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IS RUN-AND-JUMP A DYING ART?

Bruce Davidson in the 1983
Maryland Hunt Cup *p. 32*

Inside:

4 Vets On Game-Changing Technology *p. 44*

The Legacy Of Ledyard *p. 48*

Depo & Regu-Mate: Will They Be Banned? *p. 56*

The Dying Art Of Run-And-Jump

Racing, exercise riding and foxhunting were formative experiences for many top eventers and show jumpers of the past, but nowadays such crossover is rare. Are modern riders galloping past a critical mile marker in their education?

BY LESLIE WYLIE

By 6 a.m. Logan Bearden is getting a leg up onto her first horse of the day.

The 21-year-old is a licensed exercise rider at Golden Gate Fields, a racetrack on the shore of San Francisco Bay. It's a bustling venue, especially at this hour. Fidgety Thoroughbreds skitter down the track, coats shimmering beneath the creamsicle sunrise, awaiting the cue to do what they do best: run.

Over the next couple hours Bearden will gallop another eight to 10 horses, many of them 2- or 3-year-olds with a gas pedal installed and not much else.

Learning to handle them has been a steep learning curve over the past two years since she first embarked upon this exercise rider gig.

Starting out she spent hours just jogging the horses around the track, building muscle strength and practicing basics: contact, connection, balance. Position is a huge part of it, too, learning to be defensive yet flexible, with hiked-up stirrups to boot.

"At first it was really hard for me," she says. "When you're holding a horse you have to hold them with your legs as well and keep your hips further back. I had to play around with where to place my body and where to put my weight.



Logan Bearden finds that galloping horses at Golden Gate Fields has helped her in her eventing as well. "You have to slowly build up to galloping," she said, "but now I can hold some pretty tough horses." RJC PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

But now I actually get it. I'm holding them without necessarily pulling harder."

Those nuances, she says, can mean the difference between a controlled gallop and being flat out run away with.

"Working at the track has taught me how to keep horses together at speed," she says. "I know where I want the horse, what the balance should be, what it's supposed to feel like. You have to slowly build up to galloping, but now I can hold some pretty tough horses."

Like all jockeys she's lost a few cat lives in the process. She recounts one recent horror story: "Nobody warned me that this one mare was

very psychotic about her mouth, and she threw her head back and started beating me in the face. She popped my jaw out of the socket then hit me in the throat, so it popped back in."

Despite the fact that her ears were ringing, and she couldn't move her face, Bearden's think-fast instincts were still intact. She hooked an arm under the mare's neck to avoid pulling on her mouth, and eventually the horse stopped fighting and bolted

into a nice breeze. Disaster relatively averted, Bearden got the mare pulled up—then hopped off and galloped three more horses.

Bearden admits that nerves still come into play when she gets on the more unpredictable horses, but she understands that those same instincts of self-preservation help keep her safe.

"Oh yeah, there are days when I think, 'I might die today. I might hit the ground,'" she says. "I still have to sit there and talk myself into it. I can do this. I'm fine. And if there's trouble I'll just bail and save myself for another day. It's not worth the \$12."

Bearden can't afford an injury

because the rest of her day is highly physical as well. By 10:30 she's at her parents' Poplar Place Stables, ready to ride another eight horses or teach all afternoon. This time, however, they're not race horses but her own string of eventers, off-track-Thoroughbred prospects and school horses. On busy days she might be at the barn until 10 p.m. with a 4:30 a.m. alarm clock looming ahead.

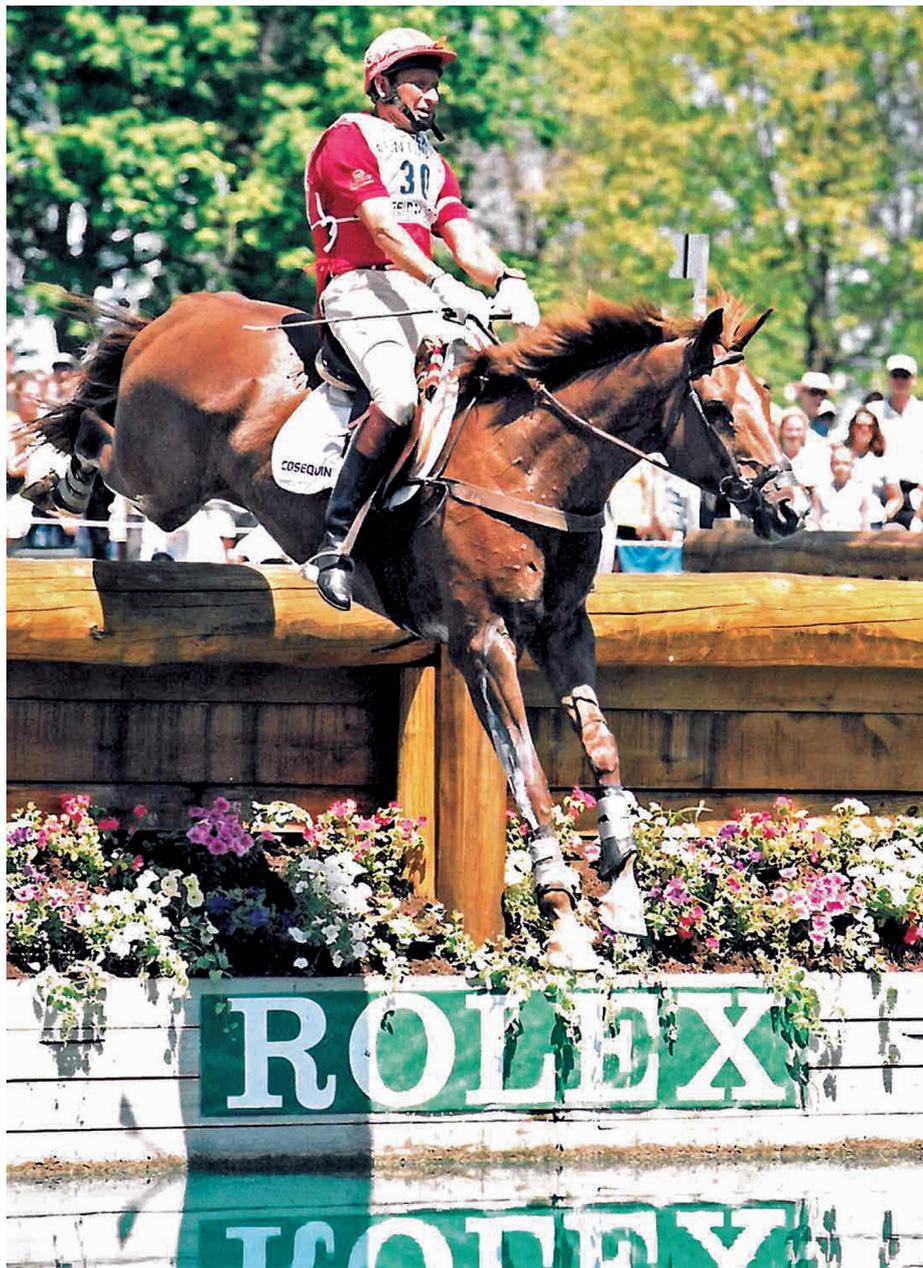
It sounds like a double-life, but Bearden doesn't think of it that way. Watching her attack a cross-country course on her two preliminary-going-on-intermediate level mounts, Pleasant Soul and Miss Fantastic, it's clear that she is a technician of speed. Ripping across the blanched California turf, her horses produce the impression of galloping up a hill: hindquarters engaged, shoulders lifted, ready to jump each obstacle in stride. And her technique works; jumping and speed faults are few and far between on her record.

It all goes back to her track experience, she explains. "For me it's not about speed anymore. I'm focused now on the jumps rather than the speed. A lot of riders you see are rushing for speed; they haul back in front of the fences and then rush off again in between. It's easier for me to come down to the fences at the speed I have."

Bearden would love to come east, where she could try her hand at racing over fences. Steeplechasing is largely a Mid-Atlantic phenomenon—Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania—with a few races run in the Carolinas and some one-offs in Atlanta, Nashville and Lexington, Ky. But Bearden is thankful for the exposure she has.

"I wish it was easier for other people to do because this sort of cross-training has really helped my riding," she says. "For a lot of people out there, it's hard enough to go cross-country schooling or even find a place to do gallop sets. There are some people who really want to do it, but their closest track is hours away.

"But I do think that a lot is being lost," she adds. "It takes a lot of time—getting on different horses, learning to deal with difficult horses and really engraving that muscle memory in your mind."



Two-time world champion Bruce Davidson, shown here aboard Little Tricky, said once you've raced, "everything you do in eventing is in slow motion in comparison." SHANNON BRINKMAN PHOTO

Modern Life In The Fast Lane

In the absence of riding race horses, how are event riders learning to gallop and jump at speed? Some would argue that they aren't learning, or at least not properly.

"Young people today, they don't even bridge their reins," laments Bruce Davidson. "They don't understand connection and balance. The horses are being pushed instead of galloping."

Without true galloping skills, Davidson explains, riders tend to seek out training shortcuts, often to

their detriment.

"It's appalling, really, the bits and rigs you see out so much in our horses' mouths. It makes them afraid to jump into space," he says. "The average young person today just doesn't take the experience of going to a training track and getting on 2-year-olds and galloping them."

Davidson is, of course, best known as an eventing legend. He helped the U.S. team win Olympic gold medals in Montreal (1976) and Los Angeles (1984), as well as silver medals in



“The riders as a whole are better now, but there is something missing in their training,” said Kevin Freeman, shown aboard his 1972 Olympic silver medalist Good Mixture. USEA ARCHIVES PHOTO

“You can’t go round and round a 10-acre field that is level and expect to learn those skills.”

—BRUCE DAVIDSON

1972 and 1996. He’s won Badminton (England), the World Championships twice, and the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day event on multiple occasions.

What often gets buried in the bullet-points of Davidson’s résumé is the fact that he was also a successful steeplechase rider. He contested the granddaddy of timber races, the Maryland Hunt Cup, twice and won the My Lady’s Manor Point-to-Point (Md.) in 1984 riding Stephanie Speakman’s Our Steeplejack.

“It was a big part of my life, and I loved it,” Davidson says. “Back in the ’70s and ’80s almost everybody point-to-pointed, and most people also galloped race horses just to learn about galloping. Then everything you do in eventing is in slow motion in comparison.”

All of the riders on the 1972 U.S. silver medal Olympic eventing team (Davidson, Kevin Freeman, Mike Plumb and Jimmy Wofford) raced on the side. So did many show jumpers, including the late six-time Olympian and two-time silver medalist Frank Chapot, who twice placed in the Maryland Hunt Cup.

“We galloped race horses as a way to get fit,” Davidson says. “We started the day doing two sets of race horses before we went to our own stable.”

Like Bearden, he gets it that many riders simply don’t have the opportunity. “Most people don’t have access to a place to gallop a horse properly,” he says. “You can’t go round and round a 10-acre field that is level and expect to learn those skills.”

And it’s not only the ability to run and

jump, Davidson says, that is being lost. It’s horsemanship as well.

“It taught me a great deal about feeding, soundness, conditioning, how much work a horse needs or can take in conditioning. All that is lost in the world of eventing now,” he says.

Davidson made sure that racing over fences was part of his son Buck’s curriculum. Buck, himself a cornerstone of the U.S. eventing team, has contested several steeplechases and point-to-points.

“You watch the way he goes, the way he rides—he understands galloping a horse,” Bruce says. “It is something that the event world needs to learn. It’s the same thing cross-country as it is in dressage and show jumping. With the right balance and rhythm and connection you can go the distance and jump the jumps with as little interference as possible.”

Good Riding Is Good Riding

Even for riders in close proximity to race horses, it’s difficult to gauge how much desire they have to gallop someone else’s horses for a few extra bucks. Not to mention time—there are only so many hours in a day. And with disciplines requiring more and more specialization, coupled with a growing emphasis on developing not just one but a fleet of horses, every waking moment for an equestrian professional is at a premium.

By today’s standards Freeman would be considered an anomaly. The two-time U.S. Olympic team silver medalist was an amateur rider throughout his eventing career.

“I was probably the last or one of the last part-time riders,” he says. “I’d be away at school or work or whatever, but now it’s a 12-month deal. And to be at the top you have to make that commitment.”

In contrast to the niche specialists who dominate equestrian sport today, Freeman was a true renaissance horseman. From hunter roots and a polo stint in college to side jobs exercising foxhounds and a



“Speed and loss of balance are not synonymous,” said Jimmy Wofford, shown here aboard *The Optimist*, en route to winning the 1986 Rolex Kentucky event.

KAISER PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

post-Olympic show jumping career, Freeman just rode.

But when it came to adrenaline rushes, he had a clear favorite.

“Steeplechasing was the most thrilling thing I’ve ever done on a horse,” Freeman says. “There’s nothing more exciting than riding down to a fence with horses on either side of you trying to be the first to the finish line.”

While in graduate school he would catch-ride horses in point-to-points, often meeting his mount for the first time in the paddock just before the race. “It seemed like a bad idea, but I’d just do it,” he says. “You have to love it.”

He procured some big steeplechase wins, including the Pennsylvania Hunt Cup in 1969, aboard *Stutter Start*. But ever since reading a book about it as a child his Holy Grail had been the

Maryland Hunt Cup, and in 1971 he finally got his chance.

It was the same year that U.S. team show jumper Kathy Kusner became the first woman to ride in the Cup. She had to sue the Maryland Racing Commission for a jockey’s license under the Civil Rights Act. Even then she had to fight tooth and nail for permission from the race’s all-male committee to compete.

Freeman and Kusner went on to win Olympic team silver the following year in their respective disciplines. Freeman’s mount, *Good Mixture*, had a background as varied as his rider’s. After earning less than \$400 in 12 starts at the track, his first owner used him to herd cattle before teaching him to jump. They competed in the hunter ring for a couple years before the ride

was handed to Freeman.

Freeman and “*Mixture*” made it to the Olympic Games just one year after the horse’s first event, a fairy-tale narrative that would never transpire in the modern version of the sport. Freeman is the first to admit that eventing has undergone a dramatic remodeling since he was playing the game.

“They keep changing the sport because of safety considerations, which is laudable, but on the other hand the cross-country is getting to be more like show jumping,” he says. “The sport evolves, and you have to change the type of horses you compete, and there are fewer Thoroughbreds with the steeplechase out of it.”

Freeman wonders if in eventing’s evolution something critical has fallen through the cracks.

“It has always amazed me that there are so many accidents in eventing that weren’t there when we were doing it,” he says. “The riders as a whole are better now, but there is something missing in their training.”

A Balancing Act

Jimmy Wofford praises Freeman as “one of the fastest and smoothest riders” American eventing has ever produced. Not to mention among the most versatile: He recounts the story of watching Freeman cross-country school a “sketchy” advanced horse, edify a troublesome timber horse, then win a puissance class at 6’3”—all in the same day.

“To me, that’s a horseman,” he says. “I always encourage my students to ride any kind of horse. They should be able to show green hunters; they should be able to go in a 1.40-meter jumping class, ride *Prix St. Georges*, school a green hurdle horse.”

Wofford encourages his students to exercise ride, which he believes is the best way to learn what a balanced gallop feels like and how to produce it. He echoes Davidson’s observation that riding race horses

Some Olympic show jumpers and eventers who also rode over timber include:



Kathy Kusner aboard Whackerjack at the 1971 Maryland Hunt Cup. DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO



Michael Plumb (number 13) aboard Oliphant at the 1976 Grand National. DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO



Bruce Davidson (left) aboard Our Steeplejack at the 1984 My Lady's Manor meet. DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO



Frank Chapot (leading) riding Evening Mail at the 1973 Grand National meet. DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO



Kevin Freeman (left) aboard Morning Mac in the 1971 Maryland Hunt Cup. DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO

► Legends & Traditions

nurtures comfort at even the highest speeds required in eventing.

“Eventers don’t ride very fast relative to timber racing and steeplechasing and especially hurdling,” he says. “We’re going less than half that speed, and once a rider has been exposed to that speed on the flat and hopefully over fences, in eventing things start to slow down in the rider’s mind. The horse is already going quite slow in terms of overall speed, but riders don’t perceive that accurately.”

He explains that at high rates of speed the rider’s ability to arrange the horse’s stride is much less of an influence, which is actually a good thing. Fiddling around with steps in front of a fence is counterproductive at best and dangerous at worst.

Instead of micromanaging strides and alternately stepping on the gas and slamming on the brakes, Wofford says, a balanced gallop must become the focus. The concept of rebalancing in front of a

fence becomes irrelevant when a horse is balanced to begin with.

“They shouldn’t be out of self-carriage in show jumping and in dressage obviously, and they shouldn’t be out of self-carriage cross-country,” he says. “If the horse is in self-carriage then all I need to do is select the correct speed for that obstacle because I’ve already done the other part.”

And it’s not just a matter of making time via more efficient jumping. It’s a matter of safety.

“A horse that is out of balance and distracted in the final few strides is not as safe a ride as a horse that has his ears pointed toward the top rail,” says Wofford.

Speed is often equated with danger in cross-country, and modern course design is frequently villainized as being at fault for accidents. Wofford interjects that there are a couple interrelated issues going on.

First, while the speed and dimensions of cross-country obstacles haven’t changed since the 1920s, today’s more technical courses—while not as technical as the reign of skinnies that dominated the sport 10 or 15 years ago—do cause riders to slow down for accuracy questions. Resultantly, they must approach non-technical questions at a higher rate of speed than the required meters-per-minute in order to stay up on the clock.

“And you are now doing this on horses that are being trained more and more to surrender their initiative, and they’re ridden by riders who have less and less experience riding at speed,” Wofford says.

So, the question circles back to: How do riders learn to ride at speed if they don’t have access to a track? Wofford has a few suggestions.

First, he says, riders must be disciplined about balance during their conditioning canters.

“Teach your horse to do its conditioning work in self-carriage,” he says. “Don’t use a sharper bit just to control him, so that when you lean backwards on the reins that he shortens his stride. Teach your horse to stay in self-carriage throughout the range of his speed from a very, very slow canter to quite a fast gallop. That can be done if riders will concentrate on it.”

Meanwhile, riders must be disciplined about developing their own galloping position. For competition he advises a 90-degree angle behind the knee when seated for the preliminary level, then for every star level higher their stirrups should get one inch shorter.

“And that’s competitive level,” he says, “so they should be doing their trot sets and their slow cantering work with their knees almost touching above the withers.”

Warning: It isn’t easy. “Riders who have never galloped on the track or done that kind of work, they have to sneak up on it—about one hole in your stirrup leather a month—because it’s



Nicolette Merle-Smith still foxhunts her event horse Ratatouille, even as he begins to compete at the upper levels. “My boy ‘2E’ would not be the event horse he is today without the six years he’s been foxhunting,” she said. SHANNON BRINKMAN PHOTO

going to hurt,” Wofford advises. “It really stresses the muscles you need for your fitness.”

Second, Wofford advocates measuring a minute-long speed trap including a straightforward galloping fence appropriate to one’s level. “They should approach at what they think is that speed, and as they go by the starting point start their watch and maintain that speed up to, over and away from the jump,” he says.

A preliminary horse and rider, for instance, should measure off a 520-meter speed trap that includes a straightforward log or table requiring no arrangement from the rider and practice approaching that obstacle in self-carriage.

“They should approach in rhythm, jump in rhythm, and land in rhythm and at the speed they left the ground. Most riders go a little blank in the air, and they land, wait, take a stride and meanwhile the horse has wandered, lost balance and slowed down,” he says.

He notes that attacking the landing, while not important at the lower levels, becomes more critical at intermediate and advanced. The fastest riders shave off precious seconds not in fits and starts but with consistency.

No one should go careening around cross-country at a racing pace, obviously, but Wofford advises watching footage of the English Grand National or the Maryland Hunt Cup for a lesson in putting the pedal to the metal safely. The horses are going twice as fast over massive jumps, and yet they’re jumping well. How?

Enter Wofford’s refrain: “Speed and loss of balance are not synonymous.”

Hunting For Alternatives

Run-and-jump instinct clearly isn’t just important for riders, but for horses as well.

Nicolette Merle-Smith is a staunch believer in the power of foxhunting to get her horses fit, physically and mentally, to event. The young professional trainer, who splits her time between Virginia and Florida, is the daughter of two avid foxhunters and practically grew up in the field. The

evidence is in her own cross-country style: She is a lithe, gutsy rider who understands how to be supportive without getting in the way.

She credits her one-star horse Ratatouille’s fifth leg and eyes-on-the-prize attitude to the hours upon hours they have invested on the heels of hounds.

“Let’s just say my boy ‘2E’ would not be the event horse he is today without

the six years he’s been foxhunting,” Merle-Smith says.

Her homebred Trakehner gelding, who jumped double clear around two CCI*s this fall, started his eventing career as an opinionated, nappy grump. On a regular basis he threw tantrums during his dressage tests, refused to leave the start box, and would spend a minute or longer rearing and spinning at the water complex.

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At their first combined test, Merle-Smith recalls, “I have vivid memories of him rearing at X in the dressage arena and trying to spin to leave the devil’s sandbox.”

After six seasons of foxhunting all over the country, 2E gradually came around. “What I particularly like about foxhunting, for him, is that it forces him to keep going and keep doing something that he might otherwise object to: trotting through this creek, climbing this mountain, jumping this weird homemade obstacle,” she says. “Because the forward energy from all the other horses is pulling him along, he has learned to accept that we will just keep marching forward.”

By the time he moved up to preliminary last spring he was a different horse. “He was absolutely prepared, and guess what? He shot out of that start box with all the confidence and rage of a natural disaster to tackle that course,” she says.

When they got to the 6AB combination, two max left-to-right angled tables, he jumped in so big to the first element that he unseated Merle-Smith to the left. She felt sure that with his right shoulder exposed, and his rider hanging halfway out of the tack, he

would run out at the B element.

“But he didn’t!” Merle-Smith says with a laugh. “He kept his forward momentum and jumped me right back into the saddle over B. My horse packed me through a combination at his very first prelim run. I couldn’t believe it and immediately broke into tears.”

While many event riders wouldn’t dream of hunting their horse in the lead-up to a CCI lest they slip on an acorn and sprain a suspensory, hunting remained a part of 2E’s program throughout.

“My plan is to continue foxhunting through the upper levels, as it is definitely my favorite fitness program,” says Merle-Smith, equating a good running hunt to the equivalent of a one-star cross-country round—if not more. “It keeps him sound and happy. He could have galloped around his last CCI* at least two more times. He wasn’t breathing [hard] five minutes later and was horribly offended that we were using ice water on him.

“It’s hard to believe he’s fit enough for a true long-format three-day,” she adds. “And if we can go foxhunting the month before Rolex in a few years, we will be happy campers!”

Jennie Brannigan (leading, aboard Where’s The Beef) has found “being out of your comfort zone, doing something dangerous and figuring out how to be as safe as you can be,” while riding race horses has been an enriching experience and made her a better event rider. TOD MARKS PHOTO

Finding A Way To Fit It In

We owe it to ourselves—and our horses—to become the best riders and horsemen we can be. It’s not always easy or convenient, but opportunities for continuing education exist for those who seek them out.

Four-star event rider Jennie Brannigan is one of the busiest riders on the circuit. In 2016 she competed 24 horses in 26 events, yet she regularly seeks out track experience.

For Brannigan the payoff of riding race horses has not only been increased fitness of the body but also of the mind. In her opinion, improvement comes from actually getting your hands dirty, diving headfirst into the fray.

“It’s about taking yourself out of your comfort zone, practicing being tough and practicing getting the job done,” she says.

Not unlike racing, she acknowledges that eventing has its risks. “Getting up every day, knowing the danger of it, hearing people tell me I’m dumb

► Racing Toward The Future

Regina Welsh is the former executive director of the North American Point-to-Point Association, formed in 2001 as a grassroots effort to revive enthusiasm for steeplechasing from the foxhunting sector.

It staged races that were safe and accessible to everyday riders with a need for speed, like the Field Master's Chase. In this event the field followed a pacesetter over a timber course until they cleared the final hurdle, at which point the pacesetter peeled off, and the competitors raced to the finish. There was a yearly championship at Morven Park (Va.) for juniors and adults.

The race was a safe way to teach riders to rate their speed in a group and keep competitive urges in check. "If we left it up to them, they'd be in the next county when the flag dropped!" Welsh says.

By 2012 many foxhunts had taken such point-to-points into their own hands, spurred by the momentum created by NAPPA. Meanwhile junior races were growing in popularity, and Welsh founded U.S. Pony Racing.

USPR's most high-profile events are its Shetland pony races, staged at major horse shows like Devon (Pa.) and the Washington International (D.C.). It's always a crowd favorite: a blur of crayon-hued silks and bushy-maned ponies going hellbent for leather around the track. The jumps aren't much more than speed bumps, but inevitably there's at least one pony in the bunch who goes adorably rogue in protest.

They're competitions, but they're also paid performances that help



Junior riders like Abigail Murphy, who won the medium pony division on her Kiss My Sass, get a taste of racing in the Field Master's Chase series held at races like the 2016 Grand National (Md.).
DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO

fund the educational undertakings that are at the root of USPR's *raison d'être*. The LLC provides low- and no-cost steeplechase racing clinics around the country, teaching young riders the nuts and bolts of riding at speed with emphasis on safety and well-rounded mounts.

"We break them up into ability levels," Welsh explains. She'll take the little ones: "We're just working on staying on the pony and galloping together. It's taught a lot of kids who were maybe scared to be confident riding in a group."

Meanwhile active jockeys offer helpful critiques and pro tips to the older youth. In addition to in-the-saddle training, they practice on an Equicizer, a mechanical riding simulator, and go over race protocol such as rules and how to enter a race.

To compete USPR must see the

rider and mount together ahead of time to approve them and make sure they're up to par on safety. In addition to demonstrating adequate control of their mount, riders must wear protective vests under their silks, of course, as well as an approved helmet. In turn all ponies and horses are required to wear an overgirth and neck strap.

"Safety is a huge factor, and we are very adamant about that," Welsh says.

There are opportunities for up-and-coming riders in the racing world, like the National Steeplechase Foundation's annual International Developing Rider Ireland Trip.

Every summer Welsh takes a handpicked group of young riders actively galloping and/or racing for NSF trainers overseas to ride under the tutelage of steeplechase legends like Tommy Stack, best known for piloting Red Rum to three Grand National

victories, and Gordon Elliott, who entered the racing world at age 13 and was 29 when his first Grand National entry won at Aintree against 33-to-1 odds. While on the Emerald Isle they also visit stud farms and the races at Galway and Courtmacsherry.

Almost every year at least one USPR graduate goes on to pursue racing as a profession. Other young riders apply the skills they've learned to other disciplines, or keep a foot planted in both worlds. The 2016 NSF Ireland trip participants were all active eventers, show jumpers or foxhunters.

"Riding at speed is something that is important to give a whirl. And also," Welsh says, underlining the most fundamental component of successful riding: keeping a horse between oneself and the ground, "it teaches you how to hang on!"

► Legends & Traditions

for doing it—every day I’m going to be uncomfortable, and every day I’m going to continue figuring out how to get comfortable with it,” she says. “You go outside your comfort zone and ask questions and figure out how to deal with yourself when you’re uncomfortable.”

Brannigan’s racing mentor is Michael Matz, a three-time Olympic show jumper and 1986 World Championships team gold medalist who’s now a race horse trainer. As the latter, he’s best known for a 2012 Belmont (N.Y.) win with Union Rags and a 2006 Kentucky Derby win with Barbaro.

“He genuinely looks out for me and doesn’t want me to get hurt,” she says. “And he has a lot of information to share. I wouldn’t have the same experience at the end of the day riding for someone else.”

After galloping for a couple years Brannigan applied for her apprentice jockey license and made her debut in March 2015. She finished fourth in an allowance turf race at the Aiken Spring Steeplechase (S.C.) riding Where’s The Beef in the turquoise and white silks of Tim and Nina Gardner’s Welcome Here Farm.

“Foxhunting, racing—a lot of people don’t have access to that. But it was something I always wanted to do,” she says. “I’ve always had a pipe dream of riding in the Maryland Hunt Cup, and I’m not going to say that it is going to happen this year but ... we’ll see.”

She quotes Phillip Dutton’s belief that every moment spent in the saddle is valuable. For her, riding race horses, “being out of your comfort zone, doing something dangerous and figuring out how to be as safe as you can be,” has been an enriching experience that has made her a better event rider.

Plus, she says, it’s just fun. “I have a hunger for doing different things,” she says. “That’s just how I am.”

One more perk of the job for riders who, in addition to thirst for experience, are hungry for a way to support their own horse habit: When it comes to part-time jobs, galloping race horses sure beats waiting tables.

Four-star eventer Holly Hudspeth recalls exercise riding in Middleburg, Va., and Ocala, Fla., for a few years in the late ’90s and early 2000s while training with



“Nowadays people have these groomed tracks, and they’re learning to ride in the ring,” said Holly Hudspeth, aboard Last Monarch. “We need to be getting kids out there, galloping up and down hills.” SHANNON BRINKMAN PHOTO

David and Karen O’Connor.

One of the most valuable lessons she learned came from Doug Fout, a steeplechase trainer and brother of 2000 Sydney Olympic bronze medalist eventer Nina Fout.

“We schooled the steeplechase horses over the hurdles, and that was a little bit intimidating,” Hudspeth says. “We’re so used to setting up the horses to the jumps, and you didn’t do that.”

Doug Fout was insistent about sitting very still on the approach to fences, letting the horses sort it out for themselves. “He was very, very picky about that,” Hudspeth says. “Horses don’t want to fall down. When we were schooling them, and we were schooling them quite fast, we were told not to move at all. If things went wrong you’d

just hunker down and stay still.”

She also learned techniques to manage horses that were hot or strong. “Horses that pull, what happens a lot now is that people end up over-biting the horses. When you gallop at the track you learn to ride at speed but with more in your hands than you’re used to. You squeeze your knees, put your hands down and brace on their neck,” she says.

Doug took Hudspeth out foxhunting with Orange County. Jumping in and out of fencelines across tough terrain was another experience she drew on as she advanced up the levels of eventing.

“Nowadays people have these groomed tracks, and they’re learning to ride in the ring,” Hudspeth says. “We need to be getting kids out there, galloping up and down hills.”