

AMERICA'S HORSE



**TRUSTED
TEACHERS:**
Celebrating
Lesson Horses

Worth Their Weight

An ode to the lesson
horse, the unsung hero
of the horse world.

By Abigail Boatwright

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MANY OF US CAN REMEMBER THE LESSON HORSE that spurred our lifelong interest in horses. They may not have won a collection of championship trophies. They may not have produced money-earning offspring. But good lesson horses – ones who day after day invite riders to become horsemen – have an immeasurable value.

The Gatekeepers

ASK ANY RIDING INSTRUCTOR, AND THEY'LL TELL you that a lesson program simply doesn't exist without good lesson horses. Tereesa Wentland is a Certified Horsemanship Association-accredited instructor from Chatteroy, Washington, and she says lesson horses are the backbone of her program at JT Ranch.

"Lesson horses are amazing," Tereesa says. "They give kids a sense of fulfillment. They provide the opportunity for students to have an

amazing, positive experience from beginning to end."

A bad experience with an unruly horse can turn riders off of horses forever – and negatively affect a riding school, Tereesa says.

"You can keep a program up and running with good lesson horses, but if you have bad horses that give people bad experiences ... The biggest part of keeping our industry growing is from word of mouth, so having a safe, positive experience is so incredibly important."

In fact, Tereesa thinks lesson horses are the foundation for the horse industry's continued growth.

"I think lesson horses are the unsung heroes of our industry, and without people getting introduced to horses through lesson horses, our industry would be basically gone," Tereesa says. "It's very hard to make money with a lesson

Scotch Is Firewater gave Brooklyn Hardy a valuable, safe introduction to horses. Although he has passed on, he will forever hold a special place in her family's heart.

CASEY HARDY

program – the overhead costs are astronomical to operate. But it's worth every penny because of the opportunity it provides kids, and the way these horses make their faces light up. When you connect these kids with these live animals, it's very sweet."

Tammi Gainer is the equestrian director for CHA-accredited Pegasus Farm in Hartville, Ohio. She says a lesson horse is a gateway to becoming a horseman for new riders.

"Lesson horses are on the front lines; they're considered the 'first touch' for many people considering getting into horses," Tammi says. "And they help us as instructors to lay the foundation of good horsemanship."

Pegasus Farm offers riding lessons to riders with disabilities and non-disabled riders, using horses that are safe for beginners, but can also transition to intermediate and even advanced lessons as needed.

"School horses help students progress toward independence and instill life skills such as building confidence and helping with self-esteem," Tammi says. "A good, solid lesson horse is literally – it's a cliché, I know – worth its weight in gold. When you get ahold of one, you do everything you can to help it live a good, long, healthy, happy, content life."

Tara Reimer is owner, instructor, trainer and manager at Cloud 9 Ranch in Steinbach, Manitoba. The Canadian says horses are the most important part of a riding lesson.

"They are teaching the riders, and it's through our horses that we understand what the rider is doing, because we know our horses so well that we can tell if the rider is nervous, or if they're miscommunicating," Tara says. "If they're not focused, the horse relays that information to us."

Experienced lesson horses know the routine of the program, says Tara, which helps riders focus on other parts of their horsemanship.

"Our horses easily go through the riding exercises and patterns, which then allows the riders to learn the muscle-memory-learned behavior, such as steering by using your eyes, better," Tara says.

A good lesson horse allows riders to progress, rather than stagnate at a certain level, says Amy Watkins, an AQHA judge, head coach of Youngstown State University's equestrian team and CHA instructor based in Canfield, Ohio.

"They have a kindness in their eyes," Amy says. "They come out every day, and you can count on them 100 percent, even when they're not having a good day. Even if the rider isn't having a good day, (a lesson horse will) turn their day around for that person. Lesson horses deserve angel wings."



COURTESY OF TARA REIMER

Ida Liked A Dun, aka "Arnie," is a model lesson horse. Don't believe it? Just look at the Peter Stone model horse created in his likeness after he was named the 2016 Certified Horsemanship Association Stone School Horse of the Year.

Ingredients for a Good Lesson Horse

TAMMI SAYS SHE LOOKS FOR A LESSON HORSE WITH STEADFASTNESS and grit.

"They do this over and over and over, day in and day out, but with a really good, solid attitude, and they have excellent work ethics," Tammi says.

A quiet lesson horse accustomed to interacting with new people is important for Tara. She also wants a horse able to forgive clumsy cues and willing to put up with being brushed, saddled and ridden by people with a variety of personalities.

"It's just about having horses that we, as instructors, can trust," Tara says. "Our horses are responsive, but they still enjoy the job. The horses look to us as instructors for confidence if the riders are nervous or over-excited. And they're a little less sensitive than a push-button show horse. They also need to be OK with being groomed a lot by students."

Teresa says the cost of a good lesson horse is worth it.

"They give, day in and day out – no matter the rider," Teresa says. The patience and grace displayed by these horses is so amazing that "you just can't put a value, a number on them."

She looks for a quiet, calm, experienced nature – usually geldings for her program, because she feels they're more consistent in their personalities. But she does have a couple of mares.

"You want one that has been exposed to many different things," Teresa says. "Whether it's trail, jumping or dressage.

And they have a kind, giving personality. We do have horses that can be difficult – they are good for some students, because it helps them learn. But overall, a willingness to do what's asked and with a kind spirit."

Amy says a good lesson horse needs to be responsive but not necessarily soft. She says no horse is "bomb-proof" but a horse needs to be trustworthy, and you need to know how they'll react in a situation.

Caring for the Lesson Horse

LESSON HORSES AREN'T ROBOTS, EVEN THOUGH THEY TEND TO be easygoing, despite their rider's emotions. Tara says paying attention to your lesson horse's nonverbal messages is crucial to maintaining their mental and physical health.

"Listen to what your horses are trying to communicate," Tara says. "If they don't feel safe or comfortable, notice that and address it."

Tara says the care of her lesson horses is a top priority – sometimes even over her own needs.

"It's very important that our horses stay healthy, and that we put the riders that best suit them with each horse," Tara says. "Our lesson program is nothing without good horses. If you don't have a connection with your lesson horses, then you really don't have a lesson program."

Abigail Boatwright is a former AQHA Media employee who freelances from her home in Fort Worth, Texas.



Lesson horses are renowned for their patience, and there's no better example of that than A Cherokee Diamond, who didn't mind wearing 300 balloons for the sake of a costume contest.

School Horse Stars

MANY OF OUR SOURCES TEARED UP TELLING THE STORIES OF their special lesson horses. We'll pay tribute to a few of them here, but we know that for every horse mentioned, there are many more like them doing the important work of teaching new riders with little fanfare.

The horse: Scotch Is Firewater, aka "Big Boy," a 1997 chestnut gelding. He passed away in November 2017.

The barn: Owned by Shoshanna Faber of New Song Farm, Pleasant View, Tennessee

Why he's a star: Casey Hardy's daughter, Brooklyn, took her first riding lessons on Big Boy when she was 3 years old. Casey, of Bakersfield, California, says the gentle gelding gave Brooklyn the best first experience.

"He was just the sweetest boy," Casey says. "Brooklyn has ridden many horses in her short span of life, from minis to world champion Quarter Horses and all in between. There are those special horses that give riders the confidence to conquer the world and the patience and grace that we riders often need. Big Boy was that horse for Brooklyn. He was so sweet, kind and patient and packed her around without a fuss. We all have that one lesson horse that puts a stamp on our hearts and we remember forever as we continue our journey as a rider. They are the horses that get us hooked."

Casey says Big Boy's quiet nature matched Brooklyn's personality, giving them an instant bond. After Brooklyn took lessons on Big Boy for about a year, Shoshanna moved with the gelding to Tennessee, and he passed away in 2017. But Brooklyn, now 7, still takes lessons on a horse named "Rocky." She sits tall in the saddle, thanks to the solid start she got with Big Boy.

The horse: Ida Liked A Dun, aka "Arnie," a 2001 red dun gelding.

The barn: Cloud 9 Ranch, Steinbach, Manitoba

Why he's a star: Tara Reimer began training Arnie for his owners as a weanling, he was shown successfully in halter futurities, and then Tara purchased him in 2003. He has qualified for the AQHA and Select world shows, and has a Superior and Register of Merit in halter.

Tara says some successful show horses don't make great lesson horses, because they are so responsive. Not so with Arnie, who excels in riding lessons under saddle, as well as showing in halter.

"Arnie has adapted wonderfully to the life of a lesson horse, while also being shown," Tara says of the 2016 CHA Stone School Horse of the Year. "I can always depend on Arnie to be a safe mount for any size, age or level of rider."

He's sound, healthy, enjoys his job, is patient when riders make mistakes and is respectful to humans and other horses, Tara says.

"Arnie is an integral part of our lesson program as a highly valued asset to Cloud 9 Ranch and all the services we offer the community," Tara says. "His strength, beauty, patience, work ethic and talent are unsurpassed."

Arnie has also been made into a model horse by the Peter Stone Co.

The horse: A Cherokee Diamond, aka "Diamond," a 29-year-old bay gelding. Still a beloved school horse today.

The barn: The Equestrian Reserve, Alpharetta, Georgia

Why he's a star: Diamond has been in Donna Romeu's family since the day he was foaled. He started out as a racehorse but ultimately settled into being an all-around show horse for her daughter, Iana, for several years. At age 9, he joined Donna's newly formed lesson program – one that today serves 160 students a week. He has been serving there for the past 21 years, and he can do a wide variety of disciplines.

"He was always the kids' favorite," Donna says. "He has always been one of the most reliable ones for beginners. But we also use him for showing and more advanced skills. He's gentle, he's kind, he's perfect."

As evidence of Diamond's heart of gold, he was game for participating in the barn's Halloween costume contest and parade ... even when that meant being festooned with 300 balloons and contractors plastic

to look like a bunch of Skittles candy.

"He had balloons on his stomach, on his sides; he was completely encased in balloons," Donna says. "It took them 45 minutes to put it on him, then he was in the stall with them for 30 minutes, and he was in the parade for another 30 minutes. And he didn't care in the slightest."

Donna estimates that Diamond has started more than 1,000 riders during riding lessons throughout his career. 🐾



Brooklyn Hardy and Scotch Is Firewater



There's More

Check out our digital magazine, accessible at www.aqha.com/americanhorse to meet more of these horses, including one mare who is a record-setting dam as well as a confidence-giving lesson horse.