



Linda Cooper poses with her beloved horse, Rocky, at Peter Weber Equestrian Center in Rolling Hills Estates, where she is the head hunter/jumper horse trainer. Photo by Carley Dryden



Western horse trainer Jan Ball poses with some of her horses in front of her barn at the Peter Weber Equestrian Center in Rolling Hills Estates.

Taking the reins

Linda Cooper and Jan Ball teach people on the peninsula to ride — two very different ways | by CARLEY DRYDEN

AT FOUR YEARS OLD, Linda Cooper saw her dream tied to a tree in Palos Verdes.

Her mom pulled the car over to the garage sale on Colt Road and confronted the owner.

"How much is that pony?"

"\$500."

"We'll buy it...What do you feed it?"

And that's how it all started, Cooper says. The family had no place to keep Two Beck, so they knocked on doors of people with barns until they found Dr. Miller, who let them keep the pony in his backyard stall.

Two weeks later, Cooper's mom led the four-year-old, atop Two Beck, on the hour-and-a-half trip down the Palos Verdes trails to her soon-to-be trainer Julie Smith.

Within two years, Cooper was ready to jump...and gallop. So Smith told Cooper to lean forward and grab her pony's mane as she approached the cross rails, four inches off the ground.

"And I did, like a little monkey," Cooper says laughing.

Now, three decades later, Cooper trains youngsters to jump as the hunter/jumper trainer at the Peter Weber Equestrian Center, which is owned by Rolling Hills Estates. She took over the position in 2003, after Smith retired. Under Cooper's tutelage, her riders have won many local and national competitions.

On a recent warm afternoon, Cooper coaches one of her advanced riders from atop a sturdy Chestnut. She canters around the ring, with perfect form, weaving in and out of the jumps set up around her.

Jumping is refreshing, Cooper says.

"You have to focus on what you're doing. It takes me out of everything. It centers me," she says.

While she was still competing, Cooper won the Onondarka and Rosewood Junior Medal Finals, the most prestigious medal competitions for a juvenile rider, and numerous local finals as an amateur rider.

In the early 1990s, Cooper taught kindergarten, first and second grades and P.E. in the Palos Verdes School District. In 1998, she became a full time trainer and opened Maverick Farms, named after her

beloved horse, who died from intestinal problems in 1997.

Cooper is a tough trainer. Until her students can ride without their stirrups, they are not allowed to jump. They spend 30 minutes of each lesson doing flat work (sans jumps) around the ring. But she also keeps the lessons fun.

"You have to leave the ring on a good note," she says.

Cooper says she models her training methods after Smith's, who possessed "patience beyond patience."

"If I didn't get something, she'd keep me there until I got it. She was really on my side," she says.

Though she has many teen riders, her students range up to age 70.

"I like adults as long as they're not too scared because I don't like to coddle them," she says. "I get the real sassy ones that ride with me. The ones that are too timid don't because I'm too gutsy."

And though she's gutsy, she ensures her little kids are safe, even the little daredevils.

"I'm pretty good at predicting who can stay on and who can't," she says, after mimicking the "teeter totter" balance of many of her youngsters.

During the summers, Cooper holds a 13-week pony camp to teach children how to ride and other aspects of horses. She also spends two Saturdays a month teaching at a local pony club. All this, of course, when she's not attending two horse shows a month across California with her award-winning riders. One student is training for the Grand Prix, the crème de la crème of hunter jumper showing. Participants must jump over four feet in a limited amount of time against other top riders around the world.

"Riders have to be fearless and accurate," said Lynda Palmer, who trains with Cooper. "For someone to get to that level, it's quite an accomplishment."

Cooper expects her 16-year-old student will be ready within three years.

Cooper humbly attributes her business and personal success to the expert direction of her former trainer.

"I always had such great direction all my life," she says. "I lucked out with the grace of God."

The cowgirl

Jan Ball remembers it clearly — she was standing under a pepper tree at Palos Verdes Stables when the manager told her she was too young to ride a pony.

The three year old cried and cried until a woman walked by with her

horse and asked Ball if she wanted to walk around on him.

"My parents didn't know it at the time but they were in trouble," Ball says laughing.

After years of begging, Ball received her first horse, Sam, when she was 10. He was \$200. Ball blazed trails all across the peninsula and eventually decided it was time to show. She joined 4H, went to a small local show and won three fifth place ribbons.

"I was hooked from then on," she says. Her school teacher parents remained patient. "No matter how badly I did they would smile and say, 'You look beautiful honey!' There was no pressure."

Ball kept Sam in her parents' backyard, a treat she didn't learn to appreciate until decades later. At the time, as soon as the sun would come up, Sam would start whinnying. So Ball would run down, feed him and clean his stall. Now she values the education.

"I learned a lot about the behavior of horses because it was right in my backyard," she says.

Throughout her riding career she won many national championships, including the acclaimed Cow Palace Grand Nationals Open Trail Event in San Francisco.

Her success in teaching others became evident early on. People began asking her for riding lessons while she was still in high school.

For about three decades Ball has taught youngsters to ride in the Peter Weber Equestrian Center ring, just yards from Crenshaw Boulevard. Her Jan Ball Performance Horses, Inc. name is well known throughout the western riding community.

Many of her students have qualified for the AQHA World Youth Championship Show in Oklahoma or won classes at All American Quarter Horse Congress in Ohio, the largest single-breed quarter horse show in the world. Ball drove back from the show a just few weeks ago. One hundred to 200 people were in each class, with 16,000 horses competing. Ball's students came home with four Top Ten ribbons and one Top Five. Last year, Sophia Harik, one of her students, missed the world finals by one point, but was still ranked 18th in the world.

While some might criticize the western showing world as just cowboy stuff, not as fancy as the hunter/jumper competitions many see on

Olympic screens, Ball believes all riding should just be for the love of horses. Though she spent some time as a kid riding hunt seat, she leaned toward western riding because she loved riding trails, which is easier in a western saddle. But one not be fooled, many of the western outfits cost \$6,000 just for the top. One of Ball's students has a top covered in Swarovski crystals.

"What's really fun about western is you can look cute," Ball notes, while sitting in her office. The wall behind her is blanketed in framed photos of her students at competitions, some with blue ribbons, others trotting over logs and other obstacles, all decked out in colorful outfits with intricate detailing.

Ball says the western world has diversified — riders can compete in roping, gymkhana, breed shows, and other events. In Quarter Horse shows, judges look for the horses to stay round and collected, low to the ground, flat kneed, with ease of transitions between jogging, loping and walking. Ball also has riders in cutting competitions, a "fun challenge," she says. Cutting mimics ranch work. There is a herd of cattle, the horse and rider ride in quietly and cut one steer out of the herd, then the rider drops their rein and the horse drops back and forth to keep the cow from returning to the herd.

Ball teaches by example, staying relaxed and calm.

"If I don't get scared, the horses don't get scared and the students don't get scared," she says.

Ball says she's lucky that she was able to make a living doing something she loves.

"I don't make the riders. I just feel like I guide talented riders in the right direction," she says.

But she'll always hold a place in her heart for the timid little kids who were too young to ride.

"I get a real thrill out of helping kids become confident," she says. "A lot of those kids have gone on to become trainers themselves, which really makes me feel old...but here I am, still doing it and still loving it."

For more information on riding lessons, contact Linda Cooper at (310) 613-5884 or (310) 265-1804 and visit www.maverickfarms.net. Contact Jan Ball at (310) 377.1135 or (310) - 251-3222 and visit www.janball.com. PP

At Miller Children's Hospital Long Beach...



Every child is unique. So is their care.

In January 2010, to meet the growing pediatric health care needs in the region, the South Bay's children's hospital, Miller Children's Hospital Long Beach, will open a brand-new, 124,000 square foot leading-edge pavilion. Designed with help from kids, specifically for kids, the pavilion includes a state-of-the-art pediatric surgery center, patient and sibling playrooms, a new pediatric imaging center and an expansion of the neonatal intensive care unit. Miller Children's Hospital is complete with pediatric doctors who specialize in the care of kids.

Located just minutes south on the 405




Miller Children's Hospital Long Beach
MEMORIALCARE HEALTH SYSTEM
562.933.KIDS (5437)
millerchildrens.org