

How The West Has Won

BY JACKIE MCFARLAND

An inspiration to hundreds of equestrians, a pioneer of excellence on the both coasts, strong-willed, stubborn and supremely dedicated, Karen Healey can speak volumes about correct position, technical riding, the idiosyncrasies of getting a great jump, essentially every detail of rider and equine development. But she is also a gourmet cook, adores the theatre and volunteers for the homeless every holiday season. I wanted the story behind the master, how she came to be an equestrian, choices she made that we all experience, career moments, her thoughts on the sport. Behind the serious and tireless teacher is a kid who grew up loving horses, worked for the chance to ride and has a huge heart for canines and equines.

IN THE BEGINNING

Karen discovered her love for horses when her family lived near a barn that a trainer named Sally Dohner owned near Harrisburg, PA. As the oldest of five children in a middle class household, when she asked her father for riding lessons “He looked at me like I had three heads. So I mucked, raked, watered—essentially did all the barn work for the chance to ride.” And that’s how it started.

She purchased her first pony with money earned from babysitting and working at the barn. She competed on the local circuit, sold the pony and bought a horse. Over the years she gained great miles in the barn, in the saddle and in the show ring.

Karen graduated from high school and was accepted to Vassar and Swarthmore but needed a scholarship to afford tuition, so she put school on hold. Sally sold the barn. Karen stayed to manage and teach, but the barn wasn’t the same. Taking the chance to go to college, she completed two years before taking a job with a young professional in the area, George Morris.



In 1972 George had just moved to Hunterdon and Karen went to Florida for the winter to work as a groom. Secretly hoping to be discovered as a rider what she found was that she loved teaching. After about nine months with George, she was managing the barn, teaching and taking clients to shows.

The two aforementioned equestrians were her biggest influences, yet she turned a corner in her riding through another discipline. “Sally was an excellent horseman, from the barn to breaking horses for the racetrack to riding effectively. George had a huge impact. Through him I worked with Bert de Nemethy, Jessica Ranshousen and Gunnar Ostergaard. I loved the dressage work. I hadn’t done that type of flatwork and I took to it quite well. When I understood how to incorporate dressage into my hunt seat was when I really learned how to ride well.”

THE WILD WEST

After a solid five years with Hunterdon, several years at Tewkesbury Farms, New Hope and Boulder Brook, it was time for a change. In the early eighties Sally Dohner and Bucky Reynolds had ventured west to start a business at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center. After pondering the opportunity to take her knowledge to a new frontier, Karen decided to head west. Sally and Bucky left two months later, but she had made a decision and was going to stick to it.

Quite different from the east coast landscape, she soon learned that paddocks on the west coast weren’t green grass, wood-fenced areas but dirt pipe corrals. Compared to Tewksbury, NJ where there were 100 one-day and multi-day shows a year, the entire state of California had only ten or twelve recognized horse shows annually.

Karen recalled those early days with a smile. “When I first started going to shows in California I would get on a horse early in

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the morning and I would be the only one there until five minutes before the classes started. One of the first regional finals was at Flintridge. It was pouring rain. Without even giving it a second thought, I taught all day in the downpour. At about three o'clock, one of the trainers, Larry Mayfield, came out and told me he'd been sent out to the ring to ask me to please go home, the rest of them certainly wanted to. I laughed and told him I wasn't done yet."

In the eighties the west coast winter circuit was in Arizona, and a few of her students were ready for that level, including Mia Woods and Meredith Michaels. In 1986 Mia went to east to ride with Beacon Hill for the USEF Medal Finals and won.

Meredith was one of the first to focus on the east coast as a part of her plan. Even after she went to Princeton, she planned to take a semester off to compete in the Olympic Trials.

"Although we both knew she would always be involved with horses at a high level, I think it was important that Meredith spent those years at Princeton. And, well, the rest is history."

Karen still gets up early and stays until the last horse is done. No longer the lone trainer at the show from sunrise to sunset, rain or shine, over the last 25 years Karen has been an integral part of the west coast evolving into a viable place for developing great horses and horsemen.

A FEW OF MANY MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Karen recalls, "In 1989 Lauren Kay and Gulliver were second in the Maclay to Ray Texel. Her mother was thrilled and asked 'So can we just quit now?' But she went back the next year, battled it out with Kelley Farmer and won."

"In 1998 at the USEF Medal Finals in Harrisburg, the weather was terrible, really rainy. There wasn't a lot of opportunity to prepare. Jill Prieto's horse Derreck was really nervous and had two rails in the first round. She got called back about 24th, and had an unbelievably beautiful second round, moving up to 6th. They brought back the top six for further testing. The track was difficult and the riders weren't allowed to watch each other. Jill had to go first and she was super. She ended up second to Kent Farrington."

"Earning second, third and fourth in the 2007 USEF Medal Finals with Hannah Selleck, Tina DiLandri and Shelby Wakeman respectively was great for all involved—the kids, the barn and making a stamp that the west coast was, and is, certainly a force to be reckoned with."

After hundreds of medal finals, Indoor circuits and horse shows all over the country, Karen is still 150% involved. She made a clear distinction about her specialty. "I am not an equitation trainer,

Opposite page:
Karen Healey.

Top: Hannah Selleck
wins the 2008 USEF
Talent Search Finals.

Bottom: Lauren Kay's
Gulliver.



there is no such thing. The Medals happen to be a path many riders choose—there are goals to work towards and technical aspects to master in order to ride well in the finals. Plus learning to deal with the pressure. My career, and what I love to do, is teaching students to ride well, assistant trainers to train well and horses to jump well.” Although known for top results in equitation, several riders have earned hunter as well as jumper accolades, from championships at Indoors to medals at NAJYRC, including the 2012 Gold Medal Winner, Killian McGrath. Many professionals, including Archie Cox, Kasey Ament, Jill Prieto, Cathleen Calvert and recently Hannah Selleck, have spent time working with Karen before venturing out on their own.

“Hannah will be a really top professional, she’s got years of great miles, and is now focusing on what it takes outside of the show ring. She’s soaking up a whole new body of knowledge.”

DESIRE AND NO TEARS

Karen claims without hesitation that what makes a great rider is desire. All the talent in the world without a solid work ethic and a burning desire to be great won’t result in a rider. Among the list of clinics Karen taught this year, two were for the USHJA Emerging Athletes Program (EAP). Lizzy Traband, who has only one arm, participated in an EAP clinic.

“Talk about desire—she’s the epitome. She trumps a handicap, doesn’t have a ton of money but has incredible focus and desire. After the clinic she took the time to write an email, expressing her appreciation, explaining what she had learned and she applied it to her work at home.”

What separates good riders with desire and work ethic from top international riders who can perform under pressure, even ache for that



Top:
2012 NAYRC
individual Gold
Medalist Killian
McGrath.



Bottom left:
Tiffani Weeda
tops the podium
in the 2007 CPHA
Foundation Finals.

Bottom right:
Archie Cox and Karen
Healey.

GIVING BACK

Karen’s involvement with the hunter/jumper affiliate USHJA dates back to its inception eight years ago. She’s an active part of an extremely dedicated group who has worked tirelessly to create the Trainer Certification Program (TCP). Karen is committed to teaching and preserving the American system of riding. TCP provides a foundation and sets consistent standards for trainers across the board.

Although difficult in today’s show world, Karen still tries to find horses that a kid from a background like hers can develop. It takes a couple of years to make a top horse, but working together to achieve training and competitive goals is truly rewarding.

“In this sport, you’re only as good as the last class you’ve ‘won’. It’s constant. I’ve been asked if I’m ready to retire. I’ll retire when I stop getting the good knot in my stomach—wanting it so badly for the kids—when that stops, I’ll stop. I’m not even close yet.”

