

XI

HORSE SHOWS



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

*Practice makes perfect
Schooling for a show under the eyes of groom and trainer*

"Why do I like horses?"

"It's the beauty of the animals, and the love and affinity I have for them. I show them for those two minutes when you are one with the horse in an effortless ride. I love their personalities.

I've had the arrogant horse, the punk, the sweet one – they're all different."

—Pam Dudley, amateur show hunter owner and rider, commenting on her sport

HORSE SHOWS

Showing horses is perhaps the horse sport enjoyed by the greatest number of participants in Virginia. In what the telephone company calls "The Piedmont Regional Calling Area" – roughly from Leesburg and Winchester south to Orange – there are at least a dozen hunter-jumper events each month that are listed in the magazine *Horse Talk*. There are many more not listed, held by Pony Clubs, riding stables and other less formal groups.

It is impossible to cover this vast expanse of activity comprehensively in a single chapter, so we have selected a spectrum of four events to represent the genre and convey its flavor and its mood: St. Peter's, an informal junior event; Warrenton, a rated but locally oriented show; A-rated Upperville, including its Grand Prix jumping; and the new Grand Prix at Great Meadow.

– St. Peter's Horse Show –

On the last weekend in May Nancy Dillon's Chimney Hill Farm becomes a Child's Garden of Horses (apologies to Robert Louis Stevenson) when the St. Peter's Schooling Show takes place for the benefit of St. Peter's Church. The show is part of an organized group – the Short Circuit Horse Show Association, membership \$10 per year, no admissions committee interview required.



CHILCOTE FAMILY PHOTO

Pinning the class

Chimney Hill is not easy to find, at least if the breakfast table directions are, loosely summarized, "somewhere northeast of the corner of Route 611 and the Snickersville Pike." After bumbling around in this region, between corn fields, cut hay and overbuilt subdivision houses, I set out by dead reckoning to the hamlet of Philomont.

There, in the general store cum post office, a kindly man behind the counter





CHILCOTE FAMILY PHOTO

Sam Chilcote

interrupts the sale of coffee to a policeman to help me.

"Go thata way, [he points to his left, whence I had come] ...second left, sign says 'Horse Show,' you can't miss it. Must be a million and a half cars."

His directions prove precise, his car count excessive by about 1,499,930. But we are there. By chance the rail fence I belly up to is at the entrance of the upper ring, where there will be three classes each for the categories of:

- Lead-line • Pre-Short Stirrup • WARM UP – 18" • Beginner • Young Entry Equitation • Baby Green Pony.

The Pre-Short Stirrup Division is just ending. A small bespectacled boy on a tiny pony emerges from the ring through the gate next to me. His pony is wearing a huge Championship rosette, its long blue, red, and yellow ribbons almost trailing on the ground. In addition to a large hunt cap and appropriate shirt, jacket and jodhpurs the rider is clad in a huge smile. A shrill young voice emanates from among the crowd of ponies, riders, parents and coaches awaiting the next class:

"Good job, Sam. You earned that one!"

I am soon to learn that "good job" is the most used phrase of the day, applicable as much to those who tried but finished last as it is to victors such as Sam.

Judging by the crowd of young girls waiting for their turn at WARM UP – 18" (the number apparently designates the height of the WARM UP jumps) the win by a boy is statistically unlikely, and so to be treasured.

Next to me, over the fence, is a sleepy bay pony named Wanoon, and his rider Katy. Katy is properly dressed in a dark jacket, her outfit topped by what seems like a huge hunt cap. I am reminded of days years ago coaching a group of large, visored baseball caps, under each of which it was possible for a discerning eye to discover a small boy with a baseball mitt.

Katy and her friends all seem to have their hair braided into two pigtails, each tied with a bow of bright ribbon. I ask Katy about her show experience.

"This is my second show."

"Ever get a ribbon?" I ask.

"No."

"Maybe today." She smiles.

Katy explains that Wanoon is one of Nancy's ponies (all the kids call her Nancy), and that most of the others are too. Katy turns to her friend Hannah mounted next to her to explain some detail of the WARM UP course, and Nancy notices me and comes over.

The maestro of Chimney Hill is a lean, weathered woman of uncertain age, quiet spoken and seemingly unflappable. She is clearly the role model, probably the heroine, for the young that chatter with each other and with her as they await their turns in the ring. Nancy exudes calm, confidence, enthusiasm and encouragement, qualities instantly transmitted to those around her. She seems to know exactly why I am there as she welcomes me, so I ask, thinking of Wanoon *"How many horses do you have on the farm?"*

"I don't know. I was a math major in college but I don't know how many



CHILCOTE FAMILY PHOTO

Lauren Hair



horses I have." [She seems pretty precise, though, on the number of her grandchildren – six.]

"You see that little girl in the blue jacket over there? That's one of mine. She's four, she's going in the walk, trot, and canter this afternoon."

Across the ring there is a pick-up truck parked along the rail. In its bed the judge is sitting in a folding chair, scoring what is going on. Nancy turns to her charges...

"Hannah, have you got the course?"

"Yeah."

To another:

"Be sure to keep your reins up. Don't look at us at all... Keep her on the base, then she won't outjump you."

I notice two girls not in riding clothes, but mingling in the mix of ponies and riders – "Those girls aren't riders?"

"They're Greer and Louise Chapman. They're here to support their friends. They ride, but they're not ready just yet to show."

A lady nearby overhears us, and introduces herself:

"I'm Martha Chapman, their mother. Our daughter Bess is an acolyte at Trinity Church. And we have a Halloween trail ride for kids each fall."

I should have recognized a fellow parishioner, but then we go to the eight o'clock service, and most young families go at eleven. Nancy has 40-50 kids coming to her at any one time, perhaps 20 of which are regulars who often help out with the novices. She adds:

"I've probably taught a thousand. And every pony here we broke and trained. We don't go to a lot of shows, we mostly do hunting."

Then Katy enters the ring, and Nancy says:

"This kid just learned to jump two weeks ago."

Katy finishes, her round marred by the fact she trotted between jumps. As she exits Nancy explains:

"You trotted because you made the turn too sharp. You have to come to the fence. I'm telling you this so you'll learn."

Her voice is kind. Then she turns to the child about to go in...

"You have to ride this pony in. She's a little bit herd-bound to the other ponies."

A red-haired freckle-faced lady comes up – Kim Hurst, Katy's mother. As we are talking they award the ribbons, and we hear:

"Second, # 609, Wanoon, ridden by Katy Hurst."

Hannah gets fifth, and there are "good jobs" all around.

Katy dismounts so her sister Jessa, #610, can get on Wanoon. Nancy adjusts the stirrups while Katy tightens the girth. At the gate for the next class – I think it is "Pre-Short Stirrup" walk, trot – Nancy is talking to #485, her four year old granddaughter, Haley Alcock. Her parting comment:

"Get your heels down."

Then we watch Haley go, posting properly when she trots, but looking all around at the crowd. Quickly the results are in. Haley gets a pink ribbon. Nancy:

"At least she beat one."

Silently I wonder if she expected more of a Dillon – even if the class was for up through nine year-olds.

Looking back one can see Katy and Hannah inspecting the posted course diagrams, which Katy is explaining. Are we looking also at a budding teacher – or executive? Then the class is over, the one in which Katy's sister rode Wanoon. The six participants emerge, carrying their ribbons. Jessa's is green, sixth, and she is having tear trouble. Katy consoles her:

"Good job."

Soon both girls are smiling. Katy explains to me later:



Katy and her red ribbon





PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

View of ring and crowd

- Upperville Grand Prix -

The final Sunday of the Upperville Horse Show week is set aside for this purpose, with a \$50,000 purse supplied by the day's sponsor, Budweiser. This year there are over 30 horses entered. A fine day draws a crowd of several thousand people. Just outside the ring's perimeter is a circle of boxes assigned to those who wish – and can afford – chairs and a front row view, plus a red ribbon denoting box holder status. Behind the western side of the ring and its boxes the land rises to form a spacious amphitheater where the general admission spectators can sit on the grassy slope, or on folding chairs they have brought, their children running loose, their dogs hopefully leashed, and

their coolers and picnics spread out around them.

We enter at the southeast corner, immediately finding friend Jeanie Perin in her box, concealed under a straw hat and behind dark glasses, relaxing after the League of Conservation Voters benefit she put on last night for 300 people. Our casual attire is not amiss – Jeanie has selected blue cotton slacks and – at the moment – bare feet. Only the riders will be formally attired – black or scarlet jacket* (scarlet for past or present members of national equestrian teams), white breeches, hunt cap, white shirt and stock.

If one looks across the ring from the east side one sees the Blue Ridge rising above and far beyond the crowd on the grassy slope. Towards the north end of the slope is a large white tent, its three conical peaks gleaming in the June sun. Were this the field of Agincourt, the tent might be the headquarters of the French commanders, the Dauphin and the Constable of France, for it is too large to suit the battle-hardened and – according to Shakespeare – more democratically inclined King Henry the Fifth of England. But resident within the big tent there is indeed a King – Budweiser, The King of Beers – entertaining his many royally endorsed friends above this peaceful field.

To the south of the royal tent are the general admissions hordes, enjoying the almost-too-warm day. Among them a scraggly youth sets the nadir of the dress code, lying on his back, blue jeans perilously low, shirt off, gold earrings glittering, a series of black Chinese characters stenciled or tattooed on his sweaty, hairless chest. We are perhaps fortunate not to understand what they say.

From this vantage point one sees to the east a line of trees immediately behind the far boxes, screening a warm-up ring and the stable tents beyond. To the south are more boxes, behind them a huge television truck, and numerous vendor tents backed up to Route 50, no doubt relocated overnight from the main show grounds across the road.

But one's gaze is drawn quickly to the center of the action, the "lists" – oops, the "ring" – which holds 17 jumps of all shapes and sizes except easy. Horses and riders enter this arena by passing under a red and white banner emblazoned "Budweiser."

* In very hot weather it is sometimes permissible to eliminate the jacket.



Once inside, they find that the course designer's imagination has run wild, hoping to challenge each horse with something it has never seen before. One jump is a fake brick wall, behind which is one flanked by two large replicas of Orcas (killer whales), marine mammals infrequent in horse farm ponds. Two nearby red and yellow rail jumps have Monarch butterflies, with three foot wingspans, perched on the posts in a take-off position. A wingless green and white jump is only six feet wide, offering the lazy horse an invitation to skip it by passing to one side. The final fence is a solid red wood wall, topped by a red and white rail, and flanked by two 12-foot brown bottles decorated with the Budweiser label. They promise a reward for horse and rider as they complete their effort, and suggest an immediate option for thirsty spectators. Few if any fences are less than five feet high.

The prescribed course weaves through a complicated series of eight tight turns, three of them at 180 degrees or more, encompassing all 17 of the fences, some of which are placed so close together that there is only room for one stride between them. Maximum time allowed is about 85 seconds. The undulating ground at Upperville – most Grand Prix events are on the flat – and the highly "technical" nature of the layout make it a difficult test.

As horses and riders are introduced by the loudspeaker it is obvious from their credentials that this is a game at which most have excelled. We note only one rider entering his first Grand Prix, and his inexperience shows; he does not complete his round. Another contestant falls as the result of a refusal. Nothing except pride is hurt, but a bystander comments:

"That's show jumping. First you're soaring over a big fence, then you're lying flat on your face, inspecting real estate!"

Another horse splashes through, instead of leaping over, the pool of water that is obstacle #8. A steward at the side of the pool waves a red flag while the splashed water is still sparkling in the air. Four faults. The horse must jump when you ask him to, whether he thinks it is necessary or not. Thinking is the rider's job. Jumping is his.

By this time I have settled into the box of Edie's cousin, Peter MacVeagh, and his wife Pat. Pat is a former show jumper, once competing at a modest level, but now an inveterate photographer of horse events, currently totally absorbed in her hobby. We chat briefly about enlisting her help in illustrating this book, then she returns to her camera. Peter, meanwhile, is keeping score. About half the horses have gone, and there are several tied at four faults, but there has been no clear round yet. If there is, those tied behind the zero-fault leader(s) will be placed in accordance with how quickly they completed the course.

With the exception of Alison Firestone, the riders' names are unfamiliar. No doubt many are from "away" and Grand Prix jumping is perhaps a sport apart, without the cross-connections one often sees among hunter-jumper exhibitors, steeplechasing, endurance riding, eventing, and foxhunting.

A horse named Gardenio enters the ring. Peter knows him from past exposure:

"That's my horse!"

Peter's excitement builds as Gardenio goes clean over fence after fence. Then comes the moment the four-fault club has feared. Gardenio completes a clean round. So later do Bergerac and Quintin. The fastest of the four-faulters must now settle for fourth; one rail pulled by jumping an inch too low in the first round will separate a possible first from perhaps eighth. A jump-off will decide the first three places.

The jump-off course has eight obstacles, again finishing with the three closely spaced one stride jumps and the beer bottles. The contestants are the three with perfect scores: Gardenio and Todd Minikus, Bergerac and Kimberly Frey, and Quintin and Candice King. King has been riding Quintin for only six months; the other two have had much more experience with their horses.

Gardenio goes first, and pulls a rail at the butterfly jump. The other two now can shoot at his four faults. Candice King is next, going cautiously, knowing that a clean though slow round will assure her of second, and that is what happens, as Kim Frey, from nearby Hume, also goes clean on the 13 year-old Bergerac, but in four seconds less than King, thereby winning.

Were he here today, Colonel Dulany would be surprised at and proud of his handiwork. The first Upperville show in 1853 had two classes. In 2002 there were over 50 division champions – typically four classes per Division, and 15 riders won leading rider awards in their category. Since Dulany's time the horse has made the transition from economic and military necessity to agent of pleasure without missing a beat in Virginia. He remains an object of affection and beauty, and a superior teacher of patience, responsibility, teamwork, and caring for others.

The surrounding countryside still retains the beauty of Dulany's day, despite modern pressures for change. The children of today will remember their time under the great oaks, and because of those memories will become the future guardians of the Colonel's vision. His Upperville Show still brings his community and the wider horse world together in a common endeavor providing sport, friendship, and fun for themselves, and support for a worthy cause.

May it always be thus.



- Great Meadow -

A new local September fixture is described on its program cover as:

2ND ANNUAL GREAT MEADOW GRAND PRIX AND BLUE RIDGE WINE WAY WINE FESTIVAL,
FEATURING THE \$100,000 MOORE CADILLAC HUMMER CLASSIC, AND
BENEFITING THE MEADOW OUTDOORS FOUNDATION FOR OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Great Meadow row of merchants' tents. Large tent in rear is for wine tasting

As a stand-alone event the organizers have made it a happening, with both a morning \$10,000 Junior / Amateur jumping event, a wine tasting, tents housing booths of merchandise, opportunities for the public to walk the course with its designer, and to meet and get autographs from the winning riders. The "opening ceremonies," will take place just before the main event, featuring a rider galloping around the ring carrying Great Meadow's flag that flew over the Pentagon on 9-11.

We decide to explore Grand Prix from the inside, to meet and talk to the people behind the scenes, so our first stop is the stable tent.

Passing down an aisle we meet Jessica Saalfield tacking up Lavarro for the Junior / Amateur event. She owns her horse, as do most of the riders in this Division. We find her pleasant and polite but also tense and busy; with her

approaching round her adrenaline is rising. We know how stomach butterflies feel, and we leave her to investigate a less pressured situation.

Near the stall of Rio (owner McLain Ward) is a baby parked in a stroller, who is being gushed over by a nice lady not his mother. We enjoy the baby momentarily and then move on, finding him unable to explain his connection to Grand Prix jumping. Further along is Kelly Strock of Somerset, Virginia, who works with La Rocca and his rider, Paul Matthews. Kelly is busy cleaning tack, but happy to talk:

"I've been riding since I was nine. I went to Averett College and got a degree in Equestrian Studies and Business. Freshman year there were 35 girls and 2 guys in the class; when we graduated there were three girls and one guy. It got too hard, and they changed their minds when they saw how early they had to get up."

Kelly figures she has been getting a lot of basic management experience, but isn't yet fixed on any particular career path:

"I could run a business, or go in some other direction."

Meanwhile she is focusing on getting La Rocca ready for the afternoon's Classic (where he will later finish among the also-rans). After the competition she is philosophical; there will be another day and her pay check does not depend on La Rocca's purses. Even in Grand Prix jumping almost no one can cover expenses with winnings.

In the next aisle two young girls, Bianca and Rachel, are talking together near a non-descript dog guarding a tack box by lying on it.



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Jessica Saalfield tightening girth on Lavarro



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Kelly Strock





PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Bianca, Rachel and Erica Valdivia



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Collie Valdivia and Modra



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Susan Strittmatter

Rachel is the daughter of Linda Gordon, who is now riding in the Junior / Amateur; Bianca's mother and father are nearby. The mother, Erica Valdivia, tells me:

"My husband Collie and I take care of the horse, his name is Modra."

She spells it for me. "Where do you come from?" I ask.

"From Mexico – Guadalajara."

She has been working for 7-8 years in the US, for how long with her current employer, rider Barbara Bancroft, I do not learn.

Finally there is Cari Furze, a lady from Calgary who has just finished her round on Geneva, and is taking the tack off her mare. "How did it go?"

"Well, we had two rails down. But that's OK. We've never done a course that big before, but because of my rapport with her I thought we could do it."

I ask her about the horse and her future plans. She answers as she takes the studs out of Geneva's shoes:

"She's a Dutch Warmblood – got her in Germany. We only have four horses now, so we take care of them ourselves. We're in the US for two months – two horses. I'm training with Joe Fargis – he got a gold medal in the 1984 Olympics. We're staying in Middleburg now, then we go to Florida."

It is almost lunch time, but first the wine tasting. For this you need a blue ticket, which gets you into a line at the entrance to a big white tent at the far end of a line of vendors' tent booths. The man asks for identification – we are being carded for the first time in five decades. Fortunately we pass, and

each of us is given a small wine glass. Inside the tent there are eight vineyards represented, all from Virginia. Samples vary in quality, but are uniformly minuscule in size, no doubt a conspiracy with the twin objectives of saving money and avoiding civil disturbance.

We enjoy a happy encounter with our steeplechasing friend Susan Strittmatter, and then leave stone sober for our picnic lunch.

Unfortunately the ring and spectator areas are so positioned that photographing the jumping will be hard. The problem is solved when Leslie gives me a green "press" ribbon – we are after all writing a book – and suit-

able areas become available. The rest of the story is best told in pictures...



The feature event opens with a parade of the flag



Contestants school before entering on the course



Jumping in front of Great Meadows signature tower



Riders and fans await their turn

