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Braiding Was Just The Start For Ruthann Smith

Molly Sorge

When Ruthann Smith first climbed onto a ladder to braid her pony at age 8, she never imagined where those steps would take her. Today, she flies across the country, teaching braiding and turnout clinics, has produced an instructional video about braiding, and has her own line of horse care products.

Smith, 37, Melrose, Mass., enjoys sharing the knowledge she's gathered in her 25 years of braiding.

"It's so fun. I have these ladies squealing on their ladders. All their lives, they've been frustrated with braiding, and finally they can braid beautifully and it's relaxing," she said. "And they can use it as time to bond with their horse before a class. And what really pleases me is knowing that I'm giving horses better lives by teaching people how to stay out of trouble and be smart about working with them."

That bond has become one of the hallmarks of Smith's teaching. When she initially began, her clinics focused on the craft of braiding, but they've expanded into general horse care and safety.

"Traveling to teach the clinics, I went to farms all over the continent, and I got to see how things work in all different kinds of barns. And I spent 12,000 hours on the ladder, perched among the best grooms that there are. And the discrepancy was really clear. Fundamental things about horse care just weren't getting passed on," she said.

Sherry Robertson, a top hunter/jumper horseman, spoke highly of Smith as a professional. "She always was very nice with horses. And I noticed it because we had some young horses at the

time and she never lost her temper when they were doing baby things, like trying to push her off the ladder at 3 a.m., or trying to eat her favorite sweater," said Robertson.

Smith lectures about some of her personal pet peeves, such as not walking a horse into a stall correctly, with the door

open all the way, and leading horses without lead ropes.

"The thing that people really get out of my presentations and the clinics is the relationship you can have with a horse—how happy you can make a horse by just handling it properly and with confidence, and being steady and clear," Smith said.

"People are always astounded at how much horsemanship they've learned at my presentations that they didn't expect to. It's almost like I have to hook them in with the idea of braiding or grooming myths. It's really about being able to quiet the horse when he's upset, and create the ideal environment for him. It's not all about knots in their neck. It's about trying to give the horses better lives."



(Lucky Braids by Ruthann Photo)

Ruthann Smith has turned a braiding career into an educational odyssey.

► Making The Video

Smith, who grew up in the Boston, Mass., area, began her career as many horse-crazy girls do, with wild and woolly ponies that she managed to convince to behave in the show ring. She first began braiding "to pay for my pony," she said. "My mom was a single parent with three kids. She supported me as much as she could, but I had to make a go of it."

But Smith's mother was also best friends with Grand Prix dressage rider Dottie Morkis, and Smith was able to get a taste of top-level competition and horse care. She began working for Morkis at age 11 and got a thorough grounding in horse care.

"I quit riding my freshman year of high school because I wanted to be well-rounded. But all through high school and college, I groomed. I cared for U.S. Equestrian team dressage horses before I worked for Jeffrey Welles and Timmy Kees at Norfield, at Ox Ridge [Conn.] and groomed for Peter Wylde. When I finished college, I thought, 'Well, I'll just braid for a while to make some quick money, then I'll make documentary films,'" Smith recalled.

Smith graduated from the University of Vermont with a bachelor's degree in psychology and began concentrating on a career in film. "I was making enough money braiding that I would work doing that for six or seven months, and then I would work

Ruthann Smith, shown with the Paint stallion Reckless Obsession, has drawn on her years of braiding and grooming experience to put together informative presentations.

on film and television projects in the slow time," she said.

Smith attended the International Film and Television Workshops in Maine and traveled to Mexico to work with Director Nicholas Echevarría. She made documentaries with wide-ranging subjects, from the spirit of a Mexican coastal village, to Cambodia's legal system, spiritual healing, and the braiding lifestyle.

Yet, even while her filmmaking career was thriving, she just couldn't get down off the ladder for good. "I couldn't quit braiding because I couldn't get someone to fill my shoes, and I really liked my customers and I didn't want to leave them high and dry," Smith said.

"I started training people, and I realized how difficult braiding was for them, and how frustrated they were getting," she added. "And that fed a



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Helping people perfect their braiding technique is just part of the knowledge that Ruthann Smith (left) shares in her presentations and clinics.

negative cycle—they would get frustrated, so the horse would start dancing around, and then he'd get reprimanded and get upset."

So, 10 years ago, Smith gave up a few of her biggest accounts and began teaching braiding clinics. "It took a long time to learn how to teach braiding. I had to learn what kinds of mistakes people made, so that I could speak to their inclinations and help them fix them."

And, branching out into teaching gave her the opportunity to combine her two careers. "Even when I was braiding, I had my trunk full of other stuff because I wanted to make the [braiding] video. And I was planning all these things that I wanted to do. I remember the other braiders wondering, 'What is all that stuff Ruthann is carting around?' But I was planning all the things that I was learning and wanted to be able to share," she said.

In 1999, Smith released her *Better Braiding* video, which showcases her teaching techniques.

"While I thought I was braiding so that I could be an ethnographic film-maker, I ended up taking all the skills I'd learned about making films and turned it back on the horses. The horse industry had this educational gap. No one was really passing on the skills. So, I took all the anthropological and psychological skills and turned them back on the horses, to teach the craft," she said.

► Just Common Sense

Demand for Smith's time exploded. "Last year I flew two to three weeks out of each month. I was just like all those executives who are on the phone at the in-gate, or trying to send a fax from the terminal. It was crazy—I'm a braider, and here I'm reaching for my laptop as soon as they turn the seatbelt light out," said Smith.

And as her scope has widened, so has her subject material. "It's shifting more to



(Lucky Braids by Ruthann Photo)

Top Turnout™ clinics, because the grooming is a little bit broader topic, and what the market is demanding, but I tuck braiding into it too. Across all disciplines, everybody needs to improve their grooming. And I call it turnout, because it's about grooming, but it's a lot about safety and handling," she said.

"I think that the thing they take away from a clinic that they like the most is the quieting techniques. If you cup your hand over a horse's eyeball, and gently rub, it turns the most fearful, aggressive horses to buttercups. That one thing, even though it's so subtle and simple, is a nice tool for people to use. I give them strategies like that that they can use when they need to get a little edge on the horses, without turning it into a fight."

Lisa Cook, an amateur rider from Brookline, N.H., took Smith's clinic. "She was very good and patient and thorough," said Cook. "She gave detailed answers

Future Plans

Ruthann Smith never stops thinking of ways to help people and horses. She currently sees an alarming void of knowledge and education in horse care, even at the top levels. And she's trying to find ways to remedy that.

"There's a whole generation of riders who had successful junior careers as the 'leg-up' generation. They're training and teaching, but they didn't put the time in on the horse care and getting to know what the horses need," she said. "They spent their time at the ring, so they don't understand what they're missing. The focus has shifted to the ring, and that's where people think the value is. They want to win more than they want happy, shiny horses."

Smith remembers how proud she was to bring a round, healthy, shiny, beautiful horse to the ring. She believes there's a lack of bonding between the horse and rider today that she had as a child.

"They want the relationship, but they're not learning how to develop it by taking care of their horses," she said. "I think the people who are really good at what they do are in the upper echelons, and they're taking care of good horses, and there's not a lot of passing it on, because that's a very small world. There aren't many programs that teach the nitty-gritty of horse care. There are plenty of places that teach the business of horses, but it all comes down to the fundamental stuff. You can't take shortcuts, you really have to spend the time on the ground."

With that in mind, Smith is developing Top Turnout™ school. She envisions top show grooms sharing their knowledge about grooming, bandaging, handling, longeing, troubleshooting soundness issues, and time management. She hopes to conduct the program in Spanish and Portuguese as well.

Other topics Smith sees as integral will also be taught, such as braiding and exercise riding, versus training. "Everyone who goes through the program will learn the fundamentals of care and handling. It sounds basic, but these are things I know to be commonly done wrong or not enough," she said.

At the U.S. World Cup Dressage League Final (Fla.) in February, Smith sponsored the Lucky Braids Top Turnout™ Award. She spent the weekend in the barns with the grooms and their horses and chose the winner based not just on their horse's appearance, but also on the way they worked with their horses.

"The idea was just to bring to light what happens on the ground behind the scenes, which is the foundation of what goes on in the ring. Happy horses win," Smith said.

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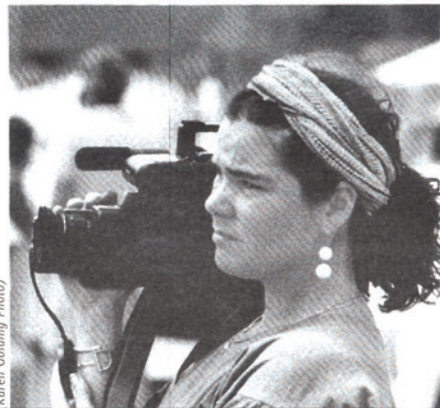
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Karen Goding Photo

Ruthann Smith's extensive film-making experience helped her in the process of creating her *Better Braiding* video.

beyond what she needed to, and you could really understand the answers she gave."

Cook attended the clinic mainly to improve her braiding technique. "I finally understand why my braids have been crooked for all these years. It was so simple—tying the yarn in the slant of the braid. I finally did braids that could go in the ring at a big horse show."

And while braiding was Cook's focus, she said she would recommend the clinic even if a person knew how to braid already. "Anyone from any discipline would appreciate what she had to say," said Cook. "She talks about a lot of general barn safety that's just common sense, but that a lot of people don't think about. You could pull a lot of knowledge out of her."

The hours spent on a ladder, twisting mane, had set Smith's mind to thinking. She observed how horses were cared for and noted problem areas. So, Smith developed a line of horse care products under the name Lucky Braids by Ruthann.

She produces a shampoo, a whitener/color restorer/dry wash, and an anti-itch salve. "It amazed me that no one had solved tail-rubbing before. So, I worked with a vet, trying to develop products to fix tail-rubbing, and slippery manes, and trying to get the horses more comfortable," she said.

"I realized, once I started to get into the product end of it with my video, that most of the people making things for horses don't really understand horses' needs. It's so unhealthy what they put in some of the horse products—like petroleum and salt in shampoo. Now I'm trying to work for the good of the horses," she said.

All the clinics, video and products have become Smith's business, but for her, it still all boils down to the horses.

"What's nice is that she's a real horse-woman, who knows exactly what we need," said Robertson. "She really listens to what people need for their horses."

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