

Beyond *The* Jumps

A Young Rider's Unusual Journey



Courtesy Ali Cornish

Every journey with horses must start somewhere. For 19-year-old hunter/jumper professional Ali Cornish, her journey has taken her on a road less traveled—and she owes it all to a difficult horse that has taken her through the ranks. Thanks to him, she ended her junior career with a coveted spot in the ASPCA Maclay Finals and has recently been able to launch her own business.

On her family's ranch in Chico, California, cows and western saddles are the order of the day. Because of her upbringing, Ali blurs the lines between equestrian disciplines. As much at home in a western saddle as she is in a jump-off, Ali's approach is unconventional, but she's unshakeable in her resolve to combine the best of both worlds. She uses the skills she has learned from a variety of trainers, both English and Western, to work with difficult, often throwaway, horses. Her goal is to always find and nurture that spark that helps make a horse great.

Second Chances

Although Ali grew up with her feet in the stirrups, her real life lessons began six years ago. That's when a talented Dutch Warmblood who was sour and burnt out came into her life. "I got him when I was twelve and he was really difficult," she says. "He was at the end of his rope."

Theodore, or "Theo," was also exactly the type of project that she wanted. "When we found him, I was looking for a 3'6 equitation horse, and we didn't have the budget for a made one," Ali continues, remarking that she actually prefers a horse without all the buttons. "I wanted to be able to look back [at the horse I got] and say that we came here together. My parents and I looked at him and, by the skin of our teeth, pulled it off and bought Theo."

After several months off, Theo was brought back to work, only this time he was under western tack. Although not a common practice in the hunter/jumper world, Ali sees it simply as good horsemanship. To her, good riding is good riding regardless of the discipline. "When I bring along a horse, I want him to be able to go Western and English. There's a lot more freedom in your body and movement in a western saddle and it helps horses out in the fundamentals,"

Top of page: With Buck Brannaman coaching, Ali practices her roping skills on Theo.

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she explains. She also likes to ride western with horses that may need a change of scenery.

Ali’s mom Tina, who grew up with horses and introduced her daughter to the sport, helped guide the pair. Theo was Ali’s first “project” horse and he was a chance for her to test both her skills and her determination. “Theo and I were both learning, and it was important that we stuck to the basics. We wanted to build that foundation with him,” Ali explains. Labeled a problem horse, Theo would rear, refuse to go in a frame and not respond. It was a challenging time, but after a year, the pair had progressed enough to enter their first show together.

“The biggest thing with him—and with any horse—is that it takes a really long time to do it well. It took us three years before he was finally ready to compete in the bigger equitation classes,” Ali says.

Before Theo, Ali had never competed in any of the prestigious indoor circuits that are the year-end highlights of the hunter/jumper calendar. Although it’s an accomplishment for any rider to qualify for these shows, for Ali it was especially rewarding. “I’ve never been able to show a lot, so we always had to make them count when we went,” she says. And that’s exactly what she did.

With limited shows together, she and Theo qualified in 2012 for the prestigious Pennsylvania National in Harrisburg. Later they went head-to-head with some of the stiffest competition in the country at the Washington International in D.C. Ali’s years of hard work with Theo paid off and they walked away with the coveted reserve champion title. Earning a spot at the ASPCA Maclay Finals in Lexington, Kentucky, at the 2012 National Horse Show, Ali is filled with gratitude for the horse that got her there.

Unconventional Foundation

In an industry that can be all too focused on immediate results with a horse that can step into the ring and pin, Ali enjoys the day-to-day work of schooling. Each day she starts her horses with the simple goal of building on the day before. She’s learned that the rough patches are more apt to occur with horses like Theo, who she says was temperamentally fragile at the start.

“My time with Theo, well, it was a waiting game... a lot of patience and a lot of years of not being the winner, but you go home with a happy horse. That’s what is important to



Ali and Theo competing at the ASPCA Maclay Finals in 2012.

me,” she says. She admits it was a hard lesson to learn, however, especially when it seemed as though every other kid her age walked away with a ribbon.

Yet, hard lessons learned are ones that can lay the foundation for future endeavors. At 19, an age when many are still figuring out who they are and what career they want to pursue, Ali has found her identity and her profession in horses. “Theo pushed me to want this path for myself,” she says with fierce determination.

Ali returned to the family ranch this past fall to start a business bringing along young hunter/jumper prospects and restarting ones that have been pushed too much too fast. “Being able to do it my way and, hopefully, build some clientele that has an appreciation for horsemanship and not so much getting them in the show ring quickly, that’s really important to me,” she explains. She’s resolute in her belief that adhering to a particular training style should come a distant second to each horse’s individual needs.

Ali knows launching her business, especially at such a young age, won’t be easy. But she believes that given her personality, she’s up for the task. “It’s funny because with the horses I’m so patient, with everything else I’m not nearly as much,” she says with a laugh. “[With the horses,] I don’t get bothered by a lot and really just try to make it work. You have to constantly remind yourself though, especially with the babies, that all the horses are different.”

Horsemanship Plain and Simple

Ali has been lucky, she says, to grow up with a family that doesn’t see horsemanship as black and white—or as specific to a single style of riding. Neither have the trainers she has worked with. Well-known show jumper Melanie

“Success is only so sweet,” she says, “depending on how you get there.”



Ali and her young jumper Freddy at a Buck Brannaman clinic.

Smith Taylor, who Ali's mother Tina has coined "Ali's fairy godmother," has been a huge influence. Ali also spent this past summer working for Olympic gold medal show jumper Peter Wylde, who gave her an appreciation for the work involved at the highest level of the sport. She also draws from legendary horseman and practitioner of natural horsemanship Buck Brannaman, who travels the country giving clinics in colt starting, horsemanship, cow working and roping. Ali and her brother began to ride with Buck at a young age, while Tina has been using Buck's methods since she first came across the kind cowboy some 20 years ago. "I started his clinics when I was ten," Ali says. "We host a clinic at the ranch every year and I ride as many horses as I can with him—riding nine hours a day for four days."

Although she can only ride with Buck occasionally because of his packed travel schedule, Ali makes the most of her time under his watchful eyes. Buck and the Cornish family have a shared appreciation for a holistic approach to riding. Much of the cowboy's work revolves around allowing lightness in the horse, so the horse begins to feel like a simple extension of the rider. It is this sense of acceptance and understanding that Ali strives for with her hunters and jumpers. It is, she says, the same willingness and enthusiasm you can see in a top roping horse.

"You have to be willing to take the time, be realistic with the horse you have and your goals. You don't have to fall into the norms," she says.

One Horse at a Time

As much as Ali believes in her work, she also admits it can be lonely at times. Her unconventional ways haven't exactly won over the hunter/jumper industry. But while she's quick to note that everyone has their own path and journey, she also hopes more people will begin to see the positives of her blended program.

As for Theo, Ali is now looking for his next ideal home as she launches her business. Until she finds that perfect owner, however, she's hoping to enjoy him a little while longer—including taking him to the Legacy of Legends event, focusing on natural horsemanship techniques, held in Las Vegas at the beginning of February. "He's been a great journey. I want him to go to a person who appreciates him. He's done so much for me," she says.



With patience that belies her age, Ali is philosophical about her goals. "Success is only so sweet," she says, "depending on how you get there." **WT**