



HORSE MASTERS

IN THE SADDLE WITH THE CADET EQUESTRIAN TEAM

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY LEWIS CARLYLE





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Gusts of cool fall wind race across the wide pastures of the Academy's southern open space as the mountains of the Front Range tower to the west, waiting to cast their long shadows across the land with the descending afternoon sun. The range is quiet except for the distinct patter of hooves in the distance. The sound becomes louder, quickly growing into a terrestrial thunder as seven horses and their cadet riders race past, dodging their way through a thicket of prickly yucca bushes. The Academy Equestrian Team is enjoying a sunny Sunday afternoon with their furry counterparts, taking advantage of the clear weather to exercise in the vast expanse of Colorado trails and open space.

The fledgling equestrian organization has been making waves of recent with several cadet wins in Intercollegiate Horse Show Association (IHSA) Western Region competitions. Cadets on the team compete in a variety of events against other schools such as Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho and Texas—all of which have decades of experience, generous budgets and venerable winning records in the equestrian world. Despite its minuscule resources, the Academy program is thriving on the enthusiasm and hard work put in by both cadets and volunteers.

Dr. Mary Kelly is the faculty advisor for the program, which consists of both the Equestrian Team and the Equestrian Club. Kelly is passionate about horses, and even more so about the sense of responsibility these animals instill in her cadets. Kelly explains, "The life we have for the cadets at the Air Force Academy is very much focused on them being competitive with other people and succeeding on their own. Horses get cadets away from that mentality. You have to get inside the horse's head, and that's what's really

important. All of the cadets on the team understand one simple directive: horse care comes first, and then they get to ride. Chores get done first and that's the priority."

Kelly illustrates that most of the horses in the cadet program are rescue cases. "We're the last stop en route to the glue factory," she says. "Several of our horses were abandoned because their previous owners couldn't afford to pay for them (horses are expensive). Billy Jack Barrett runs the stables and he gave us a barn which had been used for storage. It's a totally cadet run barn. The only horses allowed in there are the ones used for the cadet team. The cadets do all of the chores, which includes feeding twice a day, shoveling every night, blanketing, watering, grooming—the cadets pay for all of the vet care, all of the shoeing, everything."

Back on the open range, the cadets lead their mounts to a small erosion gully where several dilapidated stone retaining walls stand in crumbled heaps. It doesn't take an expert to know that horses love jumping, which happens to be one of the primary events in any collegiate horse



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competition. Team captain C1C Dayna Grant leads her horse Sly to the base of the gully. Once a wild mustang from the Sandwash basin, Sly has been under Grant’s care and guidance for a year. He has a compact, muscular build, a clever temperament and a love for the open range. Grant leads Sly up to the first retaining wall, which they bound over with ease.

“I was born in Canada,” Grant says, “and my father owned a cattle ranch so I spent summers riding with friends. As a cadet, this is a great outlet for me. It’s a complete escape from the cadet life. When we go down to the barn after class, it’s just us and the horses.”

Grant explains the importance of the connection between her and Sly, “You entrust this animal to carry you hundreds of miles on a trail ride into a new area, or to go into a competition against other colleges. That’s a big responsibility for both the horse and the rider.”

Competition is not something the cadets take lightly, and for good reason. What most people don’t know about

horse competition is that riders do not compete on their own horses. Instead, each competitor is matched up with a horse he or she has never ridden before. This element of the competition is designed to test a rider’s skill by removing any connection she may have with a familiar horse.

Dr. Kelly says, “The Equestrian Team is competitive in both English and Western riding styles. English competition tests riders on what is known as a flat class, consisting of walk, trot and canter. There’s also a jumping aspect. The kids run a course with jumps that range as high as a dinner table. You might think riding is riding, but Western class involves a completely different skill set.”

Derived from the early cattle ranchers of America, Western style can be traced back to the Spanish conquistadors who brought the first horses to North America. During the 1800s, cowboys spent long hours in the saddle driving cattle and often needed a hands-free approach to riding, should the need arise to shoot or lasso while mounted. Today, modern Western competitions borrow pieces of that history for riding events such as cutting, in which a horse and rider must select and separate a single cow from its herd.

In addition to competing on the collegiate circuit, the Academy’s equestrian program also holds several community service events each year. “We work closely with the families of deployed soldiers at Fort Carson,” Dr. Kelly says. “We host six family events per year, in which anyone, base-wide, can come up and get free pony rides. We also work with the Wounded Warrior program.” ▷



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Cadets exercise their horses across 18,000 acres of Academy open space.

Kelly explains that her two goals for the team are to make sure that cadets are competitive both regionally and nationally; and to ensure that community involvement is at least 50 percent of the equation. “Horses are meant to be shared,” Kelly says. “Horses are meant to transcend all other things. Taking care of these animals builds such an amazing sense of responsibility among these cadets. Equine therapy has been proven world-wide to get you out of your own head and your own problems and allows you to focus on something else.”

Cadet Grant views the Equestrian Team as an all encompassing sport. “We have to participate on the team,” she says. “How well we do in competition affects the team as a whole. Then there’s the managerial aspects of taking care of the barn and the horses themselves. We have 13 horses in our barn and that’s a big job.”

C3C Cole Donnelly is another team member who has been putting up some impressive standings in recent competitions. Another life-long animal lover, Donnelly explains, “Every horse has a different personality, and you pick up on that as you become

closer with them. We develop friendships with these animals, we understand one another. I’ve always loved animals and I started riding about 12 years ago; it just really clicked with me.”

Both Grant and Donnelly—like the other cadets on the team—have learned the value of responsibility in taking full-time care of these animals. Grant explains, “When we take on a new horse, we have to budget our own money for boarding and feeding and general care. That’s not something that most cadets experience here.”

“You can handle it,” Donnelly chimes in, “but only if you budget. It forces us to be more responsible with our money.”

Dr. Kelly reiterates that the entire program is comprised of volunteers, including Master Sergeant Travis Clawson, AMT for the 29th Cadet Squadron, and Former University of Wyoming coach, Kari Randle. “Now that Coach Randle is here,” Kelly says emphatically, “the difference in the team is phenomenal—because now we have someone who is dedicated to training the kids on the horses. Everyone is a volunteer, not one person gets paid a dime.”

Back on the Academy open space, Cadet Grant and Sly make short work of a few more jumps before the group rounds up to head for the barn. The horses walk steadily, their ears perked, their breath frosting in the chilly wind. “You can’t look into a horse’s eyes and know what he’s thinking,” Cadet Grant says as the riders make their way up the hill towards the south pasture gate. “There’s much more of a sensory relationship that takes place between horse and rider. It’s all based on feel and touch. You definitely have to be able to understand the animal in order to work with it. Sly was pulled out of the wild a year ago and he has a different personality than most horses because everything is new to him.”

Being away from animals is one of the hardest things cadets face during their time at the Academy. Aside from the occasional Security Forces K9 unit, the Terrazzo doesn’t see many animals on a regular basis. For those cadets who grew up with animals before coming to the Academy, losing that form of companionship can be difficult to

cope with. Members of the Equestrian Team have managed to fill that void by taking on the role of caretakers at the Academy stables.

As the sun falls to the west, one is reminded of the familiar cinematic conclusion of riders galloping into the sunset on a dusty western plain, their forms neatly silhouetted against a torrid sky. The scene fades to black to the tune of a triumphant orchestral score, leaving movie-goers with a resounding sense of closure. Despite this endearing metaphor of finality, this classic Hollywood ending is only true in fiction, for the sun also rises. As morning graces the stables, hungry animals poke their heads out of the stalls, their water basins licked dry, their fur matted, their muscles stiff and in need of exercise. They wait longingly for their cadet companions to come and give them the care they need. Where one ride ends, another will always be waiting to begin anew. There are friendships to pursue, trails to explore, pastures to gallop and miles to go before they sleep. ▣

DO YOU LOVE HORSES? HERE’S HOW YOU CAN HELP

The Equestrian Team needs your used gear! We need English tack and English hunting jackets, Western tack, Western saddles and Western show clothes (hats, chaps, shirts, boots). If you have old gear you don’t use any more, please consider donating them to the Academy. We also have hungry horses who love oats!

For other gift options including gifts of stocks or gift-in-kind contributions of equipment please contact the USAFA Endowment at (719) 472-0300 ext. 200

Greg Knedler
Associate Vice-President, Development

To make an on-line contribution to the Equestrian Team visit their secure giving site at

<https://giving.usafa.org/give/equestrian>

C1C Dayna Grant jumps with her mustang Sly.

