



LAUREN NICHOLSON

A JOURNEY FROM NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP TO THE OLYMPICS

By Amanda Picciotto Feitosa
Portraits by Kacy Brown

It was 1987 in southern Illinois when an eventing superstar was born. Lauren Nicholson's parents were accustomed to seeing horses throughout their neighborhood, but they knew nothing about equestrian sport at the elite level. When Lauren was 6 years old, they helped her pursue lessons at a local stable in southern Illinois, but they had no idea how

far those lessons would eventually take her. A passion was ignited that was so strong, it would drive her to help the United States claim the team gold medal at the 2015 Pan American Games in Toronto, Canada, and go on to compete at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games.

"It was purely happenstance that I started in an eventing barn and that was the sport I got

hooked on," Lauren said. "Once I did cross-country, that was it; I was a goner from there. I never remember a time I wasn't completely convinced I was going to do it professionally and go to the Olympics. That was just always what was going to happen."

After graduating from high school, Lauren had the opportunity to head to Virginia as a working student for U.S. eventing legends David and Karen O'Connor. Her parents were extremely supportive of her ambitions, so Lauren packed up her things and her Anglo-Arabian gelding Snooze Alarm and off they went. It turned out to be a pivotal decision, as Lauren still considers the O'Connors to be important mentors.

Lauren Nicholson, in Ocala, Florida, with Sir Prize owned by Christa Schmidt and Jacqueline Mars. Lauren is holding Bosley, left, and Sam, owned by Lauren and her husband, Sam Nicholson.

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-Lauren Nicolson



Lauren and I'll Have Another owned by Brandye Randermann.

NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP

Lauren has always been interested in the process of training horses, and one of her jobs at the O'Connors' farm was to assist in starting the young horses bred by Jacqueline Mars and the O'Connors. The techniques Lauren learned were fairly unique in that the O'Connors utilized natural horsemanship to teach their horses. It wasn't about getting the horses to do tricks on the end of a rope or be ridden bridleless; rather, the O'Connors adapted the methods to be functional for eventing. "Sometimes people miss that moment of how you can actually use natural horsemanship to be effective for your given sport, and the O'Connors really mastered that," Lauren said.

David would demonstrate what to do in the training and then Lauren was left to her own devices to figure things out. Though Lauren worked mostly independently, David would check in and offer guidance as needed. One of the principles of natural horsemanship is understanding the horse's reaction and knowing what to do to best teach them new skills. Because of that, it takes patience and experience to become more effective.

One of the exercises the O'Connors utilized was a roping technique similar to lunging. On a shorter line, they would teach the horse to respond to body cues to move forward and stop. Once this was learned, horses could be roped over different obstacles, including various cross-country elements. The idea behind this method is that by introducing jumping questions this way, the horse can navigate the challenges itself without the interference of a rider. The horse learns to study what they have to do and figure out how to solve the problem so, in the future, they will have the confidence to tackle similar situations.

Snooze benefitted from these practices, but when he arrived at the O'Connors', he didn't want to go off the down-banks. Lauren had previously suffered a couple of bad falls at down-banks, even once breaking her back, so Snooze no longer felt confident about how to get to the other side. The roping technique helped them get back on track. David would rope the horse up and down the banks with and without Lauren mounted, allowing Snooze to regain his confidence on his own terms.

"I got Snooze when I was very young and very clueless, and when I came to the O'Connors' they actually laughed because I was just such a hot mess," Lauren admitted. "The natural horsemanship actually saved the horse's career, and I was able to go on and do my first Kentucky Three-Day Event with him in 2010."

Lauren filmed a Masterclass for streaming service Horse & Country (H&C) in which she details how roping can be used in training performance horses.



THE START OF VERMICULUS

As she was building toward her debut in Kentucky and advancing in her career, Lauren was in need of another horse capable of competing at the high-performance level. With limited personal funds and without a separate backer, her options were sparse. She had already brought along one small Anglo-Arabian in Snooze, so why not do it all over again? She found Snooze Alarm's 3-year-old brother in 2010 and decided to give it a whirl. That's where Vermiculus' story starts.

"Everybody chipped in a little bit," Lauren said. "My vet, Christiana Ober, chipped in some money, and former USEA President Max Corcoran chipped in, too. Max jokes that she owns his tail. Everybody gave me a few hundred bucks to make it happen, and that's how I ended up with Vermiculus."

Jacqueline Mars took over the ownership when Vermiculus was 6 years old, and since then, he and Lauren have competed at some of the most impressive events around the world, including being part of the silver-medal-winning team at the 2022 FEI Eventing World Championship held at Pratoni del Vivaro in Rome, Italy. However, getting there was not an easy road. While David believed Vermiculus would become a five-star horse from the moment Lauren picked him up as an almost-

3-year-old, Vermiculus provided plenty of moments to the contrary.

"Funnily enough, he was probably one of the more challenging young ones that I had to break," Lauren shared. "We laugh now that he was quite feral. I got him and turned him out with Snooze, and then it took me three months to be able to touch him again!"

"He was very sharp and naughty as a young horse," Lauren continued. "We have a system for training; some horses you work through the system, and you go from the groundwork to putting a saddle on in the first day, and then others it takes longer. I think it took us a month to get the saddle on Vermiculus just because we had to keep working through the system, each step, super slowly to get to that next step, since he was a very suspicious little Arabian. We laugh about it, but there were times I couldn't train him at all because he was super cheeky in the dressage."

On one particular occasion, Lauren and Vermiculus were out on a trail ride through the Virginia woods with other young horses as part of the training Lauren calls "bushwhacking." They ride the horses in rope halters through the varied terrain to expose them to different environments. While out on their adventure, Vermiculus took exception to something and, in protest, dragged Lauren into the thickest brush and bramble and refused to move. "We were stuck in there," Lauren

laughed. "Everyone was laughing hysterically, and he was just like, 'Nope, not doing it.' I had to get off and crawl out of the bramble and then he came out nicely."

TODAY'S EVENTING STAR

Despite the challenges, Lauren's patience with Vermiculus' training has paid off, and they have become one of the most formidable eventing duos in the world. For Lauren, it was at the 2019 Burghley Horse Trials CCI5* that Vermiculus solidified his status as a top five-star horse.

Even now that Vermiculus is a seasoned competitor, Lauren still relies on their roots in natural horsemanship training to keep the gelding at his best. Because each horse is unique, what they get out of the same exercise can be very different. While roping was good for Snooze Alarm to rebuild confidence over tricky obstacles, for Vermiculus, it helps him stay interested in his work. "With Vermiculus, I actually do a lot on the rope at the competitions," Lauren said. "He doesn't like being drilled under tack, so it's a way to let him play and keep him occupied and thinking without grinding on him."

At 16 years of age and with copious international experience, Vermiculus has his competitions chosen very selectively. With the 2024 Paris Olympic Games on the horizon, Lauren is even more mindful about peaking



Lauren with Sir Prize, left, owned by Christa Schmidt and Jacqueline Mars, and I'll Have Another owned by Brandye Randermann. Lauren is holding Benny, left, and Bosley.

him at just the right moment. In the meantime, she has other mounts in her string gearing up for eventing superstardom, including I'll Have Another, Landmark's Jungle's Gold, Larcot Z and several exciting young horses bred by Jacqueline Mars and Christa Schmidt.

GIVING BACK TO EVENTING

As a top U.S. rider, Lauren believes she has a responsibility to give back to the sport of eventing. She has participated on numerous governance committees during the past decade and currently serves on the United States Eventing Association (USEA) Board of Governors as the vice president of active athletes, at-large. She also holds several positions in the US Equestrian organization as an athlete representative, including on the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee Board of Directors Athletes' Advisory Committee as well as on the Executive Committee, and is co-chair of the Eventing Riders Association of North America (ERAofNA).

In addition to volunteering her time, Lauren is committed to being an educational resource for riders of all levels. She gives clinics, teaches lessons and regularly contributes to popular written and video information sources. Lauren particularly enjoys sharing her natural horsemanship training so that this essential part of her program can become

more accessible for everyone. Recently, Lauren filmed a Masterclass for streaming service Horse & Country (H&C) in which she details how roping can be used in training performance horses.

Lauren's empathy for the horse is obvious, and she proves that training in this way is not only useful for top horses. When a horse understands what is being asked and can methodically progress from simple to more demanding tasks, it develops into a solid citizen regardless of its career path. Having this foundation provides the horse with more opportunities and helps it be successful.

"There are other ways to teach horses about cross-country and jumping besides getting on them and staying on when it gets exciting, when they get green and stop, or through any other miscommunications," Lauren said. "Roping is a way you can produce a horse without needing an extensive amount of skill while on their back. My goal is to give people more knowledge about how to use natural horsemanship, break it down and make it uncomplicated. It doesn't have to be complicated." 📺

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To watch Lauren's Masterclass on *Horse & Country*, sponsored by *Greyson-Jockey Club Research Foundation Inc.*, visit *horseandcountry.tv*

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