

Renaissance Woman

THE VERSATILE STACY WESTFALL
FINDS SUCCESS IN A WIDE VARIETY
OF DISCIPLINES.

Story by Holly Clanaban

Stacy Westfall laughs, humbly, explaining how she almost didn't get up the nerve to reach out to legendary three-day eventer Denny Emerson. She'd had her horses on the East Coast and thought maybe she could stop by his farm in Vermont while she was nearby. Eventing isn't necessarily in Stacy's wheelhouse, but horses and learning are.

After a gracious invitation from Denny—because, really, who *wouldn't* want Stacy to come to their barn?—she gave a mini clinic to Denny's working students, and then he asked her to hop aboard one of his horses to play with counting strides to a jump.

"Jumping is not her 'thing,'" Denny posted on social media, "but you would never know it. Good riders are just good riders."

Stacy's story started like so many others. She was a horse-crazy kid, encouraged by her parents, and she grew up barrel racing in Maine on a mare named "Bay" and entering all the classes you can imagine at open horse shows. Now, as

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an adult, Stacy hasn't veered too far from that path. She still has that same love for the animals she built her life around, and "entering all the classes" has evolved into success in a mind-boggling number of disciplines.

Stacy has won 13 major reining freestyle competitions, first earning notoriety for performing *bridleless* and then upping the ante to *bareback* and *bridleless*. She was the first woman to win Road to the Horse, known as the world championship of colt starting. Mounted shooting, which combined the speed she loved as a child with the precision of reining, was next, and she became a Level 4 regional champion. She found success in AQHA ranch riding classes, while simultaneously dipping into the waters of dressage and western dressage, where she has earned, respectively, a bronze medal and five world championships. She has even dabbled a bit in western pleasure and longe-line futurities.

Trail riding, working with nurse-mare foals and travel-

ing the country have also been on the agenda. Stacy makes time, somehow, to build a thriving business of clinics, plus a robust social media presence and a website chock full of training tips, online lessons and podcasts she produces herself. And, of course, she is wife to trainer and National Reining Horse Association judge Jesse Westfall and mom to three sons, Caleb, 22; Joshua, 20; and Nathan, 18.

"She has this charmed existence, but she makes it happen," says her friend Suzi Vlietstra, who was founder and owner of Hobby Horse Clothing Co. for 39 years before selling the company in 2017. "I think it's fair to call Stacy a Renaissance woman. Stacy truly is that in her capacity to learn, her curiosity and her ability to form relationships."

We should all have a friend like Suzi, who enthusiastically ticks off Stacy's selling points. "God created her to be this advocate for horses, I absolutely believe that," Suzi says. "And she is one of those lucky people who ended up doing in life what they were meant to do and finding it pretty early."

Stacy, now 46, credits a high school math teacher for setting her on this path when he asked students what career they wanted to pursue. With a healthy dose of teenage sarcasm, Stacy told the teacher, "I want to ride horses, but you can't go to school for that." The horse world in Maine was pretty cloistered, and Stacy had never even seen a reining horse—much less dreamt that she could earn a living training horses. Stacy's teacher sent her to the library to do some research, though, and she happened upon the University of Findlay in Findlay, Ohio. "Apparently, you *can* go to school for that," Stacy says, laughing.

She graduated from Findlay in 1997, leaving with a degree in equestrian studies. While she was in college, she met Jesse, and she showed her first reining horse, Boot Scootin Dolly, who later would produce Whizards Baby Doll, the black mare nicknamed "Roxy" who catapulted Stacy to fame with their legendary reining freestyle performed without a stitch of tack at the 2006 All American Quarter Horse Congress.

Stacy fell in love with the sport of reining early on, and Jesse encouraged her to get in the show pen with Can Can Lena, a mare owned by their client, James Fanello. In the

Top: Stacy and Roxy's ride to "Live Like You Were Dying" by Tim McGraw at the 2006 All American Quarter Horse Congress was dedicated to her father, who had passed away less than a month before. The video of this ride went viral and caught the attention of Ellen DeGeneres, who invited the Westfall family and Roxy on her television talk show.

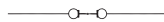




When Stacy and Jesse were looking to purchase property, one of the "must haves" was plentiful trail-riding opportunities. Their place in Loudonville, Ohio, adjoins Mohican State Park, which offers more than 90 miles of beautiful trails.



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summer of 2003, Stacy was competing aboard “Hailey” when she dropped a rein. The mishap had a silver lining, however, showing her that she might be closer to riding bridleless than she had thought, so she started riding with the reins tied around the saddle horn to hone her skills.

Congress was just months away, but Stacy thought she could pull off a bridleless freestyle routine.

She put an immense amount of pressure on herself, and the skeptics on the rail didn’t help, either. When she practiced her bridleless ride at some paid warmups, “People

were like, ‘What are you doing?’” she remembers. “And it wasn’t like admiration. It was more like, ‘You’re crazy!’” Stacy’s tension carried over into the competition arena at Congress, and when her body remained tight after a sliding stop, Hailey mistook that for a cue that she should do a rollback. The routine went off track after that, and although the crowd loved the novelty of bridleless riding, Stacy omitted a lead change, which is a required maneuver. Her score was 0.

As Stacy left the arena, “everybody was cheering,” she says, but she and Jesse knew what was going to happen before the score was announced. The audience didn’t anticipate it, though, and there was chaos for a moment when the fan favorite went to the bottom of the standings.

It was a turning point for Stacy, but not in a good way at first. “I went home and just beat myself up,” she says. She watched the video of her ride over and over. “Jesse watched

Insights from Jesse: “She just really does love the horses. It’s not about fame or money. It’s about inspiring people, and she truly has a love for horses and spending time with them.”

“Nobody had any idea who it was. They didn’t even know if it was a woman or a man because of the face covering, and the name ‘Stacy’ could go either way. It was so fun!”

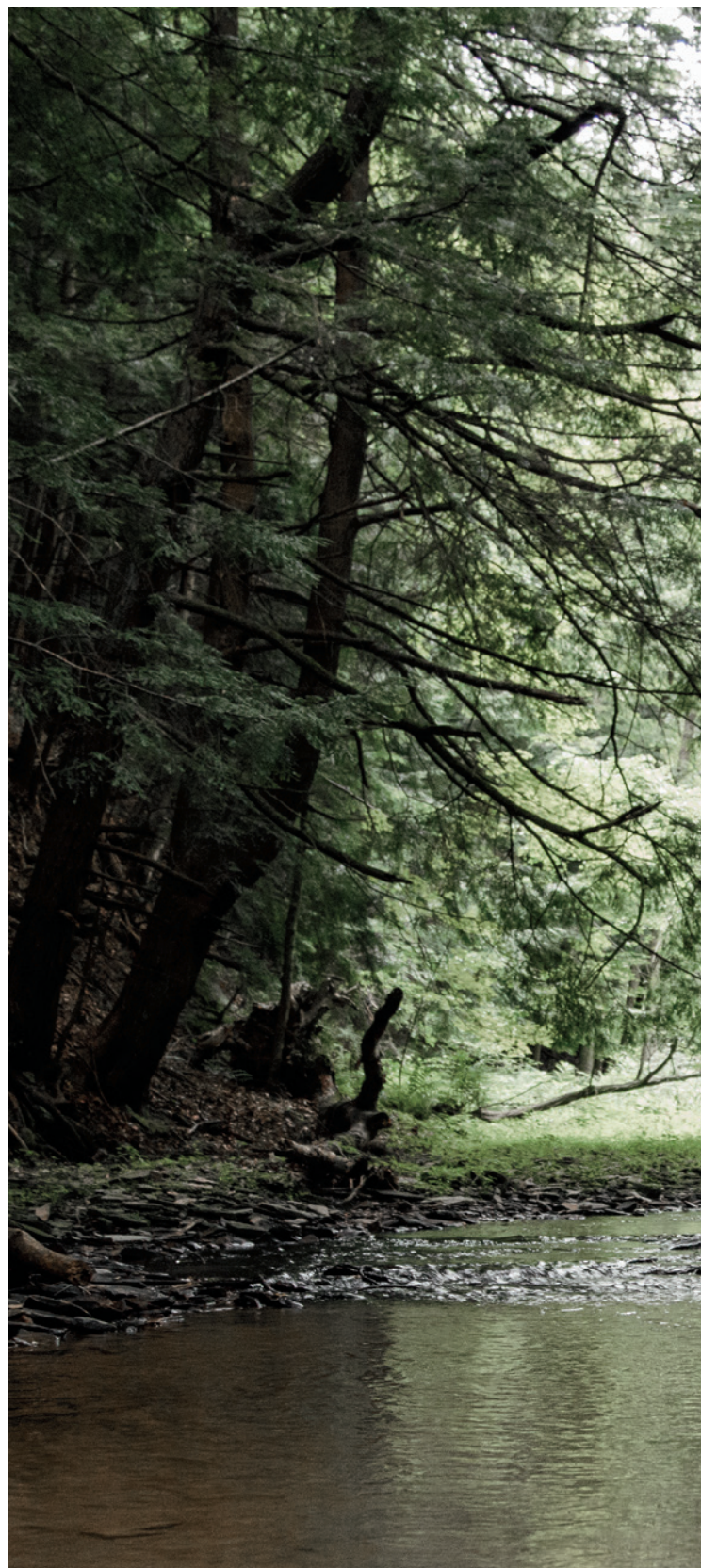
me beat myself up for about three weeks, and then one day, he was walking through, stepping over me because I’m literally on the floor watching this video, and he said, ‘Have you ever considered going to the (NRHA) Futurity freestyle?’...I looked like a loaded gun, I’m quite sure, and he said, ‘You could give it another shot.’ I don’t know how he got brave enough to say that, but he did, and I kind of sat on it and pondered it.”

Stacy remembered that she had a book by renowned sports psychologist James E. Loehr and, within those pages, she found enough wisdom to exorcise some of her horse-show demons. With just two months in between Congress and the NRHA Futurity, “I managed to make the shift to realize that I could release the outcome. I could go ride the best ride I could, and I have no control over who else shows and what caliber horse they have. I can’t control that. All I can control is what’s in my hands.”

The mental shift was life-altering. When Stacy walked into the NRHA Futurity arena in Oklahoma City in December 2003, “I went in, and I was breathing, and I was loose, and I was *there*. I was able to ride.” Instead of the ride being a blur, as it had been at Congress, she remained aware and in the moment. She even realized that her ride was going a bit faster than normal, so she made a bigger circle at one point to make use of her extra time, laughing because she knew Jesse was probably out there somewhere stressing about her getting in the final required maneuver.

She was the last of 10 riders, and the announcer announced her score dramatically, knowing that he was revealing the winner. “It was like the Cinderella story,” Stacy says.

Stacy was relatively unknown at that point, and for that “Ghost Riders in the Sky” freestyle, she had dressed as an





Stacy grew up trail riding and loves the benefits it provides both horses and riders. All of her horses get to stretch their legs and freshen their minds on the trail.

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and she finds experts to teach her stuff.”

old-time cowboy, with a duster and a bandana covering her face. The next morning at breakfast at her hotel, she and her family overheard people talking about her freestyle ride. “Nobody had any idea who it was. They didn’t even know if it was a woman or a man because of the face covering, and the name ‘Stacy’ could go either way. It was so fun!”

The disastrous ride of just a few months prior “was literally a turning point in my entire career,” Stacy says. “The 2006 bareback and bridleless ride never could have happened without that.”

Just as she learned and grew then, Stacy continues to put an emphasis on education, and she is both a perpetual student and a skilled teacher. As she masters new skills, she loves passing the knowledge along. In 2004, responding to popular demand, she made her first DVD, “Bridleless Riding: How Does She Do That?” About that same time, she also became close friends with a businesswoman who was the cousin of Greg Gessner, owner of Roxy.

“We have so much fun together, but one of the things we talk about a ton is business. We always have,” says Stacy’s friend and longtime client, Molly Wagner, who is CEO of Equithrive. “She has a very unique ability as a horse trainer to be able to see the whole picture of how all of the marketing platforms work together. She sees it better than most marketers, people who do this all the time. She’s following the platforms and seeing what’s working and where she should focus her time and energy. That’s what has made her brand grow. How many people or businesses do you see that have over 400,000 people following them on Facebook?”

Stacy’s Facebook numbers are impressive, for sure, and she also has a healthy presence on Instagram, Twitter and YouTube—where her 2006 ride on Roxy garnered more than 2.4 million views—as well as her own website, *www.stacywestfall.com*, where she has posted more than 100 podcasts and more than 1,000 blog posts.

Suzi enjoyed watching Stacy develop her podcasts, and

the process offers an insight into how someone creates an “overnight” success. (Hint: There’s nothing overnight about it.)

“Stacy has so much curiosity,” Suzi says. “She teaches herself all kinds of stuff, and she finds experts to teach her stuff. She has done that in business, too. I know before she went into the podcasting venture, she listened to a ton of podcasts, and she went to a number of seminars and conventions about podcasting, and then she ‘busts out of the gate’ as a really good podcaster. So you think, ‘Is she just a super genius?’ Well, yeah, but she did a ton of prep work.”

When Stacy pivoted toward western dressage, with an eye toward competing at the 2019 Western Dressage Association of America World Championship Show, she attended the association’s judges workshop to gain essential insights, she took lessons from a dressage instructor who didn’t care what type of tack she showed up in, and she started a Facebook group that allowed fans to ride along on the journey.

“I was going to be learning so much, I wanted to share it,” Stacy says. “And I could also ask questions in (the Facebook group), because there are other people who have done it, and just because it was the first time I’ve done it, it wasn’t the first time everybody else has done it.”

Learning a new discipline isn’t easy, but Jesse says Stacy is always willing to put in the work.

“She is very studious,” he says. “When she wants to learn something new, when she sets her mind to it, she’s pretty determined to succeed. She has such a strong work ethic.”

When she was getting into mounted shooting, Jesse says that Stacy spent time researching guns, finding local experts

Top: Downtime is rare for Stacy, who is an excellent time manager. She has to be to stay on top of all of her projects. Jesse says he helps with filming, but “we don’t have employees.” So the online courses, the podcasts, that’s all done by Stacy herself. “She stays focused.” Bottom: Among Stacy’s honors is her 2012 induction into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame.





to coach her and helping her horses adjust to what can be an adrenaline-triggering sport.

She wrote a series of articles on mounted shooting for AQHA in 2010—again sharing that knowledge she was gaining—and she talked about the importance of preparation. Stacy hadn't handled guns much before, so she spent time practicing cocking the pistols (unloaded, of course), pulling the triggers and even drawing the guns from holsters as she walked around their property.

"The thing I love about this entire journey with horses is I'm still learning," Stacy says. She's quick to ask questions, which is a great attribute, as different disciplines don't always speak the same language. A rollback in mounted shooting competition, for example, looks nothing like a rollback in reining.

"I'm not afraid to ask questions and ask for clarification. I do feel uncomfortable at times, but I'd rather understand than pretend," she says. "The better I understand, the more clearly I'll communicate with my horse."

And ultimately, that's what this is all about: the horses.

"I enjoy learning new things, and I think my horses do, too," Stacy says. "I think more and more people are going to see a lot of value in cross training horses. That's what I've naturally been doing for quite a few years, basically because I like trying new things, so it leads to cross training."

Stacy trail rides frequently, and the Westfalls' home in Loudonville, Ohio, backs up to Mohican State Park, with more than 90 miles of trails. Groundwork is also a big part of her program, and Molly sees how these components affect the horses Stacy comes into contact with.

"One of the biggest reasons I have really enjoyed riding with Stacy is she is such an advocate for the horse," Molly says. "All of her horses are so mentally sound."

And Stacy's horses are just as versatile as she is. For instance, Stacy purchased Doctor T Tari after she started him under saddle at the 2006 Road to the Horse. "Popcorn" went on to earn an AQHA Register of Merit with points in reining, he is trick trained, he competed in mounted shooting, he has done some dressage, qualifying for regional championships, and Stacy has also taught him bridleless cues and loaned him to a kids' camp one summer.

Her horses seem to benefit—both mentally and

Top: Stacy and her mare I Can Can I sometimes mix dressage tack with reining sliding plates. Bottom: Stacy's two western dressage world champions, I Can Can I, aka "Willow," and Ravenclaw, aka "Gabby," are both related to the famous bareback and bridleless reining mare Roxy.

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physically—from doing different things. "I think it's interesting for the horses if you keep changing things up because they just seem like, the more layers that you add, they get smarter. They understand that there are differences."

Stacy's mare I Can Can I, known as "Willow," has been trained to do a sliding stop that would earn points in reining. But she can also do a balanced halt that's appropriate for dressage or western dressage. It all depends on if Stacy sits her hips back and opens her legs slightly to ask for a slide, or if she keeps her legs on during the halt.

While those different cues can be hard for a rider to remember, Stacy says the horses are never confused.

"Willow will remember accurately every time," Stacy says, laughing, "and I will not accurately ride it every time. I trained her, and I can't remember all these rules, but her? She's got this."

It's like speaking different dialects of a language. "The foundation and the training are all the same," Stacy says. "I view it as adding layers, not contradicting each other. I always look at it as a gift you give the horses, these levels of understanding, and it's just super cool to watch them blossom when they understand all the different things. They become very versatile, and they really seem to enjoy it."

Suzi calls Stacy's ability to succeed in so many areas a "mind meld" between the different disciplines. "She's such an amalgamator, it's such a melting pot of concepts.

"I'm always curious to see what she's going to do next, and she's always up to something," Suzi says. "It could be anything, and she'll take us along for the ride, and she'll probably be successful at it." U