this or that, they are going to go somewhere else. That's come along in these last 20 years or whatever, and it costs a lot of money to have those perfections at a horse show."

So, 1996 marked Warrenton's last run as an A-rated show.

"Certainly, with the trend in horse showing, our dates and being a one-ring show, we felt like that was a good move for us to help the show survive and thrive," says co-president Hilary Gerhardt of Catlett, Virginia.

The facility's 8.74 acres, which have hosted the show since 1900, weren't large enough for the kind of amenities riders had come to expect at premier shows.

"We had a single A show, and it lasted, but it was dying on the vine," says Oare. "It broke my heart when we said, 'Oh, we have got to not be an A show anymore.' It was always a big A show, but it was the right thing to do. We weren't staying alive."

It's a business all totally ingrained in the lifestyle and everything else. You can't separate it."

—John Madden

Since becoming C-rated, Warrenton has turned to its community. With more freedom to create a tailor-made schedule, classes such as a \$5,000 hunter classic under the lights and a day devoted to foxhunters—with an adjoining tailgate competition—grace the prize list.

"The one thing that we hear over and over again is that [for] exhibitors, it's very special for them to be able to come into the ring, receive their award with the grandstand in the background," Gerhardt says. "Those trophies date back, many of them from the very beginning, and [we] have the presentation and the fanfare that often these bigger horse shows are just not able to do. We are a one-ring show, and so it's a really wonderful spectator show. What I hear also within our community is that [for] a lot of people, [their] first introduction to horse showing is at Warrenton."

Though Warrenton adapted, not all standalone shows can do so. How and why are they being forced to change, and what's the cost to the horse industry—fiscally and culturally—if these traditions are lost?



THE STATE OF THE UNION

The standalone show format—often benefiting a hunt or a charity—was the standard nationwide before Gene Mische established professional management company Stadium Jumping Inc. in the 1970s.

“When I was starting out, I remember the first time we did two weeks in Ocala [Florida], people were just, ‘Two weeks in one place? Wow,’ ” says David Distler, who runs the Washington International (Maryland) and co-runs the Devon Horse Show (Pennsylvania). “Or two weeks in Palm Meadows, Florida, and then Tampa [Florida] was three weeks long—and people were just amazed.”

In the 50 years since, the horse market has embraced the circuits model started by Stadium Jumping and other companies—and it’s snowballed. Now, the Winter Equestrian Festival runs for 13 weeks in Wellington, Florida.

“What used to be ‘the circuit’ or WEF, the winter three months, has now turned into really from Nov. 15 through basically the end of April,” says Heritage Farm owner

and trainer Andre Dignelli of Katonah, New York.

On the winter 2022 calendar in Florida alone, there are six circuits running at the same time: WEF, HITS Ocala, World Equestrian Center—Ocala, The Ridge in Wellington, Fox Lea Farm in Venice and TerraNova in Sarasota.

Outside the sunshine state, the Desert Circuit (California), Great Lakes Equestrian Festival (Michigan), Kentucky Horse Park spring and summer series, Gulf Coast Winter Series (Mississippi), HITS Saugerties (New York), Tryon International Equestrian Center (North

The Upperville Colt & Horse Show (Va.) used to be held entirely on grass but has transitioned to all-weather footing to keep up with consumer expectations.

KIMBERLY LOUSHIN PHOTO

Carolina), Texas Winter Series, Vermont Summer Festival and Summer-in-the-Rockies (Colorado), among others, offer weeks of competition in one location.

“We always get what we want,” says Olympic show jumping trainer John Madden, of Cazenovia, New York, and Wellington, Florida. “The market dictates it. The cost and savings [of staying in one place favors the circuits]. It’s easier to train your horses. It’s nicer for the professionals. So, our sport/business is just reacting to the market and doing it that way.”

In 2010, the U.S. Equestrian Federation held 151 “series events,” defined as three or more weeks of competition at one venue (though not necessarily back-to-back) put on by the same competition manager. That same year, there were 306 standalone events, defined as just one or two weeks of competition. In 2019, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, standalone events dropped to 208, and there were 112 “series events.” In 2021, the number of events dropped all around again, with 163 standalone events and 106 series events.

Though the pandemic hit the entire show industry, standalone shows were most affected with a 46.7 percent decrease from 2010 to 2021.

“I think a lot of the standalone shows are hurting,” says Distler. “People want the easy way. They want the simplest way.”

“I get it—if you can buy a place or lease a place for a few months, and you don’t have to worry about traveling, it’s all well and good,” he adds. “I wonder how good it really is for the industry.”

THE ECONOMIC GAME

While National Show Hunter Hall of Famer Scott Stewart, of Flemington, New Jersey, spends his winters on the Florida circuit, he prefers smaller shows. When a show has two rings, he says, he can focus and watch some of the other horses go.

“It’s a little bit less pace than the multi-ring horse shows,” he says. “It just seems a lot more special.”

But the current trend is moving toward circuits.

“We got two separate things: We got the sport, and we got the business,” says Madden. “And they’re intertwined. If nobody ran a show in Wellington, you’d still have people waiting at the in-gate the first week in January to go, [even] if there were no prizes, if there was no FEI. Because it’s a business all totally ingrained in the lifestyle and everything else. You can’t separate it.”





As the site of America's first grand prix, the Chagrin Hunter Jumper Classic (Ohio) saw the best jumpers, like Margie Goldstein-Engle and Daydream, compete on the polo fields. In 2021, the show moved to nearby Chagrin Valley Farms. *PHOTO COURTESY OF CVPHA*

The economic realities of running a show push the pendulum toward larger facilities.

“The big operators have a real advantage when it comes to using scale economics to operate horse shows,” says Shelby Bonnie, president of the Middleburg Classic (Virginia) and vice president of the Upperville Colt & Horse Show (Virginia). “They can lock up talent—be it announcers, jump crew, course designers, judges, stewards—over a circuit versus an individual show. They can amortize their capital costs over circuits. In the last 15 years facilities have become more important, not less important. That’s a single trend, and it’s an important trend.

“A large operator can say, ‘Look, I’m going to really invest in my facility, my footing, my barns, my bathrooms.’ And they can justify that over a 10- or 15-week circuit,” he adds. “Let’s say it costs you half a million dollars to redo the footing in a grand prix ring. They can amortize that half a million dollars over a minimum 10 weeks. When you’re Upperville, Devon,

Hampton Classic [New York], Chagrin [Ohio], or one of these other shows, and you have one week or even two weeks, the math is: You’re trying to amortize that same spend over a much smaller window.”

Because of that, the product quality continues to rise at the multi-week shows, and with it, consumer expectation.

“Horse show management companies can offer a better product when they’re making their revenue over a greater number of weeks,” says Brookway Stables trainer Archie Cox, of Lake View Terrace, California. “If they have a soft week, it’s not the end of their horse show because they make it up the following week with a very well-supported week. When a standalone horse show gets hit with bad weather, maybe there’s bad footing one year, that can really take its toll on a standalone event.”

Progressive Showjumping Inc. owner Rick Cram, of Aiken, South Carolina, says it starts with green space and being able to

preserve the facilities used by horse shows. “So many horse shows are leaving our calendar or moving to a new location because the facilities aren’t managing [and] staying alive,” he says.

The Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show (North Carolina) hosts only a handful of events and two USEF-recognized hunter/jumper shows annually, but their efforts to modernize—tearing down and re-erecting stabling and redoing the ring twice—have lured prominent hunter professionals to the Broyhill Equestrian Preserve in the North Carolina mountains.

“They have just invested,” says Cram, who runs the show. “I think the biggest thing that they do correctly is that when they get a donation from somebody, it’s earmarked for a project of improvement.”

THE FOOTING COMPONENT

For most of its history, the Upperville show took place on grass under the oak trees. Although the grass rings were a key part of the show’s character, footing eventually replaced them.

“There was a point where you’re like, ‘If we pursue a grass ring strategy, every year we’re going to become a little less relevant,’” says Bonnie. “The top jumper barns and the top hunter barns just aren’t going to come

The big operators have a real advantage when it comes to using scale economics.”

—Shelby Bonnie

anymore, and we'll slowly become second tier. And then over time we'll go to the third tier, and then over time we'll go to the fourth tier. Just a long, slow decline. With the cost of horses and the need for top footing, that is the simple reality.”

With horses selling for over a million dollars and competing all year long, trainers and competitors prioritize venues with top footing.

“Footing is really the No. 1 key to success at events,” says show manager Phil DeVita, of Apopka, Florida. “And the places that have been able to upgrade their footing and have modern footing that is safe and fast and pretty weatherproof, those facilities are going to succeed. It doesn't matter [whether] they're in New York or Florida or Virginia or the West Coast or Texas. Footing is definitely the key to success. The three most important things at the horse show are footing, footing and footing.”

Dignelli recalls that the shows once stopped in November, with maybe a week or two of competition in Florida before the spring.

“Now basically it goes all the way around the calendar year,” he says. “And so, I think the footing has become more and more paramount, and the places that have spent the money on the footing, people go there, and they're like, ‘Oh, this is what we want.’ ”

However, that perfect footing comes with a hefty price tag. Show managers estimated that for just one ring, installing all-weather footing starts at six figures—and that's not even accounting for a schooling ring. For a boutique facility that hosts only couple shows a year, that can be impossible.

“There's not a lot of profit involved [for some of these charity horse shows]. For someone to come in and say, ‘Well, your horse shows are going to fail unless you go with modern footing,’ ” says DeVita. “You're looking say at three rings and three schooling areas, you're at a million and a half dollars. You're looking at a facility that is struggling.”

ADAPTING TO THE TIMES

Following two years in Tryon during the pandemic, the Washington International Horse Show's management announced it would not be returning to the District of Columbia. Instead, the 2022 event will move to Maryland's Prince George's Equestrian Center. Much like the National

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When the Washington International was in the Capital One Arena in downtown Washington, D.C., it exposed new people to the sport.
KIMBERLY LOUSHIN PHOTO

They still have to care about it or else it becomes another corporate horse show.”

—Amy Uniss

Horse Show at Madison Square Garden (New York), it's a loss of a unique event in a one-of-a-kind location. But being distinctive presents unusual and sometimes insurmountable challenges—like sports teams needing the Capital One Arena. Distler, of West Palm Beach, Florida, hopes WIHS's move to a more equine friendly location will encourage hunter trainers to prioritize it.

Like WIHS, Chagrin Hunter Jumper Classic in Ohio

moved to a more permanent facility, from the polo fields to nearby Chagrin Valley Farms in 2021. At the polo field location, DeVita and his crew would arrive a week ahead of time to work the footing—and then there was the water, electric and tents to install.

“It's just a tremendous amount of work,” he says. “Chagrin Valley Farms, that's had horse shows for many years, is just a smaller venue. They don't have the space that the polo field had, but they've got three new all-weather footing rings. So that makes it a huge attraction.”

DeVita believes moving allows the show to flourish. “Our clientele's going to be a little different, but I think it's a great little show,” he says. “I think people are going to have a good time, but you can't reproduce the polo field. And maybe that's a good thing because it was nothing to spend \$40,000-\$50,000 a year on just getting the footing prepped again for that year.”

The expansion of Houston challenged the Pin Oak Charity Horse Show's ability to find a permanent home in its early history, until it moved to the Great Southwest

Equestrian Center in Katy, Texas, decades ago. While Great Southwest hosts 14 USEF competitions a year, it pulls out all the stops for the three weeks of Pin Oak, a fundraiser for the Texas Children's Hospital.

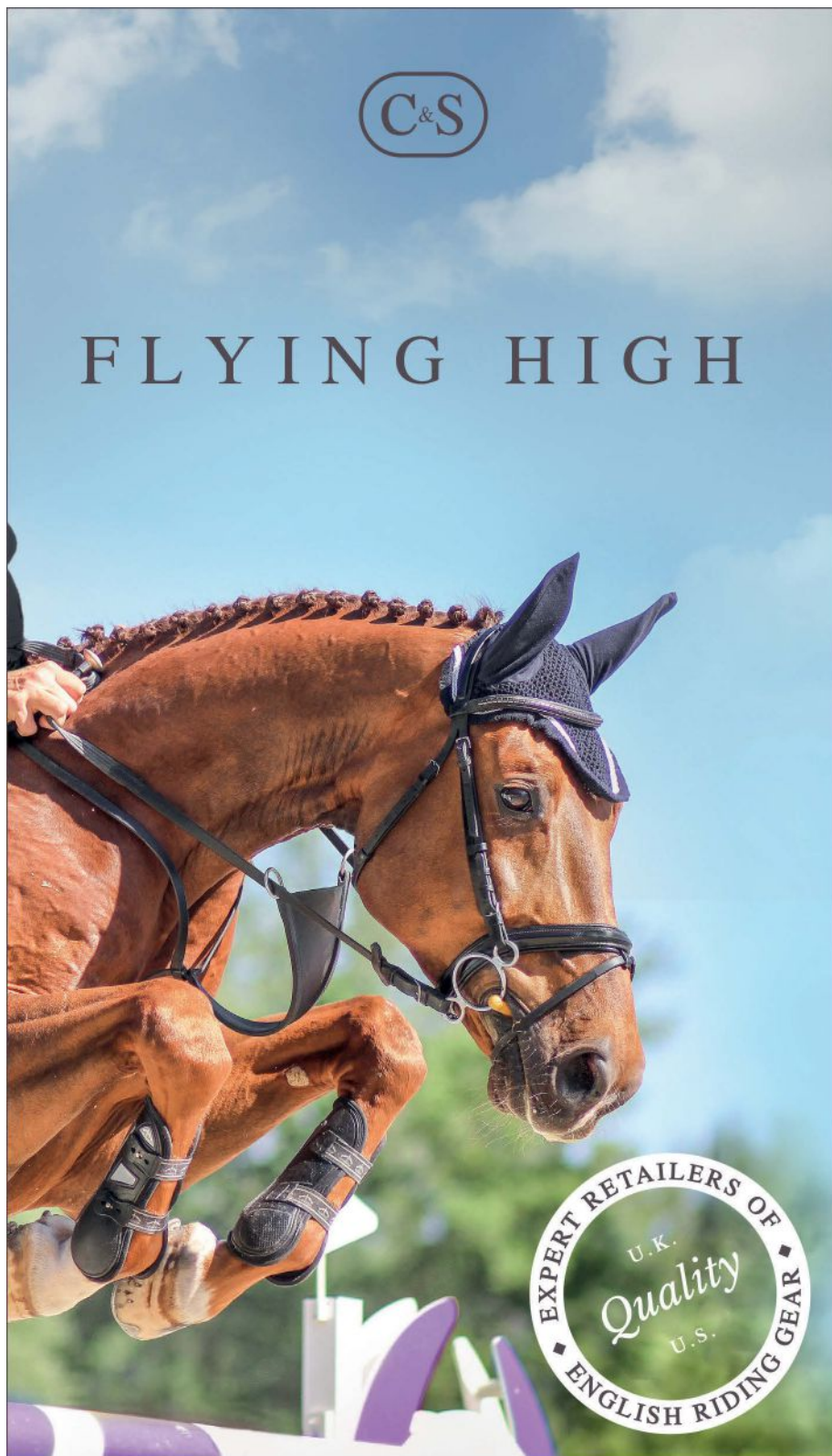
"We are in such a fortunate position, in a very unique position," says show manager Amy Uniss. "It's another show in our calendar, but we have the efficiencies built in already, so that we spend our resources on making the show nicer for the competitors. I don't have to rebuild the arena the week before the horse show starts.

"What I see these days is that you have to keep up with the Joneses, and the industry is changing so much," adds Uniss. "It's not just a mom-and-pop industry anymore; it's a business. So, we run our other stuff more business-like, and Pin Oak, we have this sponsor piece of it that drives our ability to do the extra fluffy stuff. We're lucky here that it is a Houston tradition. The 76th year is this year, and people still love the show, and I think that's the thing, is that they still have to care about it or else it becomes another corporate horse show."

But what if the location defines a show?

"I think if Devon ever moved, unless we built a place that looked exactly like the Devon that we all know and love, it would just be another horse show," says Distler.

While Devon has a certain prestige as it requires riders to qualify, Distler and Peter Doubleday continue to modernize footing and seek Fédération Equestre Internationale rating to maintain its reputation.



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“Having more shows in more locations is important.”

—Shelby Bonnie

“Peter Doubleday and I have tried very hard to find a good balance,” says Distler. “We try to keep the tradition—because the tradition is so much a part of Devon—and at the same time modernize and move forward with the sport.

“There were many people that didn’t think we needed to be FEI, and some people thought we did need to be FEI,” he adds. “And we watched a lot of the better riders stop coming. We tried it for one year, and I thought it went great. Others did not. We dropped it, but then it got to a point where we had to go and do it again. It’s made a huge difference in the quality of horses and riders we’ve gotten.”

In Warrenton’s case, preserving the location and transitioning to C-rating was the solution. For Upperville, they upgraded footing and brought the Loudoun Benefit Horse Show, Middleburg Classic and the Piedmont Jumper Classic to the grounds.

“We’re trying to support a very small number of local shows, and we’re trying to make sure those shows feel authentic and have classes for our local community and support our local community,” Bonnie says. “But that

trend towards shared infrastructure and bigger, more expensive events is really hard to compete against.”

ROMANTIC NOTIONS AND REALITIES

No one solution works for all standalone shows. But as these competitions adapt and change, is a part of the sport’s culture lost?

“When I think of really good standalone shows, I think in the old days of the American Invitational in Tampa Stadium; I think of Devon: ‘Where champions meet’; I think of Madison Square Garden,” says Madden. “So, if that’s the flavor of what our romantic notion is and what we want to protect, well, maybe that ship has sailed. I don’t know—two out of the three don’t exist.

“We have to keep evolving,” he adds. “But I think the sport and the industry stresses have created this. One should not kid themselves that it hasn’t changed the sport completely.”

A world without circuits is unrealistic, and an industry without standalone shows is stale. In a perfect world, they both exist. But sport geared toward weeks and weeks in Florida, or another expensive location, is unattainable to many people.

“As we grow the sport, we need to focus on more geographic diversity and recognize there isn’t a broad group of people who can afford to drive 10 hours to spend 10 weeks at an otherwise expensive event,” says Bonnie. “It’s not to say these circuits shouldn’t exist, but rather to say that having more shows in more locations is important. The one-week shows are important. They can be a launching pad for the next generation of riders and owners. They’re important for the health of the sport. Given the scale economics of circuits without some focus on behalf of our industry leaders, these standalone shows will be on the losing end of raw economics.”

Though the market will continue to dictate which competitions fail and which succeed, managers believe they can continue drawing participants to their standalone shows by providing an experience the larger ones cannot.

“[If] those boutique shows can continue to keep that aura, that feel, that sense of specialty of being at the horse show, I think people will still support them,” says DeVita. “At least those certainly are my hopes.” 🍷

Since becoming a C-rated show, the Warrenton Horse Show (Va.) has focused on its community, offering crowd and competitor favorites like hunt teams. *PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WARRENTON HORSE SHOW*



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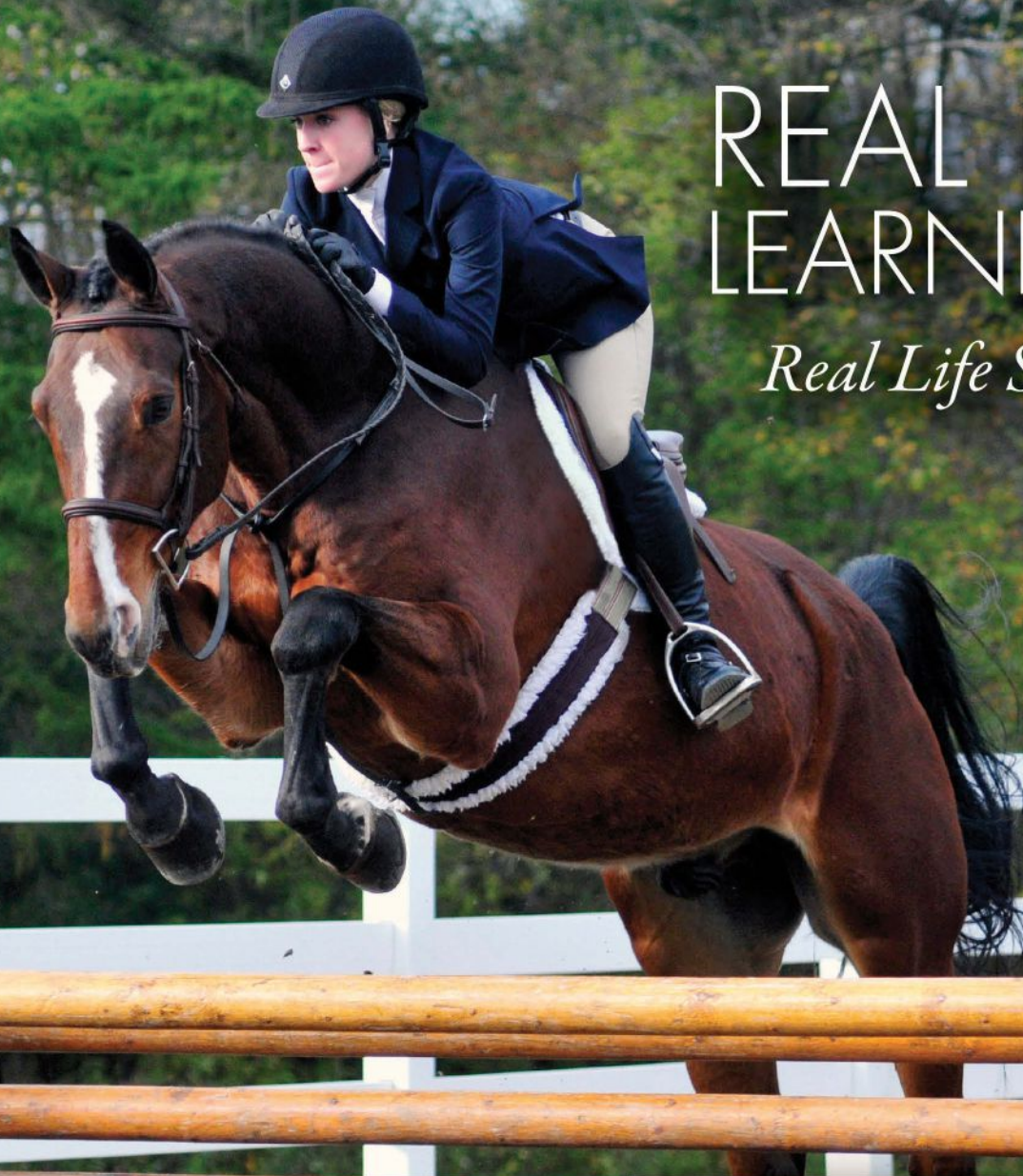


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