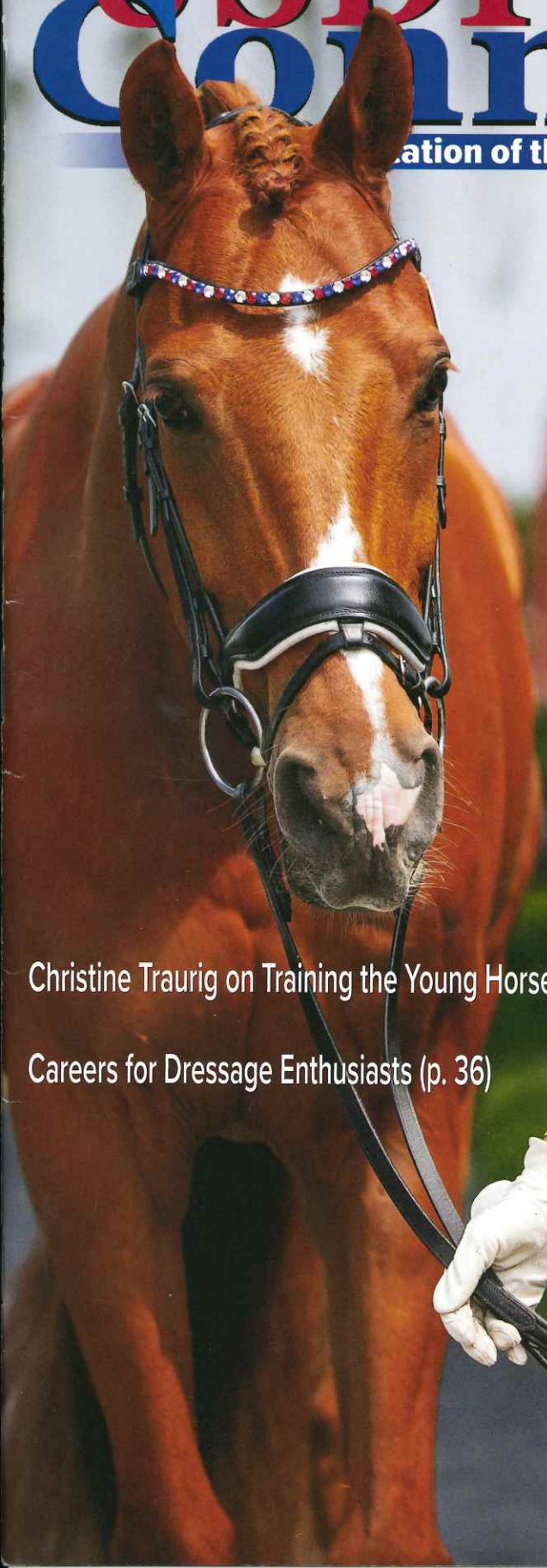


# USDF Connection

Association of the United States Dressage Riders



*Miki Yang and  
Donovan*

Christine Traurig on Training the Young Horse (p. 18)

Careers for Dressage Enthusiasts (p. 36)

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# Forward Transitions

Not all horse-related jobs involve riding and training. Meet seven successful professionals who turned their dressage passions into unique horse-industry careers.

BY EMILY ESTERSON

HANDY WITH A CAMERA? This operator had a front-row seat at the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games dressage competition



JENNIFER BRYANT

In 2005, I had a big glass office next to a busy newsroom filled with reporters, advertising sales representatives, graphic designers, and circulation managers. As the editor-in-chief of a midsize city's business newspaper, I worked long days and sometimes deep into the night.

I was also a liar.

My horse was boarded about ten minutes away from the office. I took long lunch breaks: "Errands, lots of errands!" I'd tell the staff before rushing to the barn to catch a ride midday, or "I'm having dental work" so I could participate in a clinic. (My staff must have thought I had terrible teeth.) There was a shower in the tack room that no one ever cleaned, but I used it to rinse off the sweat and dust before jumping back into my power suit.

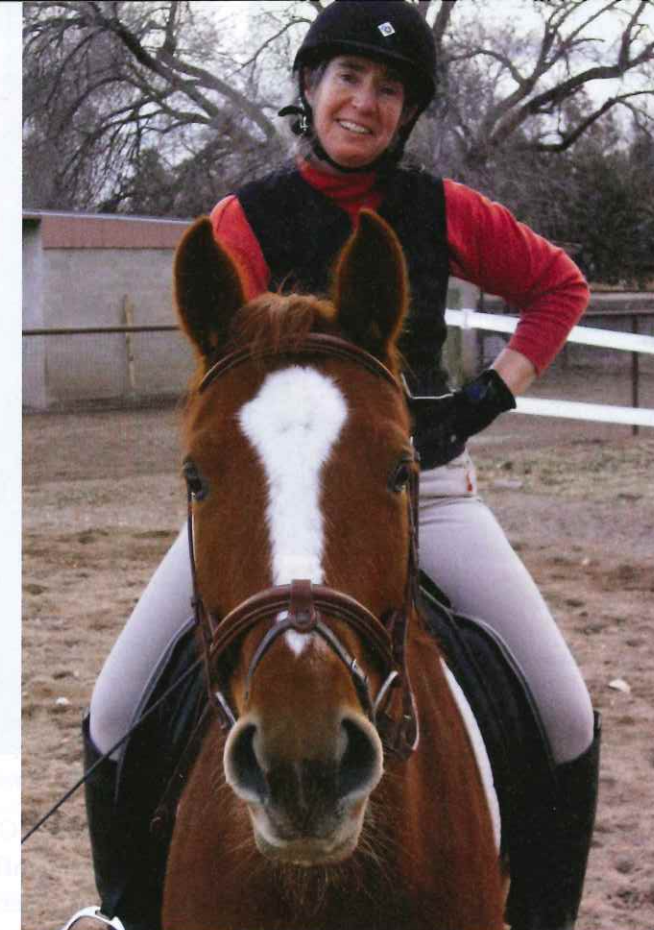
Then the newspaper changed hands, and I got passed over for a promotion (go figure). It took me one week with my new boss to know that my fancy newspaper career was over.

I decided that horses needed to figure into my professional life in some way. Either I had to find a flexible job that allowed me time to pursue my passion, or I'd have to incorporate my passion into my career. I had written the occasional freelance article for *Dressage Today* magazine and worked briefly for a natural-horsemanship newsletter, so I mined my network. I landed as a contract editor for horse-industry magazines covering equestrian businesses and the management of equine veterinary practices. Later I launched a business creating magazines for equine associations and events, and now I also develop and teach online courses in equine business management and journalism for University of Guelph Open Education. And my schedule is flexible. For almost 20 years, I've been gigging around the horse industry. I don't have to lie any more—because horse people understand.

For those driven by a passion for horses and dressage, there is often an incident or a series of incidents that incites a professional or career pivot toward horses, even if it is not directly related to dressage. It also ignites entrepreneurial spirit, as a financially sustainable "day job" in horses is hard to find. Many passionate horse people create their own careers on a path that is not unlike dressage itself: constant learning.

For this article, we asked six other successful professionals in various equine-related industries to share their own career trajectories. If you, too, yearn to make horses a part of your career, their stories may provide inspiration.

COURTESY OF EMILY ESTERSON:



PUTTING HER PASSION INTO WORDS: Equestrian writer, editor, and educator Emily Esterson and Belle

## The Apparel Entrepreneur

For FITS founder Sheryl Rudolph, who worked for Pendleton and Nike as a sportswear-fabric specialist, losing her job as a fabric-sales representative was a precipitating moment.

At the time, Rudolph had started riding a friend's horse, revisiting her childhood passion. "So I went to get some breeches and boots, and it was still the same stuff that I hated as a kid. I was thinking about all the work I had been doing [with fabric and sportswear], and I started making notes about how I would improve riding gear." The idea for FITS was born, the business launched out of her basement in Portland, Oregon.

Rudolph leaned on friends and former colleagues in the industry to help her get started and released her first breeches—featuring a supportive stretch fabric and segmented full seat—in 2005. During this time, she also got deeply into dressage, purchasing a nine-year-old Welsh Cob, FITS Toandos Mountain Man. With the help of trainer Bernadine Diers, Rudolph took "Monty" from barely broke to the upper levels. A freak non-horse-related accident ended Rudolph's riding career; but Monty, now 23, has shown Grand Prix with Diers, who now owns him.

"It never felt like work," Rudolph says of the venture,



**FUN IN THE SADDLE:** FITS founder Sheryl Rudolph riding her Welsh Cob, FITS Toandos Mountain Man

even though FITS grew very quickly and the stresses were many. “Working with people with common interests, that was really joyful for me. If you’re doing something you love with people with common interests, you never work a day in your life.”

Rudolph is now retired, having sold her company several years ago. Today, FITS remains a confirmed and successful brand in the industry.

## The Judge

Giving back to her profession and improving her teaching were two motivations for Janet “Dolly” Hannon, a Colorado-based US Equestrian “S” dressage judge and trainer.

After earning a degree in horticulture from Colorado State University, Hannon worked in that field for a couple of years. But horses pulled her, and she began working for trainer and dressage judge Janet Foy. Hannon soon pivoted from eventing to dressage, and in the late 1980s and 1990s she purchased an FEI-level schoolmaster while building her own training business.

During one trip to California to



**EXPERT EYE:** Dressage judge and clinician Dolly Hannon

train with Hilda Gurney, the Olympic medalist mentioned that Hannon, with her keen eye and knowledge, would make a good judge. With a thriving dressage-training business already in the works, Hannon embarked on the long, costly, and occasionally discouraging road to earning her judging licenses.

“For my ‘R,’ they had changed the riding requirements, so I had to catch-ride to get the scores I needed and apprentice on the East Coast,” Hannon says. By the time she earned her “S” and had judged for five years at that level, she had aged out of eligibility for her FEI judging credentials.

Hannon, who says she loves teaching, honors those who have helped her along the way: If it hadn’t been for mentors like Gurney and show managers like the late Lloyd Landkamer, she says, she might not have come as far as she has. At his shows, Hannon explains, Landkamer always gave her large lower-level freestyle classes to judge because he had determined that Hannon would learn to be an expert at judging these classes. “He helped me along the way in terms of getting

other jobs,” she says.

Nowadays Hannon maintains a full teaching, clinic, and training schedule; rides and shows her own horse, Electra; and travels to judge all over the country. Perhaps what she loves most, though, is the way that judging informs and improves her own teaching.

“I’m definitely giving back to the sport, because, generally speaking ... judging is not going to be the way to make a lot of money,” Hannon says. “It’s very gratifying and fun to meet people, and great to see what’s going on all over the country.”

She admits that it took a lot of grit to get her “S,” saying that the achievement helped her overcome the disappointment of not being able to get her FEI credentials. The current chair of the USDF Freestyle Committee, she recently expanded her volunteer contributions when she was invited to join the faculty of the USDF L Education Program.

Serving on the faculty, she says, was a longtime goal.

“I know I make a difference with teaching, and now I will be able to teach apprentice judges. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do.”

COURTESY OF SHERYL RUDOLPH; HEIDI HELMER



**HER CALLING:** After a demanding communications career and an MS diagnosis, Anna Sochoky pivoted to combine her loves of horses and reading into a career as an equestrian writer

## The Writer

Anna Sochoky rode as a child but then took a long hiatus, returning to riding in her forties when she moved from the Midwest to Santa Fe, New Mexico. She’d also had a long career in communications, having worked on political campaigns, as a lobbyist, and as a communications director—a career she says she didn’t particularly love.

When her mother died, Sochoky was thrust into essentially two full-time jobs—one her demanding day job as a communications director of a college, and a second handling her mother’s complicated estate. She was exhausted, often reading legal documents through the night.

A year to the day after her mother’s passing, Sochoky was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

“It was a perfect storm,” she says. “I realized you cannot waste your time. Take the reins of your life. I thought: Writing is what I’ve always wanted to do, and I have to do it now.”

A longtime dressage enthusiast, Sochoky earned an MFA in creative

COURTESY OF ANNA SOCHOKY

writing and took an online equine-journalism class. Finally she had her career “lightbulb moment”:

“The two things I love are horses and books. I was still navigating the diagnosis when I was walking down the hall in my house, and I thought, ‘Horses, health, and history! Ta-da! That’s my brand.’”

It took a few years to gel. Sochoky attended American Horse Publications conferences, networked with editors, and slowly built a portfolio of published articles. “I was kind of piddling around, writing one or two stories a year. But last summer, it started to explode. I put in a resume at *The Horse*, and I pitched six stories to *Horse Illustrated*. The floodgates opened. It took me four or five years because of my health and getting my focus.”

This year, Sochoky has ten articles either published or soon to be. She’s experiencing what she calls a renaissance period in her equestrian life, riding with clinicians and instructors at Santa Fe Sport Horse and enjoying ground work. She says the MS diagnosis put a laser focus

on pursuing a passion and committing to it.

“The benefit of extreme crisis,” she says, “is that it forces you to make decisions and to be really clear about what your desires and your capabilities are.”

## The Musician

Beth Hall pursued careers in both horses and music, but it would be years before she hit on a way to combine her passions.

As a student at the University of Massachusetts, Hall rode under the tutelage of such dressage luminaries

## CAREER CHANGE?

Some horse-related careers are an outgrowth of practitioners’ existing skills, such as musical training or a journalism degree. Others, such as saddlery work or dressage judging, require additional specialized education.

Here are some resources to explore that relate to the careers discussed in this article.

*American Horse Publications:* [americanhorsepubs.org](http://americanhorsepubs.org)

*Equine Business Management diploma, certificate, and courses, University of Guelph (online):* [equineguelph.ca/#gsc.tab=0](http://equineguelph.ca/#gsc.tab=0)

*Society of Master Saddlers:* [mastersaddlers.co.uk/courses](http://mastersaddlers.co.uk/courses)

*US Small Business Administration’s SCORE program (free mentoring for entrepreneurs and small businesses in local communities):* [sba.gov/local-assistance/resource-partners/score-business-mentoring](http://sba.gov/local-assistance/resource-partners/score-business-mentoring)

*USDF dressage technical delegate resources:* [usdf.org/education/td.asp](http://usdf.org/education/td.asp)

*USDF L Education Program:* [usdf.org/education/judge-training/lprogram/index.asp](http://usdf.org/education/judge-training/lprogram/index.asp)

*USDF resources for musical freestyle:* [usdf.org/education/other-programs/musical-freestyle/index.asp](http://usdf.org/education/other-programs/musical-freestyle/index.asp)



UP THE SCALE: Dressage rider and musician Beth Hall parlayed those skills into a successful freestyle-design business, Woodwind Studios

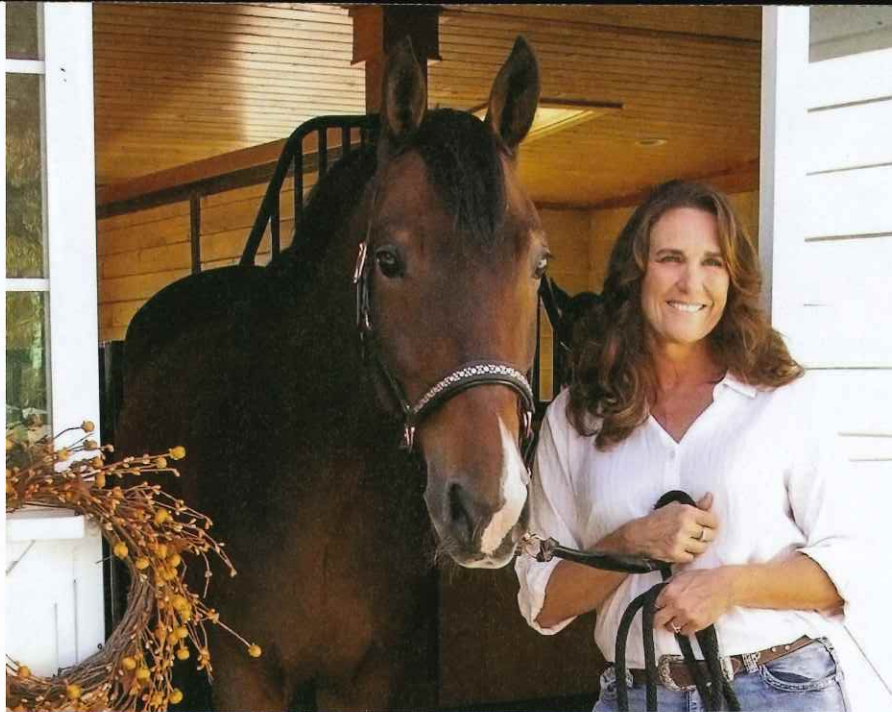
as Susan Blinks and Sarah Geikie. Later she completed the USDF L program, bred and trained Swedish Warmbloods, taught lessons and clinics, and established and ran Woodwind Farm in her native Alabama.

The musically inclined Hall started piano lessons at the age of five, later embracing the flute as her instrument of choice. She obtained both a bachelor's and a master's degree in music. She's been a soloist and plays in a quintet.

The defining moment that reshaped her career, says Hall, was a riding accident that left her unable to either ride or play music for a long time.

"I got really hurt coming off a young horse," she says, "and creating dressage freestyles started to make more sense to me than getting hurt."

Not surprisingly, Hall had previously choreographed her own freestyle and hosted freestyle clinics at her farm. But her new career as a freestyle designer really began when her friend Rebecca Rigdon—whose mother, rider/trainer Arlene Rigdon, had been one of Hall's dressage mentors—called to ask for help in developing a Grand Prix freestyle.



ENTREPRENEUR: Premier Equestrian founder Heidi Zorn with her horse, Primo

"After that, it took off very quickly," Hall says. A tech-savvy cousin helped her to set up the technology she needed to develop her business, and later she worked with a sound engineer at a university. About six years ago, she took over all the work—from choreography to writing arrangements to recording—involved in her Woodwind Studios freestyle-design business.

"Passion is only as good as the training that backs it up," Hall says of dressage freestyle. "You have to have a solid grounding in both disciplines to put it all together for a ride." Thanks to her music training, she knows how to select pieces, edit music, and sync tracks with horses' footfalls. Her strong dressage background helps to ensure that each client's horse is capable of the choreography: "You have to know what questions to ask the rider."

For Hall, being a freestyle designer truly hits all the right notes.

"It was a happy melding of two things I really love," she says.

### The Arena Specialist

In 2001, Heidi Zorn, co-owner and founder of Premier Equestrian, Sandy, Utah, couldn't afford to pur-

chase a \$5,000 dressage arena. So she asked her neighbor, PVC fence fabricator Mark Niehart, if he could make one for less. He could and he did, and the two have been business partners ever since.

Zorn, who owned a small advertising agency at the time, has always had a bit of an entrepreneurial bug and a horse obsession. "The main reason I got into this," she says of the venture, "was to support my horse habit."

Premier Equestrian expanded into footing when Zorn's ten-year-old Andalusian turned up lame. "I really started to notice the surfaces we were riding on—old sand and clay mixes," Zorn says. "So we started modifying different surfaces, and I got with a local engineer who worked at the copper mine." The engineer educated Zorn and Niehart about the various types of sand, and Zorn began experimenting with footing additives. She proclaims: "Today, I will never ride on a poor surface again."

Premier is now the North American market leader in dressage arenas and footing, and it holds the title of official footing advisor for the 2022 Ecco FEI World Championships in Denmark. Even so, its original,

low-cost arena, the Classic, remains a mainstay, with Zorn noting that "there is a big need for people who don't have deep pockets [to be able to] put in a nice arena in their back yard without having to take out a mortgage."

Like others who have incorporated horses into their careers, Zorn loves interacting with horse people in her work life, saying, "We talk the same language ... we have our own vernacular." She also relishes the opportunity to work with experts like equine-biomechanics expert Dr. Hilary Clayton, among others, to expand her knowledge, "not to mention all our customers. We all share this passion."

### The Saddler

Adrienne Hendricks needed to replace a keeper on a bridle but couldn't find anyone to do it. Then her father said, "Don't you think we could do this?"

As a child, the Boise, Idaho native says she had to "fight" to ride English, and her mother started the local Pony Club. Later Hendricks left Boise for a while, pursuing a career as an investment professional.

When she moved back 15 years ago, the family still had horses, an arena, and some old saddles that needed work. "I was shocked at how much it cost" to repair them," Hendricks says. So with her father, she started working on her own tack. She introduced herself to local instructors, and when an English tack shop went out of business, she purchased its sewing machine. Former saddler, cowboy, and eventer Gary Mittleider, who lived nearby, helped Hendricks to drop the panels on a saddle; but he also told her that if she wanted to work on tack, she needed to apprentice.

Hendricks got in touch with British Master Saddler Suzie Fletcher, who was in Colorado at the time.



TACK EXPERT: Saddler Adrienne Hendricks

Fletcher wasn't exactly encouraging, telling Hendricks that she had a lot of people requesting apprenticeships. But "for some reason, I hit a chord" with Fletcher, Hendricks says, "and a few out a couple of weeks and did a re-seat. I was also transitioning out of banking, and I got really good at it."

To earn the title of Master Saddler, a craftsperson must make a saddle, bridle, and girth from scratch. Hendricks is currently working on it, apprenticing with Fletcher and taking courses with people like Frances Roach, who is the bridle to HRH Queen Elizabeth II. When Fletcher returned to England, she left her repair business in Hendricks' hands. Hendricks is also now the US representative for British saddler Lovatt and Ricketts.

Throughout her equestrian career, Hendricks has ridden different breeds and disciplines, from Western to eventing to endurance to dressage. She's currently schooling her Hanoverian/Thoroughbred cross Fourth Level and also has a new horse, a Friesian.

"I wanted my whole life to ride

horses, but I wasn't good enough," Hendricks says. "My parents said, 'You have to go to college.' Now I'm finally living my dream, doing something with horses all day long."

The people we interviewed for this story agree: The joy of working with others who who share the passion for horses and dressage is worth financial and personal sacrifices. Sometimes that means learning a new skill, investing in training, or embarking on a tough entrepreneurial journey. But a life lived with horses—and horse people—makes the effort worthwhile.



*Emily Esterson is the author of The Ultimate Book of Bits. She runs a custom publishing business, E-Squared Editorial Services, and has three horses on her small farm in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She also teaches equine journalism in the University of Guelph Equine Diploma program.*

COURTESY OF BETH HALL; COURTESY OF HEIDI ZORN

COURTESY OF ADRIENNE HENDRICKS