



Laura Connaway and Ceralena;
photo © Sandy Gregory

Laura Connaway

Horses have always been an integral part of Laura Connaway's world. From an early age, she learned from her mother, an accomplished horsewoman, how to forge special relationships with her horses. Competing at the top levels in the jumper ring is Laura's forte, and as an amateur rider and sport horse breeder, she's found the perfect way to balance her love of competing with her thriving career.



Over 20 years ago, she launched Connaway & Associates, an equine insurance agency geared towards sport horses. She wanted to create a company where she and her customers could find common ground, and at that point, no such insurance agency existed for equestrians. These days, Laura often takes a "mobile office" on the road with her when she travels to shows away from her home in Arkansas. This way, she gets to enjoy the best of both worlds – her horses and her clients.

Horse & Style: *How did you get started in riding?*

Laura Connaway: I was really lucky because I have a sister that was absolutely horse-crazy. She's a couple of years older, so she set everything in motion. I was the little sister who always wanted to tag along. My mother rode as well, and so the three of us would all go to horse shows together.

H&S: *Who were some of your idols as a young rider?*

LC: As a young rider in Arkansas, we were pretty isolated from top riding, but when

I was able to get to a higher level and take myself to some bigger shows, I rode with Laura Kraut. That was just the ultimate, because she was so welcoming and she had such a passion for the horses. I would read about some of the West Coast riders, too – to me, Hap Hansen was always the amazing one because he'd ride so many horses. It didn't even seem like I was in the same sport as some of those Olympians. There were those riders, and then there were all the rest of us. There weren't as many people at the top of the sport back then.

H&S: *Who do you look up to now as a rider?*

LC: Now, the riders I look up to and idolize the most would be the people that get so much enjoyment from their horses and have found their niche in such a massive sport. They set goals that are good for the horses that they have. We can't all be in the top ten in the country or even the top ten in our division, but to be able to really enjoy the sport and the training is the best feeling.

Often when I don't have a top horse out competing, I'm back to enjoying the

tiny little things that a horse does better in their training. There are many times when top riders don't have an upper-level horse, yet they can still find enjoyment with the training process. Or they can get that feeling of success when a student does something really admirable or when they help them become a true horseman instead of just a rider.

H&S: *Why do you love competing in the jumper classes?*

LC: When I think of the jumpers, I never really feel like I'm competing. It's just all about fun. You have places that you gallop, you have places that you slow down, you turn, and then you gallop again. During that time, you're so immersed in it... and to me, that's the goal, which is to be completely immersed in it. You're so focused on what you're doing at that very second.

In the hunters, I have a little bit too much time to think and then I can get distracted. But with the jumpers, I never really feel like I have that extra time. So, for me, the jumpers suit me better.



Laura Connaway and Quite Funny.
photo © Zequi Gasparini



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H&S: *What's it like competing at the grand prix level as an amateur?*

LC: Right now, there are so many top amateur and junior riders who compete at the grand prix level. It feels really normal and like a perfectly natural progression. Just like if you're riding a young horse and he's jumping in the 1.10m classes, you're always planning for him to move up to the 1.20m. And then you're always looking for the next opportunity for him to jump the 1.30m. Once you jump the top of the amateur divisions, you're looking at the next level, which would be the grand prix classes, so it just seems so natural.

H&S: *Tell us about your top horses, both of whom you bred yourself.*

LC: I have Quite Funny, who's 11 this year. We call him 'Hap' at home which is kind of short for 'Happy' or 'Hap Hansen,' whom I named him after. When I bred him, I was really hoping to get a grand prix horse and Hap Hansen was such an amazing grand prix rider. I never got to know him, but I would hear his name all the time.

Hap is such a comic. All the horses have little charms on their bridles, and his charm is a surfboard, because he is totally a surfer dude. He thinks he's too cool for school and really doesn't think he needs to practice. He doesn't take anything seriously. He has so much athletic ability that you may think he's not paying attention, but he's just like, 'Hey, I got this!' He'll jump as high as he can, just because he can.

I also have Ceralina, who's a mare and is 13 this year. She is extremely business-like and organized in everything she does. She's the exact opposite of Hap. She thinks that when she goes into the ring, she might be going into battle. She puts on her little battle armor and is ready to go. If you

wanted to go to war, you'd pick her! She also bosses me around all the time, because she doesn't think I know much. On her bridle charm, she has boxing gloves because she always has my back.

They're both by Quite Easy, but they have different mothers. They're not really the type I would've bought necessarily, but I'm much more committed to a horse that I've bred. A lot of it is just how much time and effort you put into them.

H&S: *What's one of your most memorable achievements as a rider?*

LC: It would have to be jumping clear at the FEI level in the premiere class in Tryon last year. I still can't believe that happened.



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photo © Sandy Gregory



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Hopefully it'll happen again! It was the ultimate thrill.

I've also gotten to jump in some of the big grand prix classes at the Kentucky Horse Park, and that was pretty amazing as well.

H&S: *What inspired you to get started in the insurance world?*

LC: Years ago, when I would go to insure my own horses, I had no idea who the person sitting behind the desk was. If you had a problem, you could call, but they might not be able to answer your question, or maybe not even take your call. I thought it would be great if there were somebody out there that was your contemporary, knew the sport, and answered your questions face to face. It would be a lot more personal, too.

H&S: *What's it like to see so many of your clients when you're out competing?*

LC: It is so awesome because I get to cheer on all the horses and riders. Sometimes if it's a big class and it's a horse that we insure, I feel like it's my own horse in the ring. In the office, we'll all be watching them compete online and we'll get so excited if one of "our" horses does really well.

H&S: *What are some of your riding goals?*

LC: I think one of my main goals right now is to have a horse that, when they're 18, is sound and willing to go out there and still jump at the top level. That would show that I've kept them happy and healthy. It's got to be the result of ultimate horsemanship. We have customers that do this, and I admire it so much.

H&S: *What's something you'd like to do with your company?*

LC: We have such amazing employees and I've really wanted to do a four-day workweek for everyone at Connaway & Associates. We are implementing that in April. I consider it a huge accomplishment because everybody who works in our business is basically a partner in the whole company. We have such longevity with our employees and they're so dedicated and wonderful — they deserve this. So, this has been a long-term goal. **H&S**