



# IN STRIDE

The Official Magazine of the United States Hunter Jumper Association

*COVID-19's Life Lessons*

**CREATING  
THAT  
CONNECTION**

**OLYMPIC  
GAMES  
DETOUR**

*Rockette and  
Sterling Malnik*

SEPTEMBER 2020 Volume 15, Issue 5



# COVID-19'S LIFE LESSONS

These trainers made the most out of their horse show downtime, and the often unexpected results will only serve to enrich their programs into the future.

BY MICHELLE BLOCH

**W**e willingly hand over hours of the day to our horses. We schedule vacations around them. We give up vacations because of them. We even plan starting families around them. The equestrian life—and the time it requires—is vastly different than the average person's life.

When COVID-19 hit the United States and governors mandated shutdowns and horse shows canceled, it was as if the horse sports train made an unscheduled stop in the middle of unknown territory—one void of roads, maps and calendar schedules. The shutdowns and subsequent isolation periods were as diverse as our country, but the abrupt cessation of showing resulted in everyone, regardless of geographic location, finding time on their hands.

Time is a rare commodity in the horse world, especially for trainers whose days off are seldom severed from the business.

So despite the horror of what was happening in hospitals and nursing homes, and to business owners with shuttered doors, the one glimmering light was this gift of time.

And perhaps it was by using this gift that these trainers could move through the unprecedented time with a light at the end of the tunnel. A book could be written about the individual ways people took advantage of their breaks from showing and the downtime. The following “chapters” are just a glimpse into equestrian resiliency across the country.

## ■ Time for Reflection

Back in May, when New Jersey's residents were beginning to emerge from their homes for more than groceries, trainer Stacia Madden was doing something unexpected on a weekday afternoon. It had been six weeks since she'd driven from

Florida to her Beacon Hill Show Stables in Colts Neck, and 2 ½ months since she had last stepped foot on any show grounds.

“I have shorts on, and I'm watching Ellen DeGeneres on a Friday afternoon,” said Madden, highlighting the peculiarity of the situation. A pre-COVID day in late May—a Friday afternoon like this one—would have meant wrangling a few moments of her time between students in and out of Devon's Dixon Oval.

Madden flashed back to early March when regions of the country had begun to shut down. The Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Florida, had prematurely ended on Week 10. New Jersey was about to become one of the hardest hit states aside from New York, and Madden had some decisions to make.

“I'd gotten good advice one time that if something big or catastrophic happens,



SHELBY PHILLIPS PHOTOGRAPHY

Beacon Hill Show Stables

you're supposed to make as few changes as possible while you try to navigate," said Madden. "So we didn't really change our shipping schedule. We kept the dates exactly the same."

That decision gave Madden critical time to organize. Most of her customers are scattered around the country; only a handful reside in New Jersey. Madden discovered that those clients wanted to ride if New Jersey law allowed it. "I thought it was going to be about 50/50, but it was 100 percent of my customers who wanted to ride," she said.

Before heading back to New Jersey, Madden had a revelation. "I walked out into one of my lessons and thought 'What do I do today?' I lost my road map," she recalled. "My whole way of teaching was based on goals."

When she started in Florida, her focus was on fitness. By mid-Florida, she was

teaching riders for specialized classes, such as Young Riders, Jumpers or Equitation. Madden explained how her preparation for Old Salem Farm in May is always about learning to jump on the grass field, and Devon prep is learning to jump on an open stride.

"I really never recognized how much my teaching was based on the future or learning from the past," she said. "Without those past experiences or horse shows to prepare for, I had to stop and think. Then I realized you can't go wrong with basics and basic horsemanship, and understanding your relationship with your horse."

Once Madden headed to New Jersey, she was glad to return to her 22-acre farm. "Knowing we were going to be able to hunker down and basically be self-sufficient on the property made everyone really confident," she said.

In addition to their isolation, Madden and her employees had another reason to be happy at home. Madden had made a decision before leaving for Florida in December that would prove to be beneficial in the extraordinary times.

"I realized that Beacon Hill was going to be vacant for the first time since we built it in 1996. I decided to do a lot of renovations and updating while it was vacant because it was just so much easier to do. Coming back to a very refreshed and clean environment was kind of exciting," she said.

The first thing Madden did with her extra time was "an unbelievable wave of cleaning and organization. Every drawer got opened. Everything got labeled. Labels got labeled."

Madden took time in the barn to see what was working and what wasn't. By establishing new, small systems, she created efficiency. Suddenly, everything had a place.

“I think it was possible because there was less congestion in the barn,” she said. “Customers weren’t allowed in the barn. It allowed for clarity so things could get done better. Everything got streamlined.”

Aside from the cleaning, the organization and the self-reflection, there was one thing Madden came away with.

“I loved seeing that the kids didn’t lose interest when they couldn’t show and compete,” she said. “When you’re teaching kids who are so competitive it made me wonder if they are doing it for the right reasons. But if I could have allowed them to come and ride more they would have ridden more.”

## ‘The Best Worst-Case Scenario’

“The doctor told me that if the fracture was a millimeter over, I could have been paralyzed,” said Caitlyn Shiels, sharing the sobering report the doctor gave her after breaking her back. When she hit the ground during Week 5 of WEF, her muscles tensed so hard they fractured the wing off of L4. Being sidelined for six weeks was an enormous blow to Shiels, who runs her own small business, True North Stables.

But things got tougher. She watched WCHR Week 6 from the sidelines, and as a result of her fall, she also faced unexpected shifts in her clientele. And then the spread of COVID-19 became a reality, and WEF canceled.

“It felt like everything was thrown at me all at once,” admitted Shiels. But as she made her decision to remain in Florida until May, she knew the time off was exactly what she needed.

“When COVID hit I thought to my-



PHELPS MEDIA

self, ‘OK, this gives me the time to get strong, and I don’t feel like I need to rush to get back in the saddle to the next horse show,’” she said, recognizing that it’s easy to feel left behind in the fast-paced show circuit. “I took extra time to heal and go slow, but it was the same time off from showing as everyone else. It was the best worst-case scenario.”

During her time on the farm she realized breaking her back wasn’t simply a physical hurdle—it was a mental one, too. Shiels has past experience with broken bones. She shattered her hand in a fall years ago, but the mental aspect of getting over the back injury was monumentally different.

“It sits a bit heavier than a broken hand,” said the 37-year-old. “Regaining the confidence has been the biggest challenge.”

Shiels reached out to fellow professional Sandy Ferrell after the accident because of Ferrell’s similar experience. Shiels took Ferrell’s advice to heart. “She told me, ‘This is your life. This is your career. You need to be careful.’”

Prior to the fall, Shiels had thought nothing of bringing out her inner cowgirl to work with problem horses. “I’m a little more reserved [with] my body now,” said Shiels. “When I was 25, I would ride anything they brought out the door, but I realize now I’ve got to be a

“It felt like everything was thrown at me all at once,” said Caitlyn Shiels of her broken back and the COVID-19 pandemic.

This year’s pandemic has given trainer Stacia Madden time to reflect. “I loved seeing that the kids didn’t lose interest when they couldn’t show and compete,” she said.

little more cautious. I’ve got to make smart choices. I can’t take that risk.”

Shiels also looked at COVID-19 through a different lens than most trainers. Three years ago she was diagnosed with lupus, an autoimmune disease that makes her more susceptible to the virus. That knowledge weighed heavily on her mind, and Shiels took early precautions at the farm, despite the less stringent measures taken at the time in Florida.

Since her diagnosis, Shiels has worked diligently to change her habits. “Up until that point I lived my life doing the things I wanted to do,” she said. “It meant reprogramming myself.”

She’s learned that the worst triggers—which bring on debilitating joint pain and rash flare-ups—are sunshine and stress, a combination that’s nearly synonymous with horse showing. Now tack on breaking your back and avoiding COVID-19.

Much like dealing with her fall this winter, the mental aspect of lupus was just as challenging to overcome as the physical. Perhaps it was this challenge that gave her the tools she needed to see herself and her business through her most recent challenging time.

Shiels and her team returned to Michigan as the calendar flipped to June. Looking back, she recalled words that helped keep things in perspective. “I have a dear friend, and she went through some ups



FINE ART HORSES

and downs. During the downs she would say, 'This, too, shall pass.' I always take that and keep it in the back of my mind and look to the light at the end of the tunnel. Life is hard, and this business is hard. I think you just have to stay positive and surround yourself with the people who are going to support you."

## ■ Old-Fashioned Education

Locked down on Firetower Road, Liza Boyd spent three months at home in Camden, South Carolina. She couldn't recall the last time she had been off from showing that long. She thought back to college and then to her junior years, when they would break from the National Horse Show in November until the start of the new show year. But nothing had been as long as three months. "Maybe it was when I was 3 years old," she said, laughing.

The extended time on the farm gave Boyd the opportunity to finish projects and explore new solutions for better horse management. It also opened the door to fishing and biking with her husband and daughters, and sitting down to family dinners on her parents' back deck.

Running a show barn that's on the road most of the year makes it challenging to find the time to make changes to a horse's management, such as feed, supplementation, shoeing, etc. These changes need

time to be assessed, something that's often in short supply. Boyd, a researcher at heart, enjoyed taking a deep dive into optimizing her horses' health by comparing products, researching ingredients and talking to nutritionists, as well as her veterinarian, farrier, acupuncturist and chiropractor.

Boyd then looked at the horses' train-



ERIN MCGUIRE

Liza Boyd pulled the green ponies out of the field during her downtime and went on adventures with, from left, daughters Adeline and Elle and student Mackenzie Miller.

ing with the same critical eye. She turned to her father, Jack Towell, a wealth of information, and went back to the basics, questioning what the horses really needed. She explored everything from their tack to the small gaps in their training.

"Talking to my dad is a little like reading an old book. He's such a good, old-fashioned horseman," she said. "So having the time where he could just sit on the edge of the ring and go over stuff with us was fantastic."

Boyd discovered that by having time at home to observe and talk things through, they learned from the animals and made positive changes. "My dad would come in and say, 'Oh, you should try this bit or this noseband.' So we switched a lot of the tack around, too. I was like, 'Oh my God. This one goes so much better.'"

Pulling the green ponies out of the field was a project that ended up benefitting more than the ponies. "We did a ton with the ponies—not just trail rides, but training. Normally, you're disrupted because of horse shows, and you're not able to finish what you've started. We were able to get thorough and finish some of the project ponies we were working on," she said.

Boyd's 10-year-old daughter, Elle, took on the training, and Boyd saw a big change in her riding when she returned to the show ring in June.

"She rode her made ponies a lot better than she was able to ride them in Wellington," said Boyd. "I think it was from all the practice and going out in the woods and galloping. And riding the green ponies made her made ponies seem so easy. So she learned a lot of valuable skills during the break."

## ■ Back to the Basics

From the East Coast to the West Coast, as trainers shifted gears, they saw an opportunity to return to the basics. For Max Amaya, of Stonehenge Stables in Colts Neck, New Jersey, it was an opportunity for his riders to connect with their horses, to understand their personalities and to get to know them as more than teammates and partners in the ring.

"I told every rider, 'This is your time to



JUMP MEDIA

Trainer Max Amaya's advice was simple: "I told every rider, 'This is your time to enjoy the time with your horse.'"

enjoy the time with your horse. We will do some flat lessons, but it's downtime where you're mostly going to really connect with your horse on a simple basis, to learn about them without them having to do a job," he said.

Amaya chose to wait until April 17 before returning to his home base. By then his New Jersey customers could ride with strict social distancing protocols in place. The extended time on the farm was a benefit for Amaya, who is passionate about horses but doesn't always get the time he wants to spend with them.

"We have 45-plus horses, and sometimes I don't see all of them every day," he said. "This time that I was home, I got to see all the horses every day and got to relate to them a little more. It's kind of cool to go back to relating to the horse for the horse itself."

Even when standing on the ground teaching, Amaya takes advantage of the time he spends with them. "When I have a group of two or three riders and one rider is jumping the pattern, and I'm

standing with the other two, I will pat the horse and look at its eye. It's unbelievable what you can see if you take a second and just look at the horse. You wonder what they are feeling. You wish they could talk. But all they have is their body language."

Amaya encouraged his riders to learn to read their horses' body language, because the burden is on the rider to learn what his or her horse is saying. "I tell my younger kids you have to understand that these horses do basically 95 percent of what we want, and they do it graciously. We talk about how much they love their job. But we have to remember that they didn't choose that job. We chose it for them."

Jim Hagman, founder and head trainer of Elvenstar in Moorpark, California, also took a step back to the basics. But for

Hagman it was back to the basics of his business. He and his clients had already returned home from the Desert International Horse Park when the California governor issued an executive "stay home" order on March 19. Hagman had been ahead of the news, ordering extra hay and feed in anticipation of shortages, and he closed the riding school on March 7.

Leaving behind their busy show and lesson schedule, Hagman and his staff implemented serious safety protocols to help protect those with elderly parents and staff members over the age of 65 who have been with Elvenstar for more than 25 years. Together, he and his staff refocused their efforts, taking on tasks such as updating their website and archiving alumni photos going back 35 years. But their efforts included more than that.

"We were able to do more reading, learning and take some time to slow our minds," he said, adding that it enabled them to reconnect with the founding principles of the program, reflection and growth. "We planned, as

though starting from zero, on how to create, manage and implement the program both in the riding school and the show stables.

"It's like a refresher course, allowing us to study our horses, their training and care. We have more staff meetings to discuss best practices, reconnect with each other and brainstorm new ideas, as well as improve our practices through our business office."

## ■ Learning Off the Horse

In early March, Carleton and Traci Brooks were attending the Desert Circuit, but the conditions there were anything but desert-like. The professionals were jumping Hunters in an unending deluge of rain. In all the years they'd spent their winters in the desert, they'd

Through all of this, they learned that they could ride the courses in their minds without riding their horses. That was a huge payoff for everyone.—

Traci Brooks

never witnessed the rain cancel more than a day or two. But the rain that fell that week was enough to shut down the entire show, and people suddenly found themselves packing trailers to head home.

"It went from Thermal being canceled to the world being canceled," said Traci. The horses returned home, and Balmoral Farm's two locations in Malibu and West Los Angeles closed to clients.

"For the horses, not much changed," said Traci. "They were getting ridden and turned out. The horses were fine. Then we started to think about the kids who weren't riding and weren't at school. We thought we could give them some homework."

Eventually, Traci and Carleton realized that their clients missed seeing their friends, and the social aspect of riding was absent in the homework they were offering. Carleton said to himself, "This negative is an opportunity. Let's find an opportunity in it."

That's when the idea was sparked to create virtual lessons face-to-face on Zoom. They offered calls twice a week but discovered that they were over the time allotted with all of the material they wanted to cover and the many questions.

"There were questions that you don't usually get to when you're in a lesson because you're working on the riding," said Traci, noting there were many about judging and sport psychology.

Traci and Carleton began adding guest speakers on Zoom, which included their veterinarian, other trainers and judges.

Roxy Sorkin, 19, who was home from



JENNIFER TAYLOR

Traci and Carleton Brooks turned the pandemic into a positive by incorporating Zoom lessons into their training program.

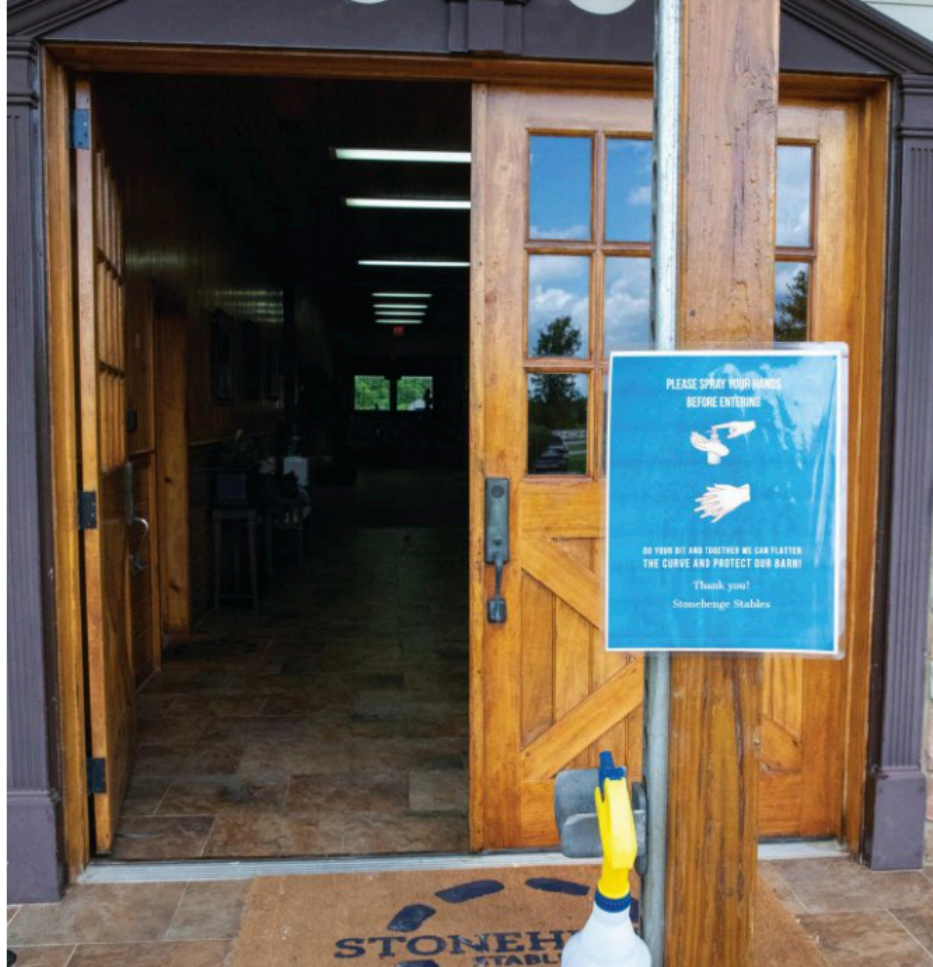
MOMENTS LIKE

**THIS**



PHOTO ALDEN CORRIGAN MEDIA

**TAYLOR, HARRIS**  
**INSURANCES SERVICES**  
WORLDWIDE EQUINE  
INSURANCE SPECIALISTS  
— FOUNDED IN 1987 —  
**THISHORSEINSURANCE.COM**  
**800.291.4774**



JUMP MEDIA

Stonehenge Stables' new entrance protocol protects clients and staff during the pandemic.

her first year at New York University (sandwiching Balmoral Zoom lessons in between her NYU Zoom classes), was impressed.

“My biggest takeaway was watching the judging videos, because it was a perspective I’d never been introduced to before—especially listening to the different types of judges and how they judge so differently, and what they’re looking for in each rider. It’s a perspective I wouldn’t have gotten if all of this hadn’t happened,” said Sorkin.

Traci and Carleton were faced with so many questions that it prompted them to expand their reach. “That’s what got us into short videos on social media, because we started thinking that if our people had these questions, other people must have them, too,” said Traci.

In between the group Zoom lessons, Traci and Carleton also did one-on-one Zoom lessons. They would go over questions as well as a few of each student’s horse show rounds. “They could pick a couple of videos and we would watch them together and pull them apart, put them back together and decide on three takeaways of what they were going to work on,” said

Traci. “Through all of this, they learned that they could ride the courses in their minds without riding their horses. That was a huge payoff for everyone.”

Carleton said the biggest impact to him was the improved communication. “The Zoom lessons helped them to open up to us more,” he said. “Now they’re asking different questions when we teach them. It was huge.”

Traci added that their students’ increased understanding of how influential it is to learn off the horse was more than they expected. “It was interesting to see how, when people came back to riding, they would tell me that through the Zoom lessons and using all the tools we worked on that they didn’t feel like they missed a day of riding. It changed their mindset about having to practice, practice, practice. Now they realized if they think about it in the right way and do their mental practice, that the physical practice wasn’t as important as they thought.”

The husband-and-wife team is looking to continue the virtual learning, giving it a permanent place in their training program. “We don’t want to let go of it, because it was so valuable,” she said. 