

Written by Kim F. Miller

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Never a dull day at Derby Lane, a small but influential hunter/jumper program in Northern California.

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This year is shaping up a little differently for trainer Vanessa Brown, yet constants remain in that she and her clients continue to be a force in the hunter, jumper and equitation ranks and she continues as an active contributor to the sport.



As of January 1, Vanessa and Buddy Brown have split up their Derby Hill enterprise. Vanessa's approximately 20-horse program takes on the name Derby Lane and stays located at the Stanford Red Barn in Palo Alto. Buddy maintains the Derby Hill name for his program at a private location nearby.

Also relatively new in Vanessa's life is a bigger volunteer commitment in the form of serving on the California Professional Horsemen's Association board of directors. She's vice president for

March 2016 - CPHA Spotlight: Vanessa Brown

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the northern end of the state, adding to her decade-plus on the NorCal Hunter Jumper Association's board of directors.

"I wanted to broaden out and do something that was less geographically oriented," Vanessa says of adding the CPHA involvement. NorCal is terrific as a show- and awards-focused association, and she loves CPHA's "emphasis on helping the entire industry."

A native of Canada who has lived and worked in several parts of the United States, Vanessa says, "I don't know of a single other organization that is solely dedicated to education and to helping its professional members."

CPHA and the CPHA Foundation do sponsor adult and junior medals, but service and education are the main mission. "There is a huge percentage of professionals who are completely unaware of the scope of what the organization does." Helping promote membership and awareness is a priority in her new CPHA role.



Derby Lane

Vanessa's background as a horsewoman and the talents of her assistant trainer Allie Qutub enable Derby Lane to be a diverse and flexible program. Students include juniors and amateurs riding in all divisions and representing various levels of experience. The trainer usually has at least a few sales horses in the stable, too.

Vanessa describes Allie as essential to Derby Lane's success. "She cares about our horses and students as much as I do." The appreciation is mutual. An East Coast native who spent most of her riding youth in Chicago, Allie says she's found the perfect match. "I love that everything is based on the basics. We are both very strong on flatwork because that's what makes the horse successful getting to the jump. That works for riders and horses at all levels."

Vanessa is no softie as an instructor, "but she's very encouraging," says Allie. "I've never seen her give a lesson that would make a rider feel discouraged."

Allie describes her boss as "very sympathetic" to the horses. "She allows them to be themselves and do what they are good at rather than trying to fit every horse into the same box."

Lisa Waits offers similar praise from a different perspective. Her 14-year-old daughter Emmeline Sears began riding with Vanessa about three years ago and Lisa is happy about the trainer's influence on "Emi" as a rider. She's over-the-moon about Vanessa's influence on Emmy as a human being.

"Vanessa does two things exceptionally well," says Lisa. Conveying and implementing high standards in a healthy manner is the first of those. Living in the extremely competitive world surrounding Silicon Valley, Lisa says their family likes "the edge that comes from a competitive environment," but not the expectation or pressure of perfection often attached to it, especially in the formative stages of their daughter's life.

"She's not making unrealistic demands for perfection," Lisa says of Vanessa. "She's saying, 'I know you can do this and here's how we are going to get it done.'" For a parent, that's priceless.

The second thing is Vanessa's "sensitive understanding of what makes both the horse and the

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rider tick and what will help them perform their best.” It’s applied in making good horse/rider matches and throughout their partnership. Lisa appreciates Vanessa’s ability to communicate effectively, and in different ways, with each horse and rider. “Even as a non-rider I can see the magic happen.”

Small Program With Big Reach

Vanessa enjoys the national nature of her business. She deliberately keeps the program small in terms of number of horses, but she casts a broad net as to where they’re from or where they’ll go.



Running her own training barn in Kentucky as a young professional and two stretches working for Larry Glefke are the foundation for a geographically broad network of connections. She’s already spent a few weeks at the Winter Equestrian Festival circuit in Wellington, FL, helping Larry and his longtime rider Kelley Farmer, a close friend, prepare horses for their busy barn.

Having a hand in the sport on both coasts enables Vanessa to “shuffle horses around a little bit” based on what might benefit them. If she comes across a talented young horse out West, she’ll often send it east where the pasture time youngsters benefit from is more plentiful. Conversely, her East Coast friends and visits are often great sources of horses for clients at home and for

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the sales side of her program. Vanessa gets a thrill out of identifying, bringing along and making matches for horses that go onto successes with new owners. “I love to follow all my ‘graduates’ through their careers.”

The Derby Lane show calendar is typically a sane 20-ish events a year and it’s rare that every client is at the same competition. There are some staples, like the Sonoma Horse Park Series (“our home series”), part or all of HITS Thermal and the Blenheim EquiSports shows in Southern California. Newly added to Derby Lane’s itinerary after a great first year of attendance are the Paso Robles Horse Park shows and Franktown Meadows Hunter Derbies in Reno.

Beyond these, the schedule is dictated by clients’ goals. If the Devon Horse Show in Pennsylvania or a show hosting a targeted medal finals, for example, are part of the goal sheet, they’ll be added so long as it’s a venue that meets the trainer’s criteria for footing and other qualities.

Reflecting on how the sport has changed over the years, Vanessa touts the Hunter Derbies as “a breath of fresh air in the sport.” Growing up riding in Canada, with Lindy Townley as her main coach, she recalls galloping hunters on grass over a course of rustic obstacles. The hunter division was already going the way of conservative courses and conservative rounds in the States when Vanessa moved here, and it continued in that way until the Derbies emerged.

Generous prize money and challenging, natural courses that produce exciting performances have been the rescue they were hoped to be. The HITS Thermal circuit, for example, concludes with a \$100,000 USHJA International Hunter Derby and East Coast HITS venues host \$250,000 and \$500,000 Hunter Prix finals.

“The prize money is a real incentive and gives owners something to do other than cry whenever they open their checkbook,” Vanessa notes. Equally important, she’s thrilled the classes are attracting non-typical fans. Horse show dads and husbands who might not have ventured outside their family member’s arena in the past are now coming out for the Derbies. “They are fun and exciting and easy to understand.” Bringing another horse, or several, into a Derby contender is a priority for her going forward.

Like many, she’s bummed that busy schedules make it much harder for kids to get a hands-on

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horsemanship education: to become more than a show rider. “The more mature women in my barn that rode as children would all be able to take care of their horse from morning to night,” she observes. “They could tack him up, turn him out, treat a wound or bandage a leg, go on a beach or trail ride and a lot of them have even hunted. But the number of kids or young adults who will be able to do that are few and far between, I’m afraid.”

Liability realities further dampen the chance to learn by doing and to do much without constant and close supervision. “In my own operation, I would be nervous to let kids do a lot of the things that I grew up doing as a ‘barn rat’ who spent every waking moment at the barn.”

The Red Barn

Vanessa is very happily based at Stanford’s famous Red Barn. “The facility is lovely and very functional, with a great staff that’s on site 24/7.” The barn is also a hub of a wide-ranging equestrian activity, from Stanford’s IHSA team, two high school squads, PE riding classes, alumni clubs and programs for the community. On top of all that, the barn’s beauty and role in the University and the region’s history make it a popular tourist attraction.

“It’s a little bit like being at a show every day,” she says. Vanessa guest-coaches team riders regularly and interacts with them daily. She has cared for practice horses owned by the many Stanford students and/or team riders who compete at the top levels of the sport, including Saer Coulter and Nicoletta Heidegger. Often, she “borrows” the clients of other trainers while they attend Stanford, in arrangements that are win-wins for all involved.

In short, there’s never a dull day at Derby Lane and Vanessa wouldn’t have it any other way.

This is the second profile in our new CPHA Spotlight, in which we’ll feature a professional member of the organization each month. The CPHA provides a forum, voice, and many valuable programs and benefits for equine industry professionals throughout the region,

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including those who live elsewhere but compete and/or work within it regularly. Members can be trainers and anyone else who earns at least half their income from working with horses. CPHA also hosts prestigious medal classes and finals for juniors and amateur members. For more information on the organization's good works and getting involved, visit www.cpha.org.