

Horsemanship at the Heart

Alexia Honnegger and her family work year-round to ride in just about every way possible, from bronc riding, to show jumping and most disciplines in between! The Honnegger family strives to incorporate horsemanship at the heart of their training to ensure that their horses are ready for anything they may throw at them in and out of the arena.

Alexia grew up on a warmblood breeding farm in Millbrook, New York and went on to compete on the East Coast. Her passion took her to Switzerland to compete, where she also met her husband. They moved back to the United States together for a corporate job opportunity, outside of the equine industry. As much as they tried, they were never fully able to leave the show world and horses behind. Alexia shares, "I think I can blame the National Western Stock Show for getting me back into horses, honestly!" They have since gone on to start their own show jumping barn in Elizabeth, Colo., named Millbrook, where they have been training and instructing for 15 years. They attended one of the Grand Prix events the National Western Stock Show held upon their return to the states and said "...we have to do this!"

Although they are mainly instructing show jumping when it comes to lessons, their children and other students in their program work to gain experience in all different disciplines. They started mainly as a children's barn that has now opened more doors for adolescents and adults to bring show jumping into their lives and to be able to travel and compete. "We are a little bit of an anomaly where we rodeo...most people just focus on one discipline where most of our horses and riders do a bunch," Alexia shares about their program. They have been helping folks get back into riding since being back to the National Western Stock Show. There have been many times that they have been approached by folks who have attended the Grand Prix or Gambler's Choice shows and have reached out to them as they are interested in either getting into riding or are wanting to get back into show jumping.

Since their son and daughter were born, they have been attending shows with their parents. "Before she could ride, she was in a pack 'n play at shows with me," Alexia shares about their daughter, Haley. Their new-found passion with equines ensured their children have experienced a variety of different activities. Although their son prefers to hunt and fish outdoors, Haley caught the horse bug and loves to compete and ride with show jumping as her main passion. She began training and competing with her own pony when she was six and she hasn't stopped since. With two show jumping venues in Colorado, they are on the road constantly covering the country to gain points needed for national rankings. Through Millbrook, they not only take Haley to compete but are also able to take other competitors from their barn.



Haley's first National Western Stock Show Parade

When setting a foundation for their riders, Alexia works to show them just how important horsemanship truly is. She believes the ability to create and maintain a relationship with your horse is somewhat of a dying art when it comes to training. People around the country are becoming reliant on the fact that someone else can prepare their horse for them and they do not have to do the work; this can hurt the strength of the bond between horse and rider as this can be a fragile time to develop and nurture the relationship. "If we are going to have trainers in the future, we can't have grooms handing them their horses. They have to do the work now...it's a need of the core values if we want them to be horsemen." One of Alexia's and Haley's favorite parts of the show is when the audience is able to visit and be with the horses. When they have 20 people around them who are petting and grooming them, the horses know to stand and have patience. "[The horses] understand their jobs and this makes them great horses." In situations where the horse is able to completely trust their rider, their confidence is high and they are able to remain calm in situations that may usually be very stressful for them.



For the 2024 National Western Stock Show season, Haley demonstrated this bond of strength between herself and her horse, Wilde Hilde, by being able to take her high-quality show jumping horse to the National Western Stock Show parade through the heart of Denver. Wilde Hilde is ready for anything Haley asks her for and fully trusts her to guide her through the high stress situations. Alexia sets the standard, "...if you are wanting to ride that horse for the Stock Show you have to be able to ride that horse in the Stock Show parade." The National Western Stock Show is the most challenging venue of the year for Millbrook's riders and they must have that established relationship built with

their horse to show that they are ready to compete at the level demanded. It became and remains a goal of many of their riders to meet this standard so they can compete at the National Western Stock Show, thus making horsemanship an imperative training aspect for these riders.

There is a level of understanding developed between horse and rider through training, a language only they share. To build the trust required from the horse, the rider must be willing to put in the time and effort with the horse to create that language. You know you have reached peak horsemanship skill level with your horse when you can ask them for anything, such as walking calmly through downtown Denver, and they execute the ask without question! Each horse requires a different level of horsemanship, and it is up to their rider to communicate and support them.



Story by NWSS Junior Apprentice Committee Member Rain Wheeler
Photos courtesy of Casey McBride Photography & Alexia Honnegger

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