



The Riding Interview

with Cory Walkey



Cory Walkey owns the Mill Creek Equestrian Center, the 30-acre Topanga Canyon facility she bought in 1972 and has since built into a soup-to-nuts training center for eventers of all levels. The facility is now home to 80 horses, including the Mill Creek Riding School's 35 lesson mounts, four arenas and a cadre of riders who are consistently in the individual and team ribbons at events throughout California. Event trainer Jennifer Johnson has helped Cory manage Mill Creek's growth during the last two years and dressage trainer Mette Rosencrantz provides refinement in that discipline.

California Riding Editor Kim F. Miller caught Cory in a rare free moment to get her views on the state of eventing for amateurs.

Riding: How has the sport changed for amateurs during your nearly 50 years in it?

Cory: Quality and numbers. When I started eventing in the 50s, 30 or 40 horses were the most you'd find at any show. Today even a small show has 150 to 175 horses, and 80% of the people riding them are amateurs. That's great and very exciting, but probably I'd say the

quality of riding and horses is what's changed even more.

Riding: What has spurred this growth?

Cory: It's been a fairly steady build. The fact that there are a lot more events, and that we can easily fill in with the occasional dressage or jumping show, creates a wonderful circuit for amateurs. The last four or five years have been wonderful because there are more events in Southern California, like Galway Downs in Temecula and Copper Meadows in Ramona. We recently competed at a lovely event in Solvang, the Santa Ynez Valley Pony Club Horse Trials, where there were 150 horses competing in the Beginner Novice through Preliminary divisions.

It's also due to having better and more teachers and trainers available to people in just about any area. It used to be you would event on any old Tom, Dick or Harry kind of horse and do just fine. Today, you need a nice, well trained horse, which you can expect to still be affordable. The quality of horses has improved tremendously.

Riding: If it turns out that eventing is dropped as an Olympic sport, what impact

do you think that will have on amateur participation?

Cory: I don't really think that would have too much of a negative impact for amateurs. It's so vastly different at the international level from what we're talking about. I think the sport grows mostly through word of mouth, when somebody invites a friend to come out and see what we're doing. Because there are so many opportunities to compete, that will continue to happen.

For years, nobody even knew what eventing was. Now, more people have been exposed to it or have read about it.

Riding: Where are most of your new students coming from?

Cory: I get a lot of adults that are returning to riding, including many who grew up riding with Mill Creek as kids, and some of whom are bringing their own kids along. I have several students who have done the hunter/jumper thing for many years and have become interested in eventing because it sounds like great fun. The fact that we have actual starting times is a big plus for these people. They love that we can actually plan our day, rather than hanging around the back gate all day waiting to ride.

Riding: Eventing requires so much nerve. How do you address the fear factor that so many of us adult amateurs wrestle with?

Cory: It's become very important to have good horses for amateurs. And, you should realize about eventing that every show offers the Beginning Novice division. It's a wonderful stepping stone and a lot of amateurs may never do anything other than that. The fences are 2'9", the speeds are reasonable, the courses are not grueling and the jumps are approachable and easy to manage, again, assuming you are mounted well and that you and your horse have good basics. When you see green riders out there on green horses, that's when things get scary.

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Riding: Are there a lot of juniors coming into eventing?

Cory: This is a hard one. The sport requires an enormous amount of effort from the family because of the distances and times involved in competing. A junior has to have that really nice family that's willing to devote that kind of time and effort. There is also the factor that kids work really hard training in all three disciplines, cross country, dressage, and jumping. They work like mad preparing for an event where they may get one ribbon. Then they see their little friend goes to a hunter/jumper show and comes home with a handful of ribbons. So, that's hard.

With the Mill Creek Riding School, we have kids that start with us at six or seven and progress through the ranks. For those who are interested, who have supportive parents and are able to buy the right horse, it generally works out that, just as they are ready to be competitive at Preliminary or a One Star or Young Riders event, they're off to college.

Riding: Have your teaching and training methods changed significantly?

Cory: Oh yes. You can't help but add

things to your bag of tricks. You pick up things up at schooling rings and shows and just about anywhere along the road of life. Probably what's changed most is my emphasis on finding the right horse. I'm a big believer in that.

Riding: How do you find horses?

Cory: Everywhere. People know that I'm always looking. I advertise for them on occasion and I'm always getting tapes and letters about horses. These days I'd say about half our horses come from the East and West Coast, even though there have traditionally always been more horses eventing back East. I've often found hunters that, say, are not quite quick enough with their knees, become great eventers. At this last show, two former hunters in our barn did great at their first event. They knew their jobs and the show jumping was a piece of cake for them.

Riding: What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?

Cory: As a teacher, I get most excited when someone competes for the first time. Everyone gets so nervous in the starting box, then when you go out on cross-country, it's just you and your horse. You forget about everything else and it's a wonderful feeling. My riders come back after that and they are so thrilled and elated. It's a wonderful thing.

Riding: It's so exciting that USA eventing coach Capt. Mark Phillips came to Mill Creek for the clinic last month. (See story, page XX). How did that come about?

Cory: USA Eventing is in the process of certifying instructors. Capt. Phillips was coming out to give an instructors seminar here the following week. It included stable management and teaching skills, etc. We thought it would be great to have him come out earlier and do an actual riding clinic.

We've had big stars out in the past. Jimmy Wofford and Bruce Davidson have come out, and we are really excited about Capt. Phillips.

Riding: Thank you, Cory.

Cory: You're welcome!

For more information on Mill Creek Equestrian Center, please call 310 455 1116.



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