

GETTING TO KNOW JAY DUKE: *Rider, Clinician, Horseman*

By Lindsay Brock/Jump Media

Photo courtesy of Jay Duke

For some people, riding, training, and dedicating their lives to horse sport is simply a job. For others, it is a passion. Former Canadian Equestrian Team member Jay Duke falls into the latter category with ease. Born into a family of riders and trainers in Calgary, AB, Duke himself is a competitor turned trainer, clinician, course designer, and all-around horseman, and he could never see himself doing anything else.

Duke began riding at four years of age under the direction of his mother, well-known Alberta trainer Cheryl Anderson, who has coached several notable Canadian riders, including the likes of Mark Laskin, former Canadian Show Jumping Team member and now its Chef d'Equipe. Duke also drew a connection to horses from his father, Fred, who came from Western riding roots and is a member of the Canadian Cutting Horse Hall of Fame.



Jay Duke showing Grappa in California before the horse became one of the most successful hunters in the U.S.

“There was no real start to my calling to be involved with horses,” said Duke, 48, who started competing on the A-rated show jumping circuit at eight years old. “The goal for me, and for many of my peers, was to ride on the Canadian Team and then go to the Olympics. That was the whole reason we rode. Unfortunately for me, only part of that dream worked out, but there was never any doubt in my mind that this sport was where I belonged.”

As a young rider, Duke had his eye firmly on the prize of representing his country on an international stage. Starting his show career on the hallowed ground of Spruce Meadows in Calgary, AB, success came quickly for him. In 1986, he was a member of Alberta’s bronze medal show jumping team at the Continental Young Riders’ Championships. Before attending the University of Alberta in Edmonton to study business marketing, Duke capped a successful junior career in 1987 by winning the Junior Jumper Championship at the Spruce Meadows ‘National’ tournament and the Junior Grand Prix at the ‘Masters’.

Additionally, Duke, was a four-time Canadian Junior Champion in both the hunter and jumper ring, which he maintains inspired his knack for versatility at a young age.

“I am ‘old school’, and we used to do a little bit of everything in my time,” said Duke. “To me, a good rider can ride any horse in any class or division. When you get on a horse and there’s a jump in front of you, you go jump it and that’s it. I think specializing as a rider just means you’re limited.”

Flexibility not only played a role in Duke’s career in the show ring, it often dictated how he acquired good horses. His four-legged talent didn’t always come from conventional means. Finding young horses in the field, or bringing them into training off the race track, was a necessity Duke learned from his mother’s training business.

“Mister Brown was three when I got him,” recalled Duke of a horse he competed internationally for Canada. “He came straight off the track, was jumping and winning in the 1.40m at Spruce Meadows at six, and was on the team at the age of seven. Another one that comes to mind is a horse called Quiz Z. He was a warmblood stallion we bought out of a field, and we had to get him on the trailer with a bucket of oats because he had not even worn a halter yet. We started from the ground up with him and he became a very successful 1.45m horse.

“Bringing horses along from such a young age is a process that requires a lot of patience, but it is very rewarding to see them develop,” continued Duke, who has been ‘flipping’ horses for as long as he can remember. “When you see horses have long careers at whatever level, it is a testament to your program because if you didn’t do it right in the first six months, you will end up with nothing.”

After spending many winters competing in California, Duke moved to the U.S. in 1993 to work on a full-time basis with trainer Richard Keller. While Duke’s dreams of representing Canada in the Olympic Games never came to fruition, his career at the international level was a noteworthy one. A career year, his 1994 season included earning the Leading Male Rider title at the Spruce Meadows ‘North American’ tournament and making his Canadian Show Jumping Team debut with Nations’ Cup appearances at the Washington International Horse Show and the iconic National Horse Show riding Silhouette.

In June of 1999, Duke was appointed trainer at Castle Cliff Farm in Sedalia, CO, just outside of Denver. It was there that he added more hunter success stories to his résumé, training horses such as King David and Caymus, both of whom went on to win USEF Horse of the Year titles. However, Duke returned to Calgary in 2006 to concentrate on what he considered to be his calling; developing young horses in the jumper ring.

“That is when I bought several young horses to compete on, including one named Grappa that I campaigned through to the grand prix level,” said Duke of one of his biggest success stories, who won the Five-Year- Old Western Canadian Championship in 2009 at the Rocky Mountain Classic in Calgary, AB. “He was sold in 2012 and is now known as Mindful, one of the winningest High Performance Hunter and Derby horses in North America under the direction of Kelley Farmer.”

In 2014, Duke hung up his show coat for good and retired from competition and training to shift his focus toward other endeavors. It was then that he became a senior course designer with Equestrian Canada and began sharing his knowledge of training, riding, and competing across all levels at clinics throughout North America.

“It was a lifestyle change,” said Duke of the switch. “The horse industry is all-consuming and shifting my focus has really revitalized me both emotionally and physically. I really enjoy coaching but when I was a rider, it was a challenge to do both well. Now I feel that I can really focus on teaching and enjoy it. Visiting the barns of young professionals and helping them grow their business and educate their riders is something I love.”

Duke approaches his clinic with an eagerness to impart wisdom, but also to encourage every rider he encounters to success, whether they compete over 1.0m or at the grand prix level. According to Duke, success is about attitude at any level.

“Anybody that has a positive attitude and wants to learn can be successful, and that is what I find most enjoyable about clinics,” said Duke, who regularly conducts clinics in Salt Lake City, UT, Seattle WA, as well as Vancouver, BC, and Prince George, BC. “Often times, the lessons are not so different from the lower level to the higher level; it’s the expectations and technicalities that vary. When I teach a clinic, I ask every rider two questions: what’s your biggest struggle and what’s your biggest strength. From there, I try to get the most from that horse and rider and produce a positive result where both did something they didn’t think they were capable of doing.”

Shifting his focus away from competition and placing it on teaching also helped Duke to learn something about himself. He came to the realization that horse sport is not his only passion, saying, “Of all the things I do, what I do best is be a dad!

“Even people who don’t like me tell me that I am a good father,” joked Duke, who has two daughters, Karter, 19, and Halle, 14. “Those two girls are everything to me. Together with my girlfriend Christina, we have created a life that is a balance between horses and family; the two things that make me most happy in this world.”

Jake Duke is a show jumping rider, course designer, clinician, and Canadian Equestrian Team veteran. Duke retired from competition in 2014 to put his extensive background training riders and horses of all levels to work as a clinician. Duke is also a popular course designer, holding his senior status with Equestrian Canada. For more information about Jay Duke, his clinics, and course design availability, visit jayduke.com.



Jay Duke’s oldest daughter, Halle, earning a 1.10m championship title at the 2017 Jump With Hope For Kids With Cancer Horse Show at Amberlea Meadows in Alberta, Canada.



Jay Duke with his youngest daughter, Karter, at Super Bowl 50 in 2016 at Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara, CA.



Jay Duke and Grappa, now known as Kelley Farmer’s famed hunter mount, Mindful, competing at Calgary’s Spruce Meadows.