

Karen Healey

L(earning) Her Way

By Diana De Rosa



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It was raining that afternoon at Flintridge in California where a horse show was to take place. Matter-of-fact it had been raining all morning, but never mind, Karen Healey was on her next lesson with more to go. In the distance she watched as one of the other trainers headed her way. It was Larry Mayfield working his way through the wet footing. Finally, he reached Karen who was curious as to why he'd made the trek since no one else had appeared all morning.

"I've been designated by the other trainers to come out here and send you home," he commented. Even through the raindrops Karen could hear a bit of a chuckle. "You are making the rest of us look bad," concluded Larry laughing.

Yet that was and is Karen Healey. She's the first one to arrive at the showgrounds in the morning and the last one to leave at night. Perhaps that's because although she now lives in California she originally came from the East Coast, and the path to her eventual settling in California was earned with lots of hard work and even more determination.

"I'm extremely focused," explained Karen, "whatever I am doing at the moment I am doing it 1000 percent." Whether she is training a horse or teaching a student, cooking one of her many exotic meals (she's known to be an amazing chef and cooks all the food for the barn Christmas party), or on a shopping outing (where she often gets carried away), Karen puts her whole mind and soul into every project. Karen also takes her roles as Chairman of the USHJA Equitation Committee and Task Force, and other committee roles very seriously.

"Everything I do I take it to the nth degree!"

L(earning) Her Way

Karen's road to training was earned and it was learning from time, experience and others more knowledgeable that helped her arrive at where she is today.

“I was the oldest of five children. We were a typical family. My father worked for the phone company. Horses were never a part of our lives and so when I said I wanted to take riding lessons they looked at me like I had two heads,” explained Karen.

Although she originally grew up in Pennsylvania, they had lived in New Jersey for two years. There were a lot of horses in the neighborhood and so she would go where the horses were.

“I met a friend to hang out with at a nearby stable. I was 12 or 13 and I really wanted to ride and so I worked off my lessons, creosoting fences and mucking stalls”

As time passed and Karen’s knowledge grew she eventually started giving lessons at that same riding school and then “after I graduated High School, I sort of took over the business for a year and a half.”

When Karen was around 20 (early 1970s) the owner, Sally Gohner, moved to Southern Pines to run another riding school business. Karen continued to run the barn for the new owners. At the time “George Morris had just opened Hunterdon,” continued Karen, and it was a very easy two hour drive from where she worked in New Jersey. At about the same time Karen decided to go back to school and as a result her students went to George.

Yet school wasn’t the answer. “I wasn’t finding anything I really wanted to do in college so I went to work for George on the Florida Circuit (1971). I did that for about 4 ? years. I went to George hoping to be discovered. What I found was I liked to teach. Even though I had very little formal instruction (we didn’t counter canter, count strides or do flying changes) I was pretty good at it.”

After Hunterdon Karen went to Tewksbury Farm because “I felt it was time to go out on my own. I ran the program there for 2 ? to 3 years. I wanted it to be my own business; not just the assistant trainer.”

That lasted two years before going to Boulder Brook, New Hope and a few other locations. “I couldn’t find a place that would work. I don’t work well for other people (except George),” she admitted.

California Here I Come

It was then, in 1981, that Karen decided that California was ready for someone like her.

“It just sounded like the right thing to do. I had lots of good clients and customers and finding something that I could afford in the tri state area was impossible. I decided California was ready. They always had good riders but in order to have a chance they had to come back and ride with someone on the East Coast. I figured I would bring my knowledge, system and discipline to produce winners on the West Coast so they didn’t have to make the pilgrimage East.

When Karen arrived in California in the 80s there were only about 10 or 12 A rated horse shows for the entire year (compare that to Tewksbury where she and her students attended about 165 in one year).

“I found my niche,” continued Karen. “I worked at Griffith Park for about 9 months. Eventually I moved out to West Lake Village and opened up my own ‘Karen Healey Stables.’”

Karen had a cross section of students, but she enjoyed working with all levels and taking each one as far as their individual talents would go. And some of those students have gone quite far.

Probably her best known is Meredith Michaels (now Beerbaum) who was one of her very first students. Meredith was 12 years old when she began taking lessons from Karen and “she stayed with me right through to her junior career. Then she was going to school in Princeton and so I sent her to George and the rest is history.”

Meredith eventually married Markus Beerbaum and now lives in Germany. She’s been a member of World Equestrian and Pan American Games Medal winning teams and was the winner of the 2005 World Cup in Las Vegas among numerous other victories.

Francie Steinwedell, another noted grand prix rider, also rode with Karen for a couple of years and Archie Cox worked for her for eight years.

Karen’s success has been based on the fact that she loves what she does.

”I love to teach. I really enjoy working with new groups of kids. I’ve had ones with great, average and no talent but helping every one of them to go as far as they can go or further is what I enjoy. As the year starts to wrap up I can’t wait for it to end but then when I get home I can’t wait for the next group to get started.”

Since California doesn’t have any PCHA recognized shows from the middle of November until after the Convention in January that gives Karen and her

husband Fred, 1969 AHSA Medal Finals winner, six or seven weeks to rejuvenate.

Then when the show season begins they spend most of her time first at Thermal for seven weeks (they own a home in La Quinta) and then at The Oaks. "We are lucky enough to have the Oaks, the nicest show facility in the country, close by."

So each week Karen heads out to the show on Wednesday morning until Sunday night when she drives back home. In between there are other venues that her students compete at and then once the Fall rolls around they head East for the Indoor Show Circuit.

When at the show Karen doesn't just prepare her students to compete. "I do actual lessons at the show," she explained. "We do lessons on the weekends and in the mornings and focus on the extra things that need attention."

Learning From George

When Karen reflects on how she got to where she is today she credits many of the people who helped her along the way, especially George.

"George was and is a tremendous inspiration. He is definitely my mentor. He never lets down. I've always had a very strong work ethic which was why I worked well with him or for him. You just did what you needed to do. There was no such thing as I couldn't or wouldn't or don't have time," said Karen.

"He has done so much for the sport. He has never wavered from his system and I think that is one of the keys to my success. I don't believe in a lot of gimmicks or a lot of tricks. The riding is what gets the job done. They don't need a different bit; they need a mouth."

"There are tremendously great riders that I love to watch ride, but being a horseman encompasses a whole lot more than riding a horse. You can pick out horses, maintain them, take young horses along and turn your horses out beautifully. You know what a well cared for horse is and you understand veterinary issues and have a working relationship with your vet."

Both George and Karen have a very similar philosophy and Karen believes the key to her success has been, "Hard work and believing in a system and not straying from it."

This and That

Yet, life can't just be about hard work. There must be those special moments

and so Karen ponders for a moment thinking about the things that make all the work worth it.

“I really like it when I get to the horse show in the morning and see a pristine schooling area and not a footprint in it and I can go out there and build a course. The sun comes up over the mountain and then all these people show up and the horse show starts.”

Karen jumps back a few years to when she was competing to recall yet another great memory. She was at Harrisburg competing in the Second Year Green Stake on a horse called Trump Card.

“Every fence that I jumped it got quieter and quieter until the last jump” when the arena erupted into applause for Karen after she clearly won that class. “It was the round of a lifetime.”

Move on a few years to 1990 at the Maclay Finals at the Meadowlands. One of her students, Lauren Kay was competing on a horse named Gulliver in the prestigious Maclay Finals and it was down to the final round. Again the arena burst into applause but this time it was for her student’s winning round and that very special horse. “He was one of the best horses I have ever had to work with,” admitted Karen. Karen subsequently donated a trophy in his name called The Gulliver Trophy for The Best Horse USEF Talent Search, West Coast.

Then in 2004 it was her student Kasey Ament who was under scrutiny. She was a working student at the time (now her assistant) and was competing on a green horse that they had taken along. Kasey was in the USET Finals and the pressure was on but a perfect go and the moment was there for both of them to cherish.

“I love taking along a horse and most of the good horses that I have had I’ve made,” she explained.

Karen also appreciated watching the World Cup Team Hunter Challenge become a reality. In 2005 she was the one who received a call from Olympic Gold Medalist Rodrigo Pessoa. He challenged her to set up a class at the Rolex FEI World Cup pitting a team of European Show Jumping riders against a team of the top U.S. Hunter riders on horses they’d never ridden before. Karen did just that (with the help of the American Hunter–Jumper Foundation). The Europeans won in 2005 but a rematch in 2007 gave the victory to the U.S.

Yet there are also those tough times when things just aren’t going your way. When asked about some of those times Fred spoke up first. “Indoors when everybody sucks! I’ve learned not to talk to Karen for 24 hours after a Finals

go badly because she's ready to quit or she is not good or whatever. Then she regains her balance and life goes on."

Eventually Karen dusts herself off and gets back in the arena again.

"She works harder than any human being I know and anyone who is on the West Coast would second that notion," commented Fred.

Since 1983 when Karen first came to the West Coast the number of horse shows has soared as has the level of riders.

"I do think that I was influential in bringing California to the competitive level that it is today," she proclaimed. In the beginning her students were dominating the ribbons but eventually others realized that if they were going to win against her Karen Healey Stables they best start working harder to do it.

She remembers at one show where her students had won all the classes the day before. The next morning they were up bright and early getting ready for the that day of showing. Yet they were alone. Karen couldn't believe it. "I thought to myself, my students won everything yesterday, where are all these other people. Don't they want to try and beat us?"

In time that all changed and earning those blue ribbons is a bit harder these days but it's not just about the ribbon, it's also about doing the best you can on any given day. It's not easy but when asked why she continues to go on she doesn't even blink an eye.

"I love it," she said with that same determination that she has with everything she does. "It's the good, the bad and the ugly."

Both Karen and her husband Fred will agree that it's been better for Karen since they married. "We both know that everything is really very temporary," explained Fred. "The world as we know it is coming to an end and tomorrow's another day!"

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