



HORSE  
SHOW  
ISSUE

# Jim Hagman's Made A Career Of Matching Riders With Opportunities

*Through Elvenstar's 28-year history, he's worked to inspire students in all facets of life.*

BY LISA SLADE

**J**im Hagman's philosophy for teaching, training, mentoring and life are all the same. He wants to pay it forward.

"I want things to be inspiring," he said. "I want to help people so they do their best to help the next person."

That philosophy is reflected in every aspect of Elvenstar, the stable Hagman created in Moorpark, Calif. Hagman helped his assistant trainer, Katie Gardner, scale the ranks when she was a junior, and she returned to Elvenstar after a few years away.



"I want things to be inspiring," said Jim Hagman of his training philosophy. PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM HAGMAN

His office staff is composed of the mothers of riders needing a little help paying their show and lesson bills. Hagman also works to find quality mounts for riders who can't always afford to buy their own, and he helps young professionals get their start in the industry.

"He's one of the most positive people I know," said Gardner. "He's inspiring without being critical. He's always bringing you up and making you feel good about riding. That's what I learned about being a coach from him—you have to be tough, but it has to be positive. Even now when I feel down, he always finds the good. People get very encouraged by it, especially because this sport can be very discouraging."

### A Role Model

At Elvenstar, young riders are encouraged to groom their own horses, and they're taught horsemanship and sportsmanship. There are riders at every level in the programs, from people participating at AA competitions and equitation finals to 3-year-olds taking one lesson a week, and the stable even started a Pony Club. Elvenstar also runs a riding academy at Huntington Central Park Equestrian Center in Huntington Beach, Calif.

"He makes his kids accountable for their actions," said Linda Cooper, who's known Hagman for 18 years and runs Maverick Farms out of Rolling Hills Estates, Calif. "He makes sure every kid says hello to every other kid in the barn. He does sportsmanship meetings. He tells them they have to be nice to each other and not have any cliques. He wants Elvenstar to be a place for families."

Part of that family atmosphere means ensuring each student has one-on-one attention. Hagman and Gardner head up the "national" show program at the Elvenstar show stable, while Kay Altheuser leads the "regional" side. A group of three instructors—head instructor Andrea Young, Barbara Burnett and Kaycee Kurtze-Bischoff—lead the riding academy. The riding academy houses 25 horses, while the show stable, with its five arenas, is home to 150.



Jim Hagman imported and trained Vancouver, who won the 2012 Pessoa/USEF Medal Finals with Meg O'Mara aboard. MOLLY SORGE PHOTO

"People from the outside go, 'Elvenstar is huge!' But it's small in subset," said Hagman. "We don't have people riding in massive classes of various levels. We have a great business manager, [Lisa Benefield], who lets me focus on the teaching. I don't know the majority of our students, and that's a positive thing. That means they're coming here and learning with their own trainers."

But despite the size and diversity of its programs, Elvenstar is still succeeding at training students at the highest levels, as well. In 2013, Halie Robinson finished third in the Platinum Performance/USEF Talent Search-West (Calif.), and Sydney Hutchins won the CPHA Medal Final (Calif.).

"I can concentrate on [top juniors] like Halie and Sydney because I don't need to teach so many. There's a reason it's called Elvenstar and not Jim Hagman Stables. You also need a large number of students to end up with a star player," he said. "We take all our riders and make them better than average, and a few become exceptional. But all our riders have a connection with a trainer. They have someone to admire."

When Vanessa Bartsch started looking into building a riding facility at Stanford University's Red Barn (Calif.), Hagman was one of the people she

called for advice.

"I was looking for a facility we'd use as a model," said Bartsch, who's now head coach of the Stanford Equestrian Team. "The hardest thing is to figure out how you can have an elite-level facility, but then also a middle school riding team and 4-H out of the same place."

"Someone said, 'You have to meet Jim Hagman! He runs Mommy And Me classes, but then he's also training kids for the Maclay,'" she continued. "Jim came out to consult with me, and he was this fireball of energy. He just blew me out of the water. He was one of the few people who had any concept of how to build a facility that would be community based."

With mentoring from Hagman, Bartsch got the Stanford Red Barn running, and she still brings Hagman in for frequent clinics.

"Even now when he comes to clinic, I have to force him to let us pay his rental car and hotel," she said. "I think one of the best things he does is help polish the riders, and he also creates this sense of positivity. Everyone walks out of the ring feeling like they can do it."

When Cooper was getting her start, Hagman also served as a mentor for her, even sending clients her way. "For 20 years, he's stood by my side and

done everything he could to help my business,” said Cooper, 46. “He’s a really giving person. He’s honest, and he’s like a father to a lot of people.”

Gardner, who enjoyed a successful junior career including top placings at major equitation championships, started riding at Elvenstar when she was 6, and she rode with Hagman her whole junior and young rider career. She left while attending the University of Southern California to work for Karen Healey and then Peter Lombardo. But in 2010, she decided it was time to go home.

“It was probably four or five years I was away, but we kept in touch the whole time,” she said. “I’d done a lot of growing up, and I’d learned a lot. He was ready to have me, and it just worked out. He really promotes riders who maybe don’t have the means to do it at

the top levels, and because of that, we have some pretty spectacular riders.”

### Faces And Hooves

But Hagman’s not only known for giving riders a helping hand up the ranks; he does the same for horses he’s purchased as youngsters. He travels to the Netherlands about four times a year, working with colleague and horse finder Johnny Bijlard.

In 2008, Hagman watched a cute 3-year-old gray trot around the ring, and he saw something special. He knew the horse didn’t move like a hunter, but he also knew he had the right attitude.

The gelding, a Dutch Warmblood (Vancouver—Lisa) named Vancouver, spent another year growing up in Europe after Elvenstar purchased him, and then he came to the United

States for an education. In early 2011, Henley Adkins, just 14 at the time and an Elvenstar working student, started riding him in equitation classes, and the pair began winning almost immediately.

“Henley’s parents were not in the position to own the next best horse, but she was working her tail off,” said Hagman, 50. “So I told her, ‘Here’s your next horse.’”

Vancouver’s record and reputation started spreading, and Hagman was soon receiving requests from riders who wanted to lease him for the major finals. At just 6, the gelding finished fifth in the 2011 Washington International Equitation Championship (D.C.) with Sarah Milliren aboard. Adkins rode him in the 2011 ASPCA Maclay Finals (Ky.), and then the horse went



Jim Hagman helped Vanessa Bartsch start the Stanford University Equestrian Team and is still a regular clinician there. VANESSA BARTSCH PHOTO

## ▶ A Lifetime With Horses

Jim Hagman's riding career started quite differently than a lot of others in the hunter/jumper industry—in a western saddle on a ranch. Hagman started lessons at Foxfield Academy in California when he was 10, before competing some as a junior.

Hagman attended California Lutheran University, earning a degree in accounting before starting his training business at Elvenstar in 1986. But even then, after working with top trainers Kip Rosenthal, Christina Schlusemeyer and Frank Madden, he knew riding wouldn't be his focus.

"We had horses in the family my whole childhood, but showing really wasn't what we did. Then I focused on college, and I basically didn't sit on a horse for five years. I wasn't starting fresh out of the junior ranks with a big reputation," said Hagman.

"So how do you build a business that's solid without ending up living in a van? That's what was frightening to me about the whole thing," he continued. "It was about building a pyramid from the ground up. I needed to create a model with the ability to go on. Now, even if I'm not standing in the ring teaching, the business is still doing things."

Hagman rides nearly every day, but he doesn't harbor any desire for competition himself.

"I love the horses and love to ride," he said. "But this—teaching—it's what mattered to me. We make horses, and we make riders, and that's what I love to do."

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“I love to teach them and interact with them like that. It’s not just about, ‘Go jump that again and put your heels down,’” said Jim Hagman.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM HAGMAN



back to California for the winter.

“We brought him home, and a lot of people were making a run at him,” said Hagman. “I was like, ‘No, we are keeping this horse.’ Henley showed him through the spring of 2012, and then Meg O’Mara called and said, ‘I want this horse.’ She came out and rode him a few times and was just absolutely a quality person.”

So when the then-7-year-old Vancouver and O’Mara walked into the ring for the 2012 Pessoa/USEF Medal Finals (Pa.) and laid down a bold, winning trip, Hagman and the team at Elvenstar were delighted. But they weren’t surprised; Hagman had seen the potential in the gelding years earlier.

Hagman provided Adkins with another talented horse, the Dutch Warmblood Barolo W (Verdi—Promesse), to bring along in 2012, and he’s found innumerable perfect matches for other clients. Whether he’s looking for a hunter, jumper or equitation, he begins his search the same way.

“First I look at their faces, and then I look down at their feet, and then at their backs. That starts it. If you look at their face, the horse has to have a wonderful brain. If they really don’t want to be doing it, I want no part of it,” said Hagman.

“Johnny is a master of bloodlines,” he added. “So many people say they don’t care about the breeding, but I care about it. There’s a reason for who the horses are. You look at the outside lines of the horse and say, ‘How do these parts func-

Elvenstar in Moorpark, Calif., is home to five rings, including the main jumping arena. PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM HAGMAN

tion?” They have to move light on their feet and also have a natural balance. If they move crooked or wrong, I move on. I’ve had my heart broken too many times.”

Hagman isn’t afraid to think outside the box when searching for horses, as well. Some used in the Elvenstar riding academy program are off-track Thoroughbreds, found with the help of Young.

“Jim has a gift, for sure,” said Cooper. “I’ve gone looking with him, and he can tell in a heartbeat if the horse has the right stride. Also, matching horses to riders, he’s just amazing. If a rider lights up a horse, he knows the perfect horse for that rider. A rider who’s more timid and anticipates, he can find those, too.”

### An Appetite For Learning And Teaching

If Hagman’s Elvenstar program appears well-rounded, it’s because the man who built it is that way himself.

Hagman took a three-week sabbatical in 2010 to Oxford University (England) for a history course in ancient empires. “I love history and politics,” said Hagman. “I’m a voracious learner, and my parents raised us as constant learners. Going to Oxford made me a student again, which I loved, and

learning the history even gave me some insight into how the Dutch and Germans do business with horses.”

That love of learning still applies to his daily training with students, as he’s continually reading about sports psychology and about the psychology of learning.

When Hagman travels through Amsterdam for a horse-shopping trip, he’ll sometimes stay a day late to visit the Rijksmuseum. He poses questions to his students that make them think about life outside of the horse world.

“I was talking recently with some of our more advanced students, and I was asking them which sport in the winter Olympic Games is most like riding,” said Hagman. “All of them said figure skating, so then we talked about why. We said it’s about the flexibility and the timing and the rhythm of it. I love to teach them and interact with them like that. It’s not just about, ‘Go jump that again and put your heels down.’”

“I like how he always has a story to go with his teaching,” said Adkins, 18, who started riding at Elvenstar when she was 10. “He’ll have a story about his childhood, and then he’ll bring it into his techniques so that it all makes sense.”

Hagman’s not afraid to take days away

from the horses, and he encourages his staff to do the same. Though the barn travels to Thermal, Calif., for the HITS Desert Circuit, they show the first two weeks and then take a break at home for two weeks before heading back. The Elvenstar national show calendar allows plenty of time for recouping and training in between competitions.

Hagman, a huge sports fan, attends baseball games with his parents, Thomas and Maria Hagman, who also live at Elvenstar in Moorpark.

“Family is very important to him,” said Gardner, 29. “He really wants us to have a life outside the horses. Then you come back, and you’re much fresher. He lets us have our lives. He has a house on the property, but he’d never let me live on the premises. It’s neat when you have someone like that.”



Jim Hagman gave the ride on the talented Vancouver to his working student Henley Adkins when the horse was still young and green, and she competed him at numerous places, including HITS Thermal (Calif.). LISA SLADE PHOTO

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