



Young rider on the road to show jumping success and becoming a role model for equestrians of color.

by Winter Hoffman. Originally posted by PhelpsSports.com: reprinted with permission.

Fifteen-year-old Zoie Noelle Brogdon is one of the more advanced riders to come out of the Thousand Oaks, California equestrian program Riders United. It is an offshoot of the Compton Junior Posse, the former inner-city riding group designed to introduce urban youth to the world of horses. Riders United is one of only a few in the U.S. designed to provide Black and minority riders of all ages from many different socioeconomic backgrounds the educational groundwork of horsemanship and give opportunities for riders to compete in the show ring.

Relying on monetary and in-kind donations from generous supporters, Director Victoria Faerber tirelessly organizes the day-to-day operating logistics at the Thousand Oaks location, while former CJP member Nathan Williams-Bonner heads up the Temecula branch of the organization. (See Be The Change, California Riding Magazine July 2020 issue).

Fellow Californian, Olympian Will Simpson, was inspired by the cause in 2008, and stepped up to donate his time to train the riders, which currently range in age from 12 to 25. Brogdon had the opportunity to clinic with Simpson four years ago and the Olympian saw a spark in the young rider. With the support of Meadow Grove Farm and the family of Zazou Hoffman, Brogdon picked up the ride on their 11-year-old Holsteiner gelding Emilion in 2018.

(Editor's Note: the author is Zazou's mother, Winter, who previously volunteered with and

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loaned horses to the Compton Junior Posse).

Together, they have seen great success in the 1.00-1.10m Jumper divisions over the past several years as she gains more mileage in the saddle.

As a Phelps Sports contributing columnist, Winter Hoffman sat down with Brogdon to learn more about her riding development, her future goals and how she feels our sport can be made more easily accessible to riders of all backgrounds.



Winter: How were you introduced to riding?

Zoie: My first time on a horse was when I was about five years old at Griffith Park, but I didn't really start riding horses seriously when I was young. I did other extracurricular activities, such as soccer, gymnastics and track. I was on the LA Jets Track Team for a few years and I ran the 4x100 meter and the 4x400 meters.

I actually began taking lessons when I was around 9 at a summer camp called Silver Spurs in Burbank, California. My mother worked in Burbank at the time, and out of convenience, she signed me up for two weeks. On the first day when she picked me up from camp the owner of Silver Spurs told my mom with a smile on her face, "This is Zoie's sport — you're in trouble now." I guess the owner saw my connection to horses back then but I don't think my mom knew what this journey was going to look like.

Winter: How did you come to have a passion for the sport?

Zoie: Silver Spurs was my introduction to horseback riding. My mom was told that I would need

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to go somewhere else if I wanted to learn how to compete. She read about the Compton Jr. Posse online and enrolled me in their summer camp for four weeks. At CJP, they taught me more than just how to properly sit on a horse, but how to truly ride one. I learned horsemanship, how to clean stalls, groom a horse, the anatomy of a horse, horse markings, how to tack a horse, you name it. We even took a field trip to the Longines Masters in Los Angeles.

The more I learned about the horse world, the more I wanted to be a part of it. Being at CJP is where my passion for horses ignited. One of the highlights I had at CJP was getting the opportunity to appear in Beyonce's video Daddy Lessons, which was on her historic "Lemonade" album. They approached CJP needing a young girl who knew how to ride horses. I was picked for the part, but although I appear in various parts, sadly, the actual riding footage was cut from the video.

Winter: Growing up, what challenges did you face as a Black rider?

Zoie: The challenge of being a rider of color is that I don't have many other riders of color to look to for inspiration. African-American girls have Serena Williams to look up to in tennis, and Simone Biles in gymnastics. I'd love to rise to the highest levels of the equestrian sport so that African-American girls can look to me for inspiration and know that it's not impossible.

Winter: You currently train at Riders United with Victoria Faerber and Olympian Will Simpson donates his time to coach you. Can you tell us how this came about, the high points and what you have learned from Victoria and Will?

Zoie: I first met Will Simpson at CJP and he became a very prominent part of my riding career. Although Victoria was our trainer, Will taught many clinics for the show team at CJP. After a couple of years with CJP, I was asked if I wanted to compete at an A-rated show. It was a West Palms Events show at the LAEC. Will came to the competition and warmed up me and Mt. Colbrook, the horse I was riding, that day. I did opportunity classes and won several blue ribbons. This was definitely a high point for me.

When CJP closed, Victoria started Riders United, and Will continues to give us lessons when he has free time. Victoria has taught me the basics of riding, but most importantly, she has taught me horsemanship and how to take care of my horse and keep him healthy and happy. Victoria has seen the best and the worst of me as I've matured into being a teen, and she has helped me through these difficult years with a horse by my side.

Victoria has a special way of bringing out the best in a rider and a horse. Now that I've advanced from opportunity classes to 1.10m classes, Will's lessons have been particularly insightful. Each lesson I learn something new that truly helps get the job done.

Winter: What opportunities has Riders United opened up for you that you may not have

had if you had never joined the program?

Zoie: Riders United has opened doors for me. Through Riders United, I have been able to participate in clinics from people like the master horseman Bernie Traurig and Olympic gold medalist Will Simpson. I have also been able to participate at A-rated shows like West Palms Events and Nilforushan Equisport Events. With these opportunities, I have been able to meet many professional riders who I consider mentors.

Winter: Why do you feel that programs like CJP or Riders United are so crucial to our sport and our world?

Zoie: Programs like CJP and Riders United are crucial to our sport because they allow kids who look like me to be exposed to and participate in a sport they would have never known existed. If it wasn't for CJP, I would never have known anything about show jumping, equitation or dressage. Programs like these are crucial to our world because they help bridge different cultures.

Winter: What steps do you feel the equestrian community can take to be more welcoming and inclusive of riders from various backgrounds?

Zoie: Unfortunately, this sport is a very expensive sport, so it can be cost prohibitive for many to participate. I feel that if we could develop a sponsorship program, we could make the sport more accessible and more affordable to all people from different backgrounds. Of course, supporting programs like Riders United is another way for the equestrian community to be more welcoming and inclusive of riders from various backgrounds. We sincerely appreciate the used riding clothes and tack that are often donated.

However, receiving funding can be used to offset so many show expenses such as the cost of a groomer so we aren't so fatigued at shows. Or the cost of a tent, table, and chairs so we have a place in the shade to eat lunch comfortably and regroup during our downtime. These things may sound insignificant, but they will help the riders feel like they belong and allow them time to interact with other riders.

Winter: You must have a very supportive family, please tell us about them.

Zoie: My mother is my biggest cheerleader! She takes me out to the barn every weekend and is my groom when we are at shows. She makes sure I'm on time for my classes and that my boots are shined before each competition. She really does it all! My dad, although admittedly a little afraid of horses, has grown to love my horse, and is always making sure my winning rounds are on Facebook to show me off. I am really appreciative to have such wonderful parents to support me in all my endeavors.

Winter: What are you planning to do after you graduate high school?

Zoie: My plan after I graduate from high school is to attend college, but I don't know where exactly. It would be great to go to a college that is out-of-state, but then I probably wouldn't be able to bring my horse. Right now I think I would like to study veterinary medicine. But who knows, that could change by the time I go to college.

Winter: Do you think you will continue to ride while attending college? Have you considered colleges with NCEA or IHSA equestrian teams?

Zoie: I would love to ride while attending college. My only hope is that if I do, it won't interfere

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with my education. In a perfect world, I would go to college during the week and train and go to shows on the weekends. Colleges with NCEA or IHSA equestrian teams are definitely something I have thought about, especially because they compete in equitation. As a jumper, competing in equitation would help my riding get stronger.

Winter: Talk to us about your horse Emilion.

Zoie: Emilion is my horse's show name. His barn name is Nijinsky. My trainer named him Nijinsky after a famous race horse, but I call him "Ninja" for short. At home, Ninja is goofy, playful, and energetic – just like me. He loves to listen to all kinds of music and go on trail rides. Ninja is also a very sweet horse. There are other horses in the barn that have tried to bite him when he walks past them, but Ninja wouldn't hurt a fly. At a show, Ninja is determined to win – just like me. He gets mad if he hits a rail and he saves me when I don't approach a fence quite right. He loves his horse treats after every lesson and he loves to be scratched on the face with a curry comb of all things. We have been partners for about two years now and I've loved every minute of it!

Winter: What advice do you have for ambitious young riders?

Zoie: Have fun and build a good relationship with your horse. Ninja and I are best friends, and we goof around all the time. Ninja has quite a personality, and he loves hip-hop and rap music. Because of our bond, we have a great connection in the arena. Also, be open to advice offered from other seasoned riders. I've been very fortunate to have many supporters in the equestrian community who have helped me along the way – Kenneth Vinther, Mark Watring, Edgar Pagan, Mike Nielson, and Cindy Postel to name a few.

Winter: What do you think it takes for a rider to get that "competitive spark?"

Zoie: This is what Kobe Bryant called the "Mamba" mentality. It's a mindset and I don't think you have to be born with it. If you want to be the best, then you have to work really, really hard to become the best. But, you have to want it for yourself and not for others!

Winter: What is a typical training day for you like?

Zoie: When I arrive at the ranch after a long car ride, I take Ninja out of the turn-out and walk up a hill to get to the tack stall. I tack him up while listening to music and having a good karaoke session to wake myself up. Then Ninja and I walk around the track a few times before we head into the arena to meet Victoria.

Each lesson can be different depending on what Victoria and I agree on doing that day. We will either work on improving my equitation, my eye, and distance coordination, or my jumping release. After our hour lesson, I walk Ninja about 15-20 minutes around the track to cool down. Sometimes we go on a trail ride and enjoy nature together. Then we come back to the stalls where I will untack and hose Ninja off. Then I always ice Ninja's legs, give him a treat, and a few kisses before putting him back in his stall.

Winter: How do your trainers prepare you and your horses? What do they have you practice?

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Zoie: My trainers prepare my horse and me by cross-training. We do a lot of dressage and flatwork, go on trail rides, focus on my jumping, and learn from different clinicians to get different perspectives. We also work on my horse's fitness, flexibility, strength, and overall happiness.

To learn more about Riders United and how you can support their mission, check them out online, and on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

About the Author: With a background in filmmaking, fashion and contemporary art, Winter Hoffman brings a unique perspective to the equestrian world. A lifelong horsewoman, she helped her daughter, Zazou Hoffman, navigate her way to a successful Junior career culminating in 1st place in the 2009 ASPCA Maclay Equitation Championship at the National Horse Show and second in the USEF Hunter Seat Medal Final with East Coast trainers Missy Clark and John Brennan. Zazou is now a trainer and professional rider at Meadow Grove Farm in the Los Angeles area. She has competed on several developing rider Nations Cups representing the United States.