

WINNING



with

HORSES

How One of the Best Polo Players of All Time and a Sport Horse
Veterinarian Balance Human Goals with Equine Needs



Inspiring
Ideas for Sensible
Changes in
All Equestrian Sports
for the
Good of the
Horse

ADAM SNOW
10-Goal Polo Player

SHELLEY ONDERDONK, DVM
Veterinarian & Certified Veterinary Acupuncturist

Foreword XI

Chapter 1

★An Introduction 1

Chapter 2

★Why Horses? 9

Adam's Take: The Ball Came First 11

Shelley's Take: Some Are Born That Way 17

Chapter 3

★Keeping Training Natural 23

Communication 26

Training Methods 27

The Push/Pull Dance 29

Riding Patterns 33

Understanding Equine Motivation 36

// *Winning Point 41*

Chapter 4

★A Competitor's Training Mindset 45

Pretend You Have a Mallet in Your Hand 47

Doing It the Way We Learned 50

Training Never Ends 52

Letting Go 55

On Breeding 58

On Biting 60

// *Winning Point 65*

Chapter 5

**★A Veterinarian's Perspective
on Management of the Performance Horse 67**

Prevention 70

Diagnostic Tool Box 72

Therapies and Treatments 75

Paying Attention 77

Petticoat 78

// *Winning Point 81*



<i>Chapter 6</i>		You Are What You Eat	165
★Veterinary Decisions While Competing		Body Condition Scoring	167
<hr/>		Supplements	169
<i>Pumbaa</i> : Navigating Illness		Conditioning the Whole Horse	170
<i>Hale Bopp</i> : When Age Comes Calling		Farriery	174
<i>Tequila</i> : The Doubt Inspired By Injury		Tack Talk	175
// <i>Winning Point</i>		// <i>Winning Point</i>	180
 <i>Chapter 7</i>			
★Therapeutic Alternatives		<i>Chapter 12</i>	
<hr/>		★Travels with Horses	
Muscle Health		Wednesday, June 30 th , 7:30 am	
Physical Therapy		July 12 th	
// <i>Winning Point</i>		August 3 rd	
		August 28 th	
		August 30 th , 3:58 pm	
		September 2 nd	
		Stuff Still Happened	
		// <i>Winning Point</i>	
 <i>Chapter 8</i>			
★Preparing for Competition			
<hr/>			
Don't Look at the Scoreboard			
In and Out of Our Control			
Training and Trusting			
My Dream			
Freedom Comes Through Discipline			
// <i>Winning Point</i>			
 <i>Chapter 9</i>		<i>Chapter 13</i>	
★Reflections on Competing		★Horse Stories	
<hr/>		<hr/>	
The Horse as a Competitive Partner		Gossip	
When Should Competition Be Over?		Chester K	
The Rider Part of the Equation		Sky Blue	
// <i>Winning Point</i>		// <i>Winning Point</i>	
 <i>Chapter 10</i>		<i>Chapter 14</i>	
★The Equine Athlete		★Best or Favorite?	
<hr/>		<hr/>	
Having Skin in the Game		// <i>Winning Point</i>	
Going Fast Slowly			
// <i>Winning Point</i>			
 <i>Chapter 11</i>		<i>Chapter 15</i>	
★Horse Essentials		★Connecting with Something Wild	
<hr/>		<hr/>	
Let Horses Be Horses		Acknowledgments	
On Retirement		Index	

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED
by copyright holder

CHAPTER

2

Why Horses?

All roads lead to horses.



Adam's Take: The Ball Came First

My own earliest associations with horses are of family pressure to get on one. Occasionally, my dad would persuade me to help him “exercise the ponies.” This occurred on trails through the woods near our home in Hamilton, Massachusetts. On cold mornings, the animals’ breath appeared like puffs of smoke being emitted from fire-breathing nostrils. I would clench the reins tight and follow as closely as possible the tail of the horse in front me. This, I felt at the time, was the safest spot.

At some stage my grandfather, who I knew as “Too,” a career pilot, put a mallet in my hand, offered up his steady gelding, B-Fly, and directed me to “swing through the ball” (white and wooden).

“Let your follow-through *fly* in the direction you want the ball to travel,” Too instructed.

But it wasn’t until that ball actually got bowled in to commence play—and I was competing alongside peers of a similar age (my younger brother,

/ 2.1 / Adam on Quince in one of his first games.



Andrew, among them)—that I threw caution to the wind and began to ride, and play, with abandon. I was 12 years old, and all in. There were goals to be scored, plays to be devised (with Andrew back at the barn as we cleaned tack), and communication with another species to improve in order to get to the ball first. The last became an ongoing quest.

But, if horses once represented just a means of getting to the ball, this changed when I began to own, train, and play my own polo ponies. At this stage, I began to focus on (and enjoy) the “equestrian side” of the sport of polo as much or more than the “ball side.” The horses became central, not only to getting to the ball first, but to my life with Shelley.

This transition was phased. For several years, I had enjoyed traveling around the world with only my boots and mallets to worry about. But the situation was not

sustainable. The sharp curve of improvement I had enjoyed straight out of college was sure to flatten. And the higher my handicap rose, the better the horses I required to play well on that rating. I could foresee the day when the quality of horses I was being loaned would become the limiting factor to my improvement.

One 10-goal mentor, Alfonso Pieres, told me, “It’s hard to play bad on a good horse.” As my handicap rose and the competition became more elite, I realized that the converse of this equation could also be true.

In August of 1991, Shelley and I visited Sheridan, Wyoming, and bought two three-year-old Thoroughbreds—Kansas and Darwin—from Mimi and Bob Tate. That fall in Wellington, Florida, where Shelley was working as a veterinary technician, we secured two stalls and rode Kansas and Darwin together every

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED
by copyright holder

★ Polo 101

For those unfamiliar with the sport of polo, here are some of the basics, which will be referred to in the pages ahead.

Polo is played four versus four horse-and-rider pairs and is often described as “hockey on horseback.” One big difference, however, is that the size of a polo field—300 yards by 160 yards or 10 acres—is massive in comparison with a rink or even a football field. In fact, 10 football fields fit into the area of one polo field.

Fundamental to the game is its handicap system whereby each player is designated a rating of “-1” to “10.” The sum of the four teammates’ “goal ratings” determines the team’s total handicap. Tournaments have set handicap limits and are hosted by clubs or the national governing body. Currently the US Open, for example, is played at the maximum limit of 22 goals.

The vast majority of professional polo players are from Argentina, which dominates in almost every demographic of the sport. But there are also world-class players from England, Spain, South Africa, Uruguay, and the United States. Matches are typically six, seven-and-a-half-minute periods, called chukkers. Total duration—with stoppages, a half-time “divot stomp” for spectators to put the field back, and breaks to change horses—is, on average, a little under two hours.

People unfamiliar with the sport are often surprised by the numbers of “ponies” that participate in a single match. (We use the expression “pony,” but they are really horses, mostly Thoroughbreds, and usually between 15 to 16 hands tall.) I played six ponies in the finals of the 2002 US Open, and this was the shortest list I had played during the entire season. For most matches, I brought a string of nine, and usually ended up playing eight of these. The one that did not play, I used to warm-up on (“stick and ball”) before the match. Today’s high-goal (high-handicap) players, who usually also have the most depth in horses, may play up to a dozen horses in a single match, “splitting chukkers” whenever possible, in order to always be riding a fresh pony. These mid-chukker changes can either be made “on-the-fly,” like a line change in ice hockey, or during a break in play, like immediately after a goal is scored or when a referee blows the whistle for a foul. ►

Polo balls have evolved from willow root to today's plastic, are slightly larger than a baseball, and are hard but light. Goals may be scored at any height through the two goal posts, which are separated by 24 feet and stand at either end of the field. A "long hit" would be considered anything over 100 yards. And the longest goals are scored from around midfield, 150 yards out; however, the majority of goals are scored by tapping it through the goalposts on breakaways or from the 30-, 40- and 60-yard penalty lines. A typical final score would be in the range of 12 goals to 10.

The rules are based on the line of the ball and are loosely comparable to the rules of the road when driving in the United Kingdom or a former colony. One can meet oncoming traffic keeping the line of the ball, or median, on your right—for this reason, all players must carry the mallet in their right hand—but cannot cross over this right of way at a distance perceived to be dangerous. "Hooking" (when a player uses his mallet to block or interfere with an opponent's swing) is allowed on the same side of the horse as the player with the ball, as long as it is below the shoulder; and "bumps" or "ride-offs" (when one player pushes against an opponent in an effort to move him off the line of the ball or to stop him from receiving the ball) are allowed with a similar speed and safe degree of angle. These are the bare basics, and all polo rules are intended to protect the safety of horse and rider. Two mounted officials with whistles patrol the field as referees, and a third official sits in the stands in case a tie-breaking vote becomes necessary.

Our focus in these pages is competing with horses in any equestrian sport while keeping the horses' interests clearly in mind. For this reason, I intentionally do not make a deep dive into the sport of polo. It is my hope that the context will provide some understanding, even for those readers who have never seen a polo match. But the emphasis is intended to be on the horse, and ultimately, the discipline itself matters little. //

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED by copyright holder

morning, training them for better rides and future competitions. They were the first two horses either of us had ever owned.

The pursuit of finding and training our own horses soon took on a life of its own. Because we couldn't afford top playing horses, the process of getting mounted required ingenuity, the recognition of untapped talent, and then a plan to nurture and train that prospect to its full potential. Shelley's help—namely her eye, and her skills on the back of young horses—was critical to this process. Incrementally, season by season, we continued buying horses until I realized that the horses—finding, training, maintaining, and playing the best ponies I could afford—had become my passion. There were stages to this evolution, many mistakes, and (hopefully) a progression of learning. I think horses are great teachers, and humility is certainly one of their primary lessons.

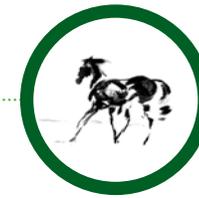
One year I was invited to a Buck Brannaman clinic at a friend's farm in Memphis, Tennessee. It was essentially my introduction to what had come to be known as "natural horsemanship." My eyes were opened to a new way of thinking, and a new range of training and communication skills to try with our own horses. "Make the wrong thing difficult, and the right thing easy," Buck's mentor, Ray Hunt, had said. During this time Shelley became a veterinarian and contributed with every ounce of her brains, bravery (she always rode the youngest horses before me), equitation, and professional expertise. When our horse Muffin won the Best Playing Pony prize in 1997 for the East Coast Open, the first such honor for one of our own horses, it felt like the proudest moment of my career, even though my team had lost the game.

So, gradually, inevitably, the horses themselves—my consistent *teammates*—had become the beating heart of my polo life.

As a child, I had begun by chasing a ball on horseback. Soon I realized that effective communication with my horse was the way to be first to that ball. To this day, working on that communication continues to be an endless—and enjoyable—process. //

end of adam's part





Shelley's Take: Some Are Born That Way

There is a photograph of me from the summer of 1999 in Montana where my smile is as broad as the blue sky above me. The reason for my beaming? *I was on a horse.* I hadn't ridden much recently at that point as I had just had my second child, and being back astride gave me so much joy. Adam remarked upon seeing the photo, "Wow, I guess we sure know how to make Shelley happy."

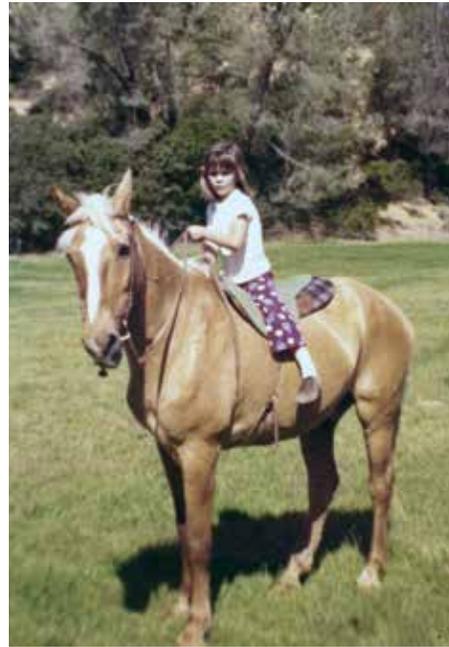
Years before, my father had sometimes exclaimed, "There's a horse!" while hurtling down the highway at 70 miles per hour in our Ford "woody" station wagon. I'd snap to attention (no seat belt constrained me in those days) and whip my head in the direction of his finger and gaze, enraptured, where a lone horse in a roadside field was rapidly disappearing from view. I was, in the parlance, "horse crazy." I played with my Breyer® horses, and built barns and sewed blankets for them. I pretended I was a horse at recess, complete with moving on all fours and neighing, for an extended period of time in the fourth grade with a similarly besotted friend. (Maybe she was my only friend at that point.)

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED
by copyright holder

”

It's almost my
favorite moment
of the day—leading
horses into the barn
for their breakfast
while witnessing
the sun rise.

/ 2.2 / On my aunt's horse, Prince, the first horse I ever rode, at my favorite place to be—my grandparents' cattle ranch in central California.



Despite some early experiences of being bucked off by a young colt or my lesson pony being naughty or falling over a jump, I had no fear of horses, and nothing they did ever intimidated me. It didn't matter that my parents weren't "horsey" or horseback riders. It didn't matter that I had to wait until I was 25 years old to have my first horse. Nothing dampened my enthusiasm. And when at 26 years old I was living in a barn, attending veterinary school, and married to a professional horseman, my family finally shrugged and conceded, "I guess it isn't a phase." Decades later, being with and around horses is still my happy place.

Sometimes I am too busy to bury my nose in my horse's neck and take a deep inhale—but each and every time I do, I am transported. When I enter into a horse's space to try and help him, I am lost to other concerns, finding flow in

a beautiful dance of questions and answers. Call me an Anglophile, but I sure do hope to be riding in my nineties like Queen Elizabeth did!

Horses simply get under your skin. Perhaps one day scientists will find a gene—it feels as innate as that. And if horses are your vocation, the prospects for retirement aren't good. It is joked that polo players will "go down swinging" due to their propensity for using their last penny to finance their passion. Leading an equestrian-centered life is addictive. I can't rationally explain why in my late middle age I still prefer doing almost anything on or around a horse—even *shoveling manure*—to doing almost anything else.

Sitting astride a horse may be, like staring into a crackling campfire, a deeply atavistic pleasure. It is a feeling of power. It is a feeling of freedom. Most teenagers

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED by copyright holder

eagerly await the arrival of a driver's license and car keys as the ticket to independence; my teenage years were full of dreams of galloping a horse, bareback, across wide-open mountain meadows and along ridgelines. The feeling is captured in this way about a character in Deborah Levy's book *Real Estate*:

Agnes had a sense of her own purpose in life, which is sometimes called agency or holding the reins of the high horse and steering it. After all, there is no point in climbing onto the high horse if you don't know how to ride it.

If you are reading this book right now, you have probably experienced at least a glimmer of these sentiments.

Sitting around a dinner table talking *about* horses can stretch for hours. Endless chatter about horse-and-rider shenanigans rolls on heedlessly, in waves of joyous heckling and nods of assent (except for those without the "gene," who will invariably slip off, wondering what all the fuss is about). But talking *with* horses, well, that rises to another level of intensity of experience. It has become my passion to understand horses to the best of my ability, during this short time I have here on Earth, sharing it with the magnificent species, the horse. I have been fortunate to have some brilliant teachers help me create the shared language between two species as epitomized by ridden classical horsemanship, and others help me learn the roots of equine language as proffered by natural horsemanship. The feeling of communicating non-verbally, whichever way it is presented, to me is transcendent. And keeps me going day after day.

As long as I am able, I wish to continue my work as a veterinarian, live on our horse farm, and keep riding. As I sit and write this, I can see my and Adam's horses spread out in various large pastures contentedly grazing. Our horses and farm have us rooted to a life in rhythm with nature, and it is a good choice for me. //

end of shelley's part



CHAPTER

6

Veterinary Decisions While Competing

*Moderation means prevention.
Prevention means achieving virtue.*

- Lau-tzu -



The innovations that Shelley brought to my stable felt like a competitive edge. She checked every horse after each match, running a plastic syringe cap down their energy meridians to see if any points were reactive; then treated discomfort, either with acupuncture or Western medicine, before it could get worse. Preventive, holistic, creative, individualized—her care was a step way beyond what my peers were doing with their horses. It was a dream scenario, knowing the “horse care” was covered. Even though it was someone else’s responsibility (Shelley’s), I knew it was being done and done well. So, when I settled into the saddle and entered the field of play, I was confident that every detail had been seen to. The horses were happy and healthy. All I had to do was play.

When spectators see a great horse making it look easy in a tournament finals, it’s hard to comprehend just how much consideration and care has gone into these animals’ performance. Here are a few horse stories that illustrate the value of proper veterinary care.

CHAPTER

6

// Veterinary Decisions
While Competing

Pumbaa: Navigating Illness

When Pumbaa played two chukkers in the 2002 US Open Finals, she was sensational. I scored two goals on her the first time I was on her, in the second chukker, then got the game winner halfway through the sixth, and we set up the goal that put the game away in the final minute. She was big, and gray, and so powerful that she dominated other horses on the field. For her efforts that day, she earned the Hartman Trophy for Best Playing Pony of the US Open. She was nine years old. And it is still the best, single-game performance I have ever ridden. What most spectators did not realize, seeing her draped in a royal blue “BPP” blanket in the winner’s circle, was that she had previously sustained a career-threatening bout with Equine Protozoal Myeloencephalitis (EPM), a disease that affects the central nervous system.

There have been many veterinary success stories when it comes to our horses, but Pumbaa’s is one of the most poignant. She came to us as an energetic five-year-old. Her owner, Mike Galvan, called me at the end of the 1998 Florida season, and asked if I would come ride his gray mare.

“I think she’s got a lot of potential, and I’d like you to take her for the off-season,” was his gist.

He wasn’t trying to sell her (at least not overtly), he just wanted me to take her to Aiken and play her for a while, because he liked the way I rode.

I went and sat on Pumbaa one afternoon at the Everglades polo field. It was just the two of us out there on a 10-acre pitch. She was a little frisky, and oozed athleticism...*if* it could be channeled in the right direction. And what did I have to lose? So I agreed to take her, with one stipulation: that if I fell in love with her, I would have first option to purchase her for a *reasonable* price. Mike agreed.

That May, Mark Bryan, a trainer working with us at the time, played Pumbaa in her first four-goal game at Aiken Polo Club. And then I played her for two or three weekends in pro-am exhibition matches, which I always found to be a nice step for a young horse before entering them in higher goal, tournament polo. She didn’t get rattled in these flowy, white-pants practice matches. And she was obviously fast and athletic, but it still hadn’t clicked about just what a talent I was riding.

For our first competitive polo together the following fall, I entered Pumbaa in a 16-goal tournament. I will never forget the feeling from the first 20 seconds or so of stepping onto the field. We were playing at Foxcroft Farm in Alpharetta, Georgia, and the mare was still only five years old. First games on green horses always made me nervous. Neither of us knew what to expect. But I started on Pumbaa in the fourth chukker, in order to give her a good warm-up over halftime, and our first play together was a “knock-in” (bringing the ball in off the end line). The moment I stroked the ball off the backline, I had the overwhelming sensation that nobody could touch us. I tapped the ball a time or two forward and to the right—a conservative knock-in to start the

rookie horse—felt her right there underneath me, and then swatted the ball 50 yards sharp left under her neck. She was so quick getting back to the ball that it felt like cheating...and we’d created yards of space. And all the while, I knew that if an opponent got too tight on us, she’d go right by them. It was an incredible feeling—of floating, with an immense power in the control of my hand and legs. I can’t even recall the results of that match, but I remember the feeling Pumbaa gave me like it was yesterday. I had never felt anything like it.

The next time I was with Mike Galvan in person was in Aiken, and I invited him to my barn office where we sat and debated the meaning of the word *reasonable*. Eventually we agreed on a price, I wrote him a check, and Pumbaa became part of my string. Her first game in Florida that next winter she helped me score three goals in the sixth chukker of our 22-goal opener, and our team came from behind to win. It was that same floating feeling, but now we were facing elite competition. I remember Frederick Roy, horse lover and the late publisher of *The Morning Line*, coming up to me after the game and exclaiming about Pumbaa in his French accent: “That gray, so exciting! *Incredible!* Her debut and she’s your new champion!”

He was right.

Perhaps it was too good to be true, because that season, that feeling didn’t last. When I singled her (rode her alone), she was high as a kite. It felt like sitting on a keg of dynamite. One day, hacking her around the track at South 40, I raised my right hand to wave to a friend passing

in a car, and she spun left and bolted. I grabbed leather and managed to hang on by a toe, but I remember thinking, *No more sudden movements while I’m sitting on Pumbaa*. Was it just youthful exuberance?

On the playing field the change was gradual, but into our second tournament she no longer felt like the “new champion” she had at the start of the season. She had gotten more strung-out, not as collected underneath me. And I found myself not trusting her to play in the crunch time (fifth and sixth chukkers). Maybe she was getting tired? I chalked it up to it being her first “real season” in Florida. And I had to remember that she was only six years old.

Then one day Shelley was going through my horses, giving them her “whole horse” vet check between games. Our experienced Brazilian grooms Bento and Bete held the individual horses for her, and Shelley liked to ask about behavioral issues they may have noticed back at the barn or while out on sets. After all, they spent more hours with these horses on a daily basis than anyone else. When Shelley asked about Pumbaa, it turned out that Bete had recently witnessed something *muuy raro*. The last time she had roached Pumbaa’s mane, Bete had been reaching up to clip between her ears, when the mare stumbled and nearly collapsed in her stall.

“*Casi me mata*,” (“Almost killed me,”) Bete said with a grimace.

Already Shelley had been considering neurological possibilities for the root cause of the changes in my former rising star—the “tiredness” and “flatness”

that I had noticed on the polo field. But with Bete's description of what seemed like dizziness or a loss of motor control, the coin dropped (at least for me). When I thought about it, I *had* noticed Pumbaa rolling over a back foot—a little half-stumble behind—once in a while when easing her around the sand track on one of our “calming” trail rides. I had chalked it up to uneven ground but couldn't recall any other horses stumbling in the same manner, *and* it was a new occurrence since the start of the season. Shelley pulled blood, sent a sample to the lab for testing, and the results came back a strong positive for EPM. This was the first such diagnosis that any of my horses had ever had. It was scary.

And this was where Shelley's expertise and horse sense took over. Her attention to detail is the special ingredient that has allowed for longevity, or, as in the case of Pumbaa, comebacks in the careers of many of my best horses. In these situations, Shelley makes all the calls. And, because I inherently trust her choices, she has total freedom to decide what she thinks is best for the horse. Perhaps Shelley's choices weigh toward the *horse welfare* side of the seesaw, with me leaning in the direction of *next competition*, but it makes for a good balance.

Pumbaa's season was over, but she was in good hands.

There was hope that we had caught the disease early enough, and that with treatment and some luck, Pumbaa could still enjoy a playing career. I recall certain aspects of her rehabilitation. Work was stopped immediately. Stress apparently could be a contributing factor for EPM,

and certainly the new routine of Pumbaa's first high-goal polo season could be considered a source of stress. There was an experimental drug, Baycox®, that we specially ordered from Canada and administered orally for 30 days. Then Pumbaa returned to our farm in Aiken where she would, hopefully, “destress” in a field with her pasture mates.

There were a lot of unknowns about EPM back in 1999 (and still are). “A neurological disorder caused by eating possum poop” was basically what I understood it to be. It seemed mysterious, but it was also dangerous, and in some cases even fatal. But unlike a tendon or ligament injury, requiring a certain amount of rest followed by graded reconditioning, there were no specific timetables for a return to competition after EPM treatment (or, at least, the data didn't yet exist). At some point we would learn if our treatment of Baycox and rest had worked to counter the disease fully, partially, or not at all. The most substantial improvements reportedly could be observed within weeks of administering the drug. And, after that, there was only one way to find out.

That summer I was contracted to play the Queens Cup and Gold Cups in England. I hadn't played there since 1994, and it would be my first time playing the UK season on my own horses. The plan was that my team would fly nine of my best horses over in early May, and these horses would return to the States at the end of July. Pumbaa would have had two months' rest, and still some time to be legged up on the farm, and I wanted to bring her. Even if I didn't play her full

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED by copyright holder

chukkers, she gave me confidence, and there was no reason she couldn't play as a spare. Shelley okayed the plan.

I'm not sure either of us would have approved the plan had we known how rough a flight it would be. But players flew their horses regularly without incident, and it didn't seem more risky than a multi-day trailer ride to my mind. Plus, if I wanted to play the season in England, this was the transport provided by my team, Mirage. It wasn't like preparing my own trailer for a long haul—all we could do was prepare my string of horses as well as possible (ensure they were rested, fit, and well fed) and hope all went well.

A cargo plane was chartered for transport and refitted with portable, plywood standing stalls to carry 92 horses. There were polo ponies and grooms from three teams on the flight, and Bento and Bete traveled with my horses. The first hiccup was a two-hour delay on the tarmac at Miami International while a glitch in the paperwork was being resolved. The temperature rose above 90 degrees Fahrenheit in the cargo area, and there was no water to drink. Once airborne, it was frigid in the hold, and Bento and Bete spent much of the flight wrapped in extra horse blankets for warmth. Then, roughly halfway through the trip, the aircraft made an unexpected descent. Word filtered back that they were landing in Iceland to refuel. And the landing was a rough one. The aircraft bounced once badly off the runway, sending the horses crashing against partitions as they scrambled to keep their balance, before it eventually settled back down on the landing strip.

Once back in the air, one of our horses, Kanji, began struggling to lie down, but her stall was too narrow to allow it. Bento got in an argument with one of the “horse guards” who wanted to tranquilize her rather than alter the formation of the stalls, but finally Bento was allowed to take one partition from the stall so that Kanji could get down and rest. It was not the smooth trip we would have wished for any of the horses, but eventually they made it across the Atlantic and negotiated a smooth landing at Gatwick Airport, outside London.

Despite the wild flight, Pumbaa did really well that summer in England. At age six, she was the youngest horse in my string, playing only her second high-goal season, and was possibly still recovering from EPM. Since my other horses were older and more experienced, I used Pumbaa mostly as a spare. Maybe it was good for her to only play a couple minutes here and there, not get exhausted from playing a full seven minutes, and it gave me confidence to know I could get on her for short bursts. I remember one play at Guards Polo Club, where she bounced off Argentinian Sebastian Merlos and went for the ball. “Sebi” was screaming for a foul, but there was no whistle. She had just overpowered his horse, the way she could.

After my horses returned to the United States (on what was, fortunately, a less eventful flight) Scott Parker (a professional driver we've been using for years) picked them up from their brief quarantine near Miami International Airport and drove them

home to New Haven Farm. They would get three months out on pasture before being legged up for their next Florida season. They deserved it. Shelley treated Pumbaa again with another 30-day course of Baycox. It couldn't hurt, and if it helped to set back the disease a little more, or ideally knock it out, then the money would be well worth it.

Over the next two years, Pumbaa started floating again. She had gained the experience that allowed her to be more settled around the barn and on the playing field. Shelley devised a strategy that I would play her for only parts of the seasons—the last two tournaments of Santa Barbara, or only the 26-goals in Wellington—because we didn't want to deplete her and give the EPM a chance to resurface. Shelley had recently become certified in veterinary acupuncture (receiving her CVA from the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society), and her needles now provided another diagnostic and curative tool to help Pumbaa, and all our horses, stay healthy and performing their best.

In 2001 my team, Templeton, reached the finals of the Gold Cup, the second-most prestigious polo tournament in the United States after the US Open. From the semi-finals, I can still picture Pumbaa exploding by 10-goaler Marcos Heguy to score the winner late in the sixth chukker.

“Que bestia!” Marcos fumed afterward. It was meant as a compliment.

In those days the players in the finals were each given two numbered saddle pads for their best playing pony candidates. As I usually did when both ponies

★ BPPs

It was always tough for me selecting just two horses as best playing pony (BPP) candidates, because as any equestrian can tell you, it can be difficult to know which horse will shine on any given day. And I made a couple mistakes.

After winning the Pacific Coast Open in 2005, I was told that “the brown mare in the fourth would have won hands down” had I put a number on her. Sorry, Bag Lady. But the practice of making players choose two prior to a match made the judges' job easier, since they then only had to watch those horses wearing the specified numbers. And, I always appreciated learning which horses my competitors felt were the best in their strings. //

★ Horses I Loved

When I say *I loved* a horse, it means I loved to play him; or, for example, that I would happily enter a sudden-death overtime chukker on him.

There were seven horses I loved on my string that summer in England—Hale Bopp, Tequila, Bag Lady, Jill, Josephine, Kanji, and Pumbaa. Usually polo players, including me, just have one or two game-winners that they play in overtime. I still can't believe how fortunate I was to have those seven talented and amazing horses all together at once. //

were competing with me in the finals of a tournament, I picked Hale Bopp and Pumbaa to wear numbers that day. And Hale Bopp, who you will come to know intimately in these pages, was selected BPP of the 2001 Gold Cup. In 2002, however, it was Pumbaa's turn. I was playing #2 for Coca Cola, a position where Pumbaa's power was a huge asset—both for shutting down the best player on the other team and for scoring goals. And after getting nipped by a goal in the finals of the '02 Gold Cup, we knew we had a good team. We weren't practicing our best horses at all between games, since the other three team members were headed to England that summer and wanted to save their horses as much as possible. And this suited me just fine. I've often felt that most polo players over-practice their horses—either for something to do, out of fear of their horses being “heavy,” or to avoid riding singles. And with 15 teams in the '02 US Open, there would be no shortage of games.

The afternoon before each match we usually rode singles on the team's Everglades field (coincidentally the same place I had first tried Pumbaa). I had a rough pattern I followed: a loping warm-up twice around the 10-acre polo field, once on each lead; some different-sized circles at varying speeds; my “railroad tracks,” where you turn tight and try to come out parallel to the track you came in on; half-circles with full stops (just two) and rollbacks in both directions; a field-length gallop with slaloming flying lead changes; and a quiet halt with a soft back-up for a step or two. And then on to the next one. I loved riding Pumbaa

/ 6.1 / With Pumbaa, the gray blur, scoring the go-ahead goal of the 2002 US Open in the sixth chukker. She won the best playing pony prize that day.

over this imaginary course. We were relaxed, this was easy, and she glided effortlessly through her exercises. When we stopped and rolled, it was like she curled up underneath me, rocking her weight back, bringing her front legs across, and propelling us forward with her hindquarters in any direction my eyes were looking. She felt like silk, and I could ride that feeling all day!

In our six games (all wins) leading up to the US Open finals, I played either eight or nine horses. Six different horses would start chukkers, and two or three would be used as spares. In the week leading up to the finals, I phoned Shelley (who had returned to Aiken after the tournament's semi-finals to manage our children's school commitments) to ask about doubling (riding in two chukkers) Hale Bopp and Pumbaa.

"I thought the same thing," she responded.

This was music to my ears. Shelley wanted what was best for our horses but also valued the competitive goals that were linked to their performance. *These two things could be aligned.* She recognized a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and like me, she wanted to win. But she had given me the peace of mind to double my best two horses, worry-free; not only because of her affirmation of my plan, but because of her attitude—now part of our program—of providing these horses with everything they needed all along the way.

Pumbaa soared that day—she was a gray, bottomless, blur—largely due to the care and rehabilitation that Shelley had provided behind the scenes.

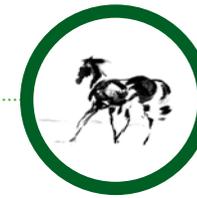


CHAPTER

9

Reflections on Competing

Grit and grace.



The Horse as a Competitive Partner

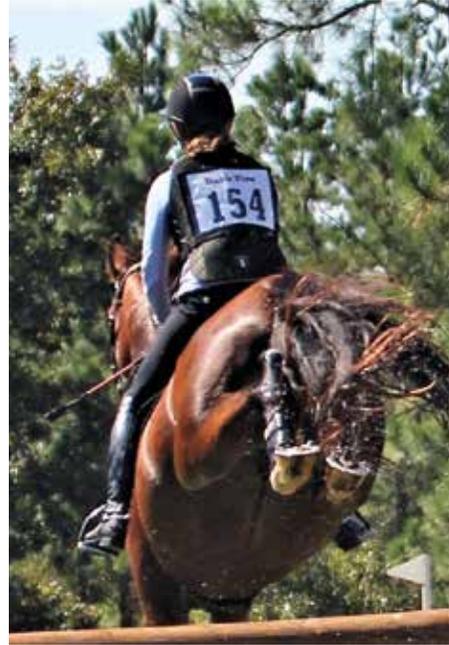
When it comes to the question of whether horses “enjoy” a sport, it is hard to say. But let’s face it, your horse doesn’t wake up in the morning and think, *Oooh, I can’t wait to jump that course perfectly or execute a flying change or win a polo play.* He thinks, *Where’s my food?* But, especially in horses that are bred to perform a certain job, I believe that they are undeniably better off when they are doing what they have been bred to do. Maybe it is just because I like to work, and I am anthropomorphizing. But let’s admit that one of life’s greatest hacks is exercise. For the mammalian brain, outdoor exercise checks all the boxes for building a healthy mind and body—true in the horse as much as in the human (see Gretchen Reynold’s *The New York Times* article from May 12, 2021, entitled “How Exercise May Help Us Flourish”). The body’s own feel-good hormones (*endogenous endocannabinoids* and *beta-endorphins* and *enkephalins*) increase their circulation and produce a cascade of positive effects, including lowering stress levels.

CHAPTER

9

// Reflections on Competing

/ 9.1 / Many horses do show eagerness to do their “job,” whether it’s on a playing field, out on the range, or like Chester is for me here on a cross-country course.



So, you’re not going to convince me that *not* exercising a horse is doing it any favors.

But how do we know when to push and when to rest? Which factors come into the decision of whether or not to play/show/compete when the stakes are high? How do we conscientiously compete? I believe we have to understand deep in our hearts that we have prepared everything we are capable of preparing, and then and only then will we feel confident that we are entitled to make demands upon our horses. We must start with a horse suited to the job at hand, trained appropriately (confident that he is only going to be asked to do things he is capable of), and given every chance to be at his physical best. We also must ensure we are primarily using long-term thinking for the horse’s welfare versus short-term gain.

These ideas sound straightforward, but it is of course very complicated to

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED
by copyright holder

★ It’s Never Make or Break

On making that call on whether to compete a horse or not: have confidence in yourself as an athlete, horseperson, and human that not competing this one horse on this one day won’t make or break your career. There will be more opportunities in the future—maybe even better ones. //

★ What Does Your Horse Want to Hear?

What do you say to your horse when you get onto the field or head out of the start box or enter the ring? Do you say, “Trust me on this one,” or “I will keep you safe today,” or “Let’s go, Tiger!” It makes a difference, depending on the horse. //

achieve all of them (which is why we are writing a book about how to do it!).

Any doubt that surfaces can put a rider off-track. I often hear concerns from clients who witness veterinary procedures on their horses, or reach a deeper level of understanding about a soundness issue of their horses, and from that time forward have difficulty putting their horses back to full work. When questions lurk in the back of your mind about your preparation—“Did I cut short too many trot sets?” or “Did I jump high enough that last lesson?” or “Does the new feed give him enough energy?”—it can have a devastating impact on your confidence. Everything has to feel right before the competition begins.

At the professional, upper levels of any equine sport, I believe we as horsepeople have to acknowledge that everything can’t be pretty all the time. Unless we abolish horse sport altogether, we have to make peace with the fact that finding the perfect line between not pushing hard enough and over-pushing is not always possible without trial and error. No person who has ever been a competitive athlete themselves would disagree. You don’t achieve greatness without the proverbial blood, sweat, and tears. Our horses need to train hard also. Doing it well is the key.

No discussion of winning is complete without considering the horse’s desire to win. Many books are written on sports psychology for the human athlete, but equestrians have to manage the psychology of the horse as well as their own! I find it fascinating to ponder how it varies among horses, and why. Is it different for

mares, geldings, or stallions? Is it innate, so we can breed for it, or is it created, and thus we must train for it?

On gender: racehorse trainers certainly feel young colts are the most highly competitive; the vast majority of the top professional polo players prefer mares (about 95 percent of the top horses in polo are mares) for their drive and spirit. And male horses are traditionally castrated to enhance their tractability, which would seem to put geldings at a disadvantage in any equine sport where horses are in direct competition with each other. But when it comes to a horse being in the ring on his own and really trying to do his best, perhaps it simply comes down to character—which can be both bred and trained. And once you’ve got it, treasure it and handle it with kid gloves.

When Should Competition Be Over?

Regarding retirement (and I speak more to this issue in chapter 11—p. 157), I have heard many stories from clients who tell me about their geriatric horses doing so much better when they continue to “work.” Recently I was texted a photo of a 20-year-old-plus patient, jumping a good-sized fence, perhaps 3’6”, with the caption “Nick couldn’t be happier that he is back doing his favorite thing.” (The owner hadn’t ridden him for a few years while she was busy training some younger horses.) Adam swears that one of our “retired” mares, Rio, grows a few inches and loses several years in attitude when she gets out on the polo field to “stick

and ball” every now and then. Data does show that most humans do better with an active or even nonexistent “retirement.” Of course, with horses, it is a little more complicated than with people, to know the right way forward.

It certainly depends on the situation, but perhaps the core issue is stress level. Would it be stressful for a horse who has competed at a high level for years to get turned out in a big field and not receive much human interaction after a lifetime of stalls and trailers and grooming? Maybe he would find it less stressful to be in light work, getting hacked and sticking to a familiar routine. Another horse, maybe particularly one who has been adjusted to turnout even during his prime, may know perfectly how to relax the minute his unshod feet hit green.

I received good advice from a child psychiatrist years ago when asking about making a school decision for my child. It was, in a nutshell, “If you listen, they will tell you.” I believe the same is true for horses (although “listening” requires much more expansive perception in a horse than a child!). Older polo ponies will tell you because they don’t want to enter the “throw-in” (when play is started by throwing it down the line-up of players and horses) or they tremble at the trailer. Jumpers will refuse fences or become grumpy in the barn. After appropriate trouble-shooting (ruling out medical and training issues) a solution can usually be found. Giving the horse to a younger rider often does the trick—horses quickly sense the drop in pressure and become the perfect schoolmaster. This is the winning

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED by copyright holder

★ Be a Buddhist Olympian

There is a conflict between performance and practice. Riders have to figure out how to set goals and strive and be motivated, day after day, while simultaneously maintaining the calm, accepting persona of not grasping and allowing the slow natural evolution of training to take place. Since most equestrians ride their own horses every day, they must constantly seek harmony between these two. It’s analogous to being a Buddhist on the face of things but underneath harboring a hidden Olympian. Striking the balance between “quiet” and “drive” is key for all athletes (and performers and strivers of any kind), but for equestrians, it is especially fraught as our energy is so transmissible to the creatures we are in partnership with. //

way—listen to your horse, pay attention to his behaviors, and the correct decision will present itself.

The Rider Part of the Equation

On a personal note, it is challenging to compete as an amateur rider while being a professional horseperson. You may know a lot but you can’t always execute! I went through a phase with my current event horse where I thought he was so perfect I refused to ride with spurs or a whip. I wanted everything to be completely harmonious and him to be a truly willing partner. Or else, I idealistically believed, we wouldn’t do it. Call it purism, I suppose. Then he “opted” not to jump one jump on a cross-country course. And I had to reconsider.

I’ve been called a “polite rider” more times than I can remember. I’ve even received the back-handed compliment, “If I believed in reincarnation I’d want to come back as your horse.” Although flattering in one sense, coming from a high-powered coach it certainly meant my demands were decidedly on the lighter side! Recently I was cleaning out some drawers and perused some old dressage tests. In the collective marks I seemed to score consistently in the “8s” for gaits (and this was on my not-fancy Thoroughbreds) but “6s” for submission. I do prefer, and even often demand, obedience from my dogs

/ 9.1 / My favorite definition of dressage: *a combination of physical therapy and obedience, facilitated by nonverbal communication.*

and children, but my horse, well, he apparently often gets a hall pass!

I think I have these predispositions because I know enough to know that I don't want to over-face my horse, but I also know enough to know that I may not have enough experience to decide where that line is. Especially when it comes to competing myself. Competing is a skill in and of itself, for both horse and rider. As with everything, practicing well is crucial to a successful outcome. Improving competitive skills takes time and experience and coaching. I remember visiting a top-tier gymnastics facility and written in huge letters on the back wall of the building was "Great gymnastics is not a result of a thousand repetitions. It is the result of a thousand corrections." I can't say it better myself.

In polo, I really only enjoy the lower-contact form of the game found in practices, with my sweet spot being training chukkers for young horses. Besides the obvious disadvantage I have of being a south-paw in a mandatory right-handed sport, I also have difficulty bringing myself to push a polo pony into the throw-ins, scrums, and bumps required in competitive games (maybe I know I'll be the one that has to take care of the horse back at the barn if he gets hurt!). Adam sometimes calls that aspect of the game

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED
by copyright holder



“trench warfare.” But galloping around helping my mount learn how to follow the ball is all fun. It is truly play, not work.

For amateurs, it is difficult knowing a professional can do a better job keeping a horse’s confidence up, and in those equestrian sports with higher levels of danger, keeping a horse safer. Some riders give up on the challenge for this very reason. It is particularly problematic when your horses live with you and you tend to all their daily needs—they evolve more into a pet than a competition partner. But it can be helpful to think honestly about your goals and focus on competence and improvement rather than results. In these instances, focusing on building a relationship and competing for fun can be your version of winning.

When I do compete, I like to be prepared. I do have my own sports psychology routine, gathered from various sources over the years. First of all, in training at home, I try to be disciplined about focusing on one thing every day that needs to be improved. I try to break down my goals into small, manageable ones. I do my best to not let negativity dominate my self-talk (easier said than done). I practice meditation and yoga to try and keep myself calm throughout my daily life, but I also rely on them (through breathwork and mindfulness) when it’s crunch time. On competition day, I practice visualization, usually in my trailer immediately before going into the ring. (A pet peeve: someone saying dismissively, “Oh, that’s all in your head.” *In your head* is where it all happens.)

I have some games I play in my head with my horse when I am competing. For

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED by copyright holder

example, on a cross-country course when I am weaving around looking for the next obstacle, I’ll try to think like a little kid on her pony: *Oooh...look! There’s the jump! Let’s go jump it!* (When I am thinking this, I *know* I am having fun!) Or when I am riding a dressage test and we have to do a turn-on-the-haunches I say to my horses: *Oops, sorry, I changed my mind. Let’s go the other way.* Then when you come to the second turn on the haunches you *really* have to apologize and play along, because what can the horse possibly be thinking in that movement? *Geez, this idiot doesn’t even know where she wants to go.* There is not a much worse fate for me than my horse thinking I’m an idiot!

Whenever I throw a leg over a horse and tell him where to go, I feel a responsibility to keep him safe. Whether that is stepping over a fallen wire on the ground or navigating holes or pointing him at a fence to jump, it is the same. It is truly amazing horses allow us to control them, and it is an honor I do not take lightly.

// *Winning Point*

Understanding what each participant—the horse and the rider—brings to the table on competition day is crucial to performance. Do you need a thermos of coffee for energy or do you need to develop a meditation practice to calm your mind? Does your horse need a relaxing acupuncture session at the trailer or a little wakeup session on the rope upon arrival at the venue? When you do go out on the course or the field or into the arena, remember that you’re benefitting from the bonds you’ve established with your horse through practicing all the many different mediums we’ve been discussing. It is time to enjoy.

★ Find a “Win” for You

If you are a person who is more focused on the welfare of the horse rather than on your own aspirations, you can still find a “win” in it for you. Get yourself an inspiring coach and surround yourself with supportive friends and family. What you do with your horse doesn’t have to be in the form of traditional competition—undoubtedly, we all thrive with challenge, but there are different kinds of challenges worth pursuing. //

end of chapter 9

