



***Escalating costs put premium on finding the right business niche for Kelly Maddox Training.***

Complaints about the cost of the sport are a year-round conversation and the topic is especially well-trod during year-end convention season. Kelly Maddox laments the loss of affordability as much as her contemporaries. She's also doing something about it at her multi-level Kelly Maddox Training in the East Bay Area's Castro Valley.

The Interscholastic Equestrian Association team she launched six years ago is "bursting at the seams" with 25 middle and high school age riders. The KMT Riding Academy is rebuilding after a business model change this past summer. "I used to have a rule that students had to take at least two lessons a week because those are the riders most likely to move onto leasing a horse," she explains.

An epiphany about how many people that left out led to nixing the restriction. "I realized I was missing out on a lot of students. I want everybody to share my passion and I realized that even one lesson a week is a lot for many people." Eliminating restrictions led to a lesson program that "I'm a lot happier with now!"

Unrated schooling shows have been a fixture of Kelly Maddox Training for several years and the barn's Facebook page has a place for posting gently used apparel and gear to swap or sell. The gap Kelly would most like to see filled in the sport is what used to be "C" rated competitions, something between the unrated schooling shows and the multi-day shows that run \$3,500 to \$4,000. "It breaks my heart when so many great young riders have to spend that

much on a show,” she says. One, two, or three-day shows at which exhibitors can earn points toward year-end regional, state or national honors would be a welcome return to the circuit.



The absence of the one-day show is particularly tough, she asserts. The experience of hauling in, caring for the horse throughout the day, preparing for the ride home and safely tucking it back in the barn that night has horsemanship lessons that are hard to replicate.

### **DIY Education**

Kelly appreciates the large quantity of educational opportunities offered by the United States Hunter Jumper Association and other governing bodies these days. But, again, she prefers to offer those herself in daily work and occasional special activities. The team aspect of IEA competition is an effective and fun conduit for instilling horsemanship, she notes. Various team roles include helping get horses and riders to the ring and practices include a non-riding educational component. An upcoming example is Erika Westhoff speaking on mental skills for equestrians. “Every practice has an activity where we can extend the education,” Kelly explains.

Encouraging students to focus in this social media-crazed era is another unique Kelly Maddox Training touch. The stable’s “no phone” policy requires riders to leave cell phones in their tack trunks. If they need to reach their parents, that’s where they can make the call. If they need to communicate something to Kelly or members of her staff, they do so face-to-face. When students are riding, caring for horses and equipment and interacting with others, they are focused on that.

Not one client has been lost over the policy, Kelly laughs. “Are you kidding me? I think it’s healthy to let go of social media. To stay focused and in the moment at the barn.”

The Riding Academy, the IEA team and a 35-horse show barn comprise a program “that I actually dreamed of having when I was growing up,” Kelly admits. She has a business degree and enjoys that aspect of Kelly Maddox Training along with the horses, coaching and training components. Many years ago, she sometimes found herself at a loss to describe her profession to a stranger. “I ride horses” was often her explanation, but she knew that fell far short of describing the diversity and scope of the everyday activities that make a successful equestrian business.

“I’m a professional athlete” is how she describes herself now. “I run a real business and it’s a real career.” And it’s a good time to be doing so with the economy improving and having found just the right niche. While the national organizations tend to focus on paths to North American Young Riders Championships and East Coast medal finals, Kelly has found her niche closer to home. The NorCal Hunter Jumper Association circuit is a good fit for the majority of her students, with occasional jaunts to Southern California and Oregon. Knowing her clients’ priorities, goals and budgets is a big key to her success.