



PHOTOS: TOP TURNOUT/LUCKY BRAIDS

# at the BACK gate

## with Ruthann Smith

by Jessica LeRoy

Ruthann Smith had no way of knowing that her first steps up a braiding ladder would have such a profound impact on her life. Over 25 years and 12,000 braid jobs later, Ruthann's scope in the industry has since become much bigger than braiding. Recognizing the alarming void in knowledge at all levels of horse care, Smith has dedicated herself to improving the lives of horses by raising the bar of turnout, daily care, and handling. Through her website [www.topturnout.com](http://www.topturnout.com), clinics, and award-winning grooming products, Ruthann makes the best care practices available for anyone, anywhere. Smith saw the need for such a resource when she began to realize that the value of quality care was not being taught to the majority of those involved

in horses. "I realized that practices standard in the upper echelon were virtually unknown to the masses," she explains. "What I'm teaching are not the tricks of the trade, I'm offering proven practices." Smith teaches the skills that create happy horses who want to win because they are calm, confident, and trust they are well looked after; she is helping equestrians understand the relationship between good turnout and a happy horse that gives a great performance.

Smith grew up like many horse crazy girls: trading work for riding lessons. "Horses are in my blood," she says. "They've had an enormous and undeniable impact on me, even as a baby. My connection to animals is profound." Fortunately, her mother was best friends with US Dres-

sage rider Dottie Morkis. Morkis would provide Smith's first chance at grooming for a world class athlete. "By the time I was nine, I was taking care of *Monaco*," explains Ruthann, "who was emerging as first in the US and fifth in the world. He was the first American horse to medal internationally, [winning individual Gold at the 1974 Pan Am Games, and team bronze at the 1976 Montreal Olympics]. I have been lucky to be able to circle in the upper echelon since I was little."

While braiding has taken somewhat of a backseat in recent years, Smith is said to braid luck into the manes of her charges. The list of her famous clients reads as a who's who of the industry, and includes: George Morris, Beezie Madden, Peter Wylde, Katie Monahan-Prudent, Michael Matz, McLain Ward, Margie Engel, Archie Cox, Leslie Burr-Lenehan, Georgina Bloomberg, Ann Kursinski, *Gem Twist*, *Roxdene*, *Heisman*, *Starman*, *Jetsetter*, and *Monaco*, to name but a few. For more than a decade, Smith split her time between braiding and film & television production. She left a promising career making cultural documentaries when she had difficulties finding a skilled replacement to pass on braiding duties with her beloved accounts. She began teaching braiding clinics, surprised at the lack of depth in the industry. "That is where I learned not only how needlessly stressed out people were about braiding," she says, "but also that the care, handling, and safety practices standard among top horsemen have not been passed to the masses. This was unnerving to me as there is often an easier way that is safer as well. People don't realize how much they don't know. Too many horses suffer when well-meaning people just do not have enough or the right information; it makes me ache. It was not until I tried to quit horses that I realized the practices I took for granted were virtually unknown outside the elite circles. It is actually

my culture that is endangered: sound horsemanship. So, I turned the lens around, and am dedicated to closing that gap, for the horses."

Due in part to the confidence she is able to impart to the horses in her care, Smith has developed a reputation for braiding horses that go to the ring ready to win. "Braiders are some of the last people to handle a horse before it competes. You can use the time to get the horse totally relaxed so it can focus, or you can upset it. Braiding luck into the mane is about sending it to the ring level-headed so it can win." With her celebrated Better Braiding DVD, she has produced an effective how-to video and specialized tool that is empowering equestrians of all ages, and demystifies many frustrating aspects of braiding. Smith teaches that the uniform braid job of professionals is within the grasp of anyone who is dedicated to learning the formula. There is a form to creating consistently beautiful braids, much like the footwork of a complicated dance. For instance, it is easier to achieve a top-notch job if the mane is pulled well. It should be tapered at the end, as a blunt mane will loosen when braided. For a mane that is already quite thin, Smith will use a body clipper blade to tease and cut the ends. If the mane is crafted so the bottom makes a straight line, it is easier to achieve the all-important straight bottomline to the braid job. She explains: "[The bottomline]



should be perfectly straight when the horse is relaxed, as well as pitched so braids are slightly longer toward the poll than the withers. If the bottomline is straight at each stage of the braiding process, it makes tying up evenly more likely. Some braids will be longer than others, but if the bottomline is crisp, it attracts the eye."

Practice makes perfect, and Ruthann has encouraging words for those discouraged by their first attempts at braiding: "Braiding is a formula, not rocket science. Execute the formula accurately and you can lay down a perfect job. There is a leverage system between fingers, so braids are tight while hands are relaxed. That's a premise of my braiding system. If you learn one that is tried-and-true, you can make consistently beautiful braids quickly and with no cramped hands. Learn the formula and you can braid any horse well. Braiding proficiently becomes a means to relax and gel with your horse before your class."

Ruthann firmly advocates the vital role played by grooms. In her world, grooms make horses win by caring for them on the ground with clarity, kindness, and by making the horse confident. Ruthann insists that, "a horse's world view is established on the ground. If it can

trust that  
all of  
its



needs will be met and that it will always be handled in an understanding and fair manner, a horse can develop the quiet confidence that leads to big hearts that win. It is not unusual for a change of groom to have a dramatic impact on a horse's performance. Even the success of international level horses is contingent upon their 'home life'."

In her quest to improve the horsemanship skills and knowledge of care givers working in the industry, Smith has invariably come across some learned habits that make her skin crawl. Often, shortcuts are implemented into daily routines in a misguided attempt to save time or ease the workload. What began as a braiding empire has now grown into a teaching opportunity that also focuses on the efficiency and safe handling of those working with and around horses. In her years spent perched as an observer on her braiding ladder, she noted pervasive everyday problems that needed to be addressed. "The wise man is not afraid to say, 'I don't know'," Smith noted. "Keep open. Be a sponge. It is very fashionable for people to think they are knowledgeable, though that is a sign of ignorance. The more you know, the more there is to learn. Always aim higher." Some of the most prevalent mistakes she sees people make include: letting horses trail behind you while leading, spraying horses in the face with water, letting the kidney area get cold, improper fitting of blankets, and saturating the horse's coat with silicone-based sprays instead of currying or more evolved coat care. These practices are unsafe and Smith has seen first hand the damage they can inflict on horses and their handlers.

Ruthann developed the Lucky Braids products to share her knowledge of top turnout and care practices with everyone. She created the company in 1999, frustrated with an industry churning out products that did not have the horse's well being first and foremost in mind. Fueled by a desire to fill this void in coat care products, the Lucky Braids brand is based on streamlining grooming while improving care. "I could tell most of the manufacturers [of popular coat care products] have never carried a water bucket," she

explains. "The bulk of information getting out is to sell product, and is not in the horses' best interest. Other companies have marketing dollars, but don't know the horses — at least not at my level. With the amount of time I've spent braiding, I've had some time to think about the conditions of hair and skin. When I realized it is standard practice to use salt in shampoo, it became evident that conventional products were causing many of the most pervasive problems. I set out to solve them, and by collaborating with a holistic vet, I have." The Lucky Braids line includes All-In-One Shampoo, Whitener/Dry Wash, Handy Salve, Braiding Yarn, and Better Braiding DVD/ tools. They are unique, well-researched and distinctive products designed to make streamlined, cost effective grooming solutions. Smith recommends the All-In-One Shampoo, which does the work of anti-fungal, anti-itch, whitening, conditioning, and detangling products; but uses natural ingredients such as Aloe Vera and the finest grade Tea Tree Oil to condition the coat from the inside-out.

For Ruthann, grooming as a career is a path that provides gratification and immense pride for a job well done. Knowing that her work is creating a better life for the animals that give so much is reward in itself, and that she may influence the careers of grooms around the world is no small feat. "For me, grooming was a way to work with the best horses in the world, become fluent in Spanish, and travel internationally," she explains of her love for the career that has spring-boarded her recent endeavors. "My miles on the road were an opportunity to get into horse's heads and understand the workings of the keenest horsemen. I still learn more every day. Grooming is not about brushing horses. It is everything that does not happen in the irons, and has everything to do with what transpires in the ring. Good grooming is a umbrella term for the work and love that makes horses thrive. Being part of that can be a very powerful experience."

Taught classic skills by the masters of the sport, Ruthann is uniquely positioned to understand the afflictions of horses and create products that effectively treat many skin conditions-

yielding coats that are resilient to dirt, stains, breakage, and irritation. She has streamlined grooming products for all disciplines, breeds, and levels able to draw on her considerable experience to deliver cost effective and simple products that work. "My mission is to educate, motivate and equip people for sound horsemanship," she explains. "It is good for the horses, their people, and the earth." Smith is excited about the response from consumers, researchers, riders, and grooms who support and applaud the products. "Trainers, many who have known me for decades, have been incredibly supportive of my endeavors. Mostly, they know I am doing right by the horses and saving them money. It has been beautiful to see support be driven from within the industry."

Ruthann's mission is to improve the lives of horses. "What moves me is making horses sound of body and mind. I am fully committed to making it easier to take better care them and raise the bar of horsemanship. The horses need us to pass on the knowledge of the wisest horsemen — the traditions of truly sound horsemanship." 