



ALL THE PRETTY HORSES

SINCE THE DAYS OF THE MILWAUKEE POLO CLUB,
WISCONSIN HAS HAD A VIBRANT HORSE CULTURE, WITH
RIDERS, TRAINERS, BREEDERS AND EVEN THERAPISTS.

BY SUSAN NUSSER ~ PHOTOS BY PETER DIANTONI

Christy Thatcher and her horse, Webster.

S

Sehrena has trouble making eye contact. Shy and soft-spoken, when she answers questions, she looks to the ground or off to the side.

But she can gaze long and lovingly at Sully, a Percheron/Appaloosa cross-breed, her horse for today's lesson. It's cold, the first bite of winter in the October air, and Sehrena shrinks into what meager warmth her jeans and thin blue hoodie can provide.

Sully is hitched to the rail outside the indoor ring at Cedarburg's Black Star Farm, which houses the distinctively named Helping Hands Healing Hooves and its therapeutic riding program. With a soft-bristled brush, Sehrena flicks away the dust from her horse's dark-brown coat. As she gently brushes the bony, itchy parts of Sully's head, he turns into her hands, closing his eyes. She smoothes his forelock, patting it neatly into place on his forehead.

"His ears are so soft," she quietly marvels.

Sehrena is African-American, as are her fellow riders, Tazia and Chardonnay. They are classmates at St. Rose Residence on Milwaukee's Northwest Side, and St. Rose brings them here for the therapeutic program. These are girls whose still-young lives have been woefully short of trustworthy relationships. But as the girls ride across the matted grass and toward their riding instructor, they seem to be enjoying the experience, and just perhaps, beginning to bond with their horses.

If it seems surprising to find black teens from an urban residential home getting riding lessons, it's just one indication of how varied – and widespread – the horse culture of Wisconsin is. Sully of the dewy eyes and dark coat is just one of hundreds

of thousands of horses in the state. Precisely how many is something of a mystery. A 2008 census by the National Agricultural Statistics Services put the number at 120,000, while a recent UW-River Falls study estimated there were some 600,000 horses in Wisconsin. The true number, says Liv Sandberg, an expert on the subject with the UW-Extension, is somewhere between the two.

The River Falls study found about 78 percent of the horses are used for pleasure, and that horseback riding is the state's fourth-most popular recreational activity. Seventeen percent – around 700,000 – of Wisconsin residents go horseback riding at least once a year. That's more than those who own hunting licenses in one of the prime deer hunting states in America.

The study found that 8 percent of Wisconsinites own horses, which generates nearly \$3 billion in sales, 12,000 to 14,000 jobs, and \$700 million in income.

When talking about horse breeding and riding, states like Kentucky and California usually get top billing. Wisconsin is hardly in their class, yet it has a fairly rich history in its own right. From Robert Uihlein and the Milwaukee Polo Club to the gold medals of Beezie Madden for show jumping at the 2004 and 2008 Olympics, this is a region that has long had a love affair with horses.

The Trainer ★

In the lingering lake mist of a cool August morning, Chrissy Hollnagel stands in the middle of the riding ring at Willow Run Stables in Mequon, preparing student Amelia Pfleger to ride the course.

Her horse, a small chestnut of indeterminate breeding named Winston, waits patiently, and is ready to go. But Amelia isn't. The painted jumps are low and unthreatening, but the distance between them makes the course deceptively difficult. After considerable instruction from Hollnagel, Amelia turns Winston toward the first line of verticals and they take off. Winston is having no trouble jumping the fences, but Amelia, who's not completely in control of either his speed or tempo, is off balance – alternately a little behind or pushing herself out of the saddle a little early. Winston resolutely carries his erratic passenger around the course while Hollnagel calls out suggestions.

Red-faced and frustrated, Amelia returns

to the middle of the ring. Hollnagel goes over the ride with her while patting Winston's neck, letting him know he's done a good job. The second time around, Amelia gets a little behind on one long stretch and Hollnagel helps her get organized by counting out the strides. On each round, a little problem shows up in a different place. Winston gamely canters around, trusting his young partner will figure it out, and she mostly does. They quit while they're ahead, and Hollnagel sends Amelia and her tucked horse back to the barn.

Hollnagel, now 30, got into training horses and riders as a natural adjunct of her own horse riding. As a kid, she was horse crazy, and like many such children started out riding with her local Pony Club. She took lessons from local instructors, including Anne Jennings of Pigeon Creek Farm, a past member of the U.S. three-day event team, a discipline often described as the triathlon of horse sports. By age 9, Hollnagel began competitive riding, and as an adult, she became a three-day event competitor.

When it was time for college, Hollnagel took her horse with her to Lexington, Ky., where her father worked at the Keeneland racetrack. After college, she moved to Ocala, Fla., where she trained for a month with internationally ranked, four-star competitor Ralph Hill. It was a revelation.

"A whole world opened up I never knew

existed," she says. In Ocala, she was surrounded by some of the most accomplished riders and talented horses in her discipline. Still, in Wisconsin, Hollnagel was able to build her teaching and training business and stay close to her family.

By late morning, she is finally able to get on her own horse, a 4-year-old thoroughbred named Jimmy. Dark and elegant, Jimmy canters rhythmically around the neatly fenced ring. Hollnagel is small and light, yet perches up and off the saddle to further reduce the weight on Jimmy's back, so he's free to stretch down with his head and relax into his stride.

Three-day eventing tests a horse's precision, stamina, bravery and athleticism. It's mentally taxing, requiring horses to compete in three different specialties: dressage (showcasing the horse's demeanor, obedience and gait); cross-country (a series of jumps and ditches in a natural trail setting); and timed show jumping (a set of artificial jumps in an enclosed ring).

Few of the top riders in this sport compete on American thoroughbreds like Jimmy, choosing instead their cousins from England and Ireland, which were bred for cooler temperaments and long-term soundness. But those horses are expensive, and so Hollnagel, like many great riders who've gone before her, has to train up a lesser horse.

Jimmy is an ex-racehorse whose short,

stressful career has left him with ulcers and anxiety. Though athletic and talented, his nerves may prevent him from reaching his full potential. Hollnagel was hoping to start Jimmy in low-level competitions this summer, but now realizes it will be at least another year, if not two, before he'll be ready.

When she first started developing horses like Jimmy, Hollnagel recalls, "every horse I had, I thought was going to make it." Now she knows better.

Jimmy seems soothed by the rocking motion of his own canter. That canter is key to his jumping ability. The challenge of riding over jumps, whether in the ring or on a cross-country course, is developing a sense of timing that allows horse and rider to work together. The rider knows the course, knows the best place for the horse to take off, knows how fast or slow the horse needs to go. It's the rider's job to get the horse to the base of the jump, prepared to explode. It's the horse's job to get over the fence. Without that rhythmic canter keeping the beat for both of them, horse and rider end

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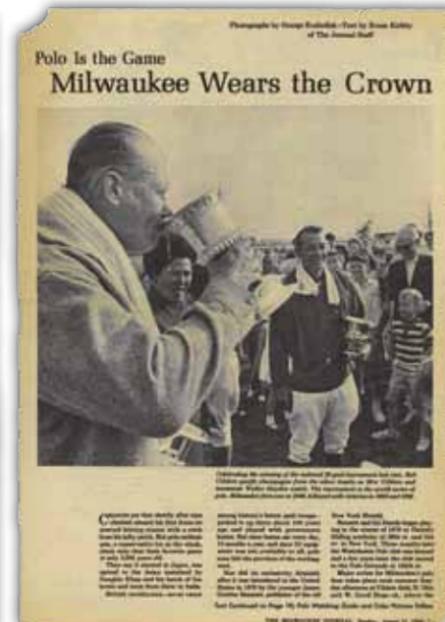
up dancing to different music.

Jimmy seems happy to canter all day. His head lowers as he relaxes. He snorts in rhythm with his stride. Hollnagel brings him back to a walk to catch his breath. Alert but steady, his ears flick, picking up sounds and motion from all around the ring.

Calmness is not natural to horses. The animals evolved on the Eurasian Steppes, the vast treeless grassland of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, on wide-open plains where flight was their only defense. Panic is their natural response to stimuli. A horse like Jimmy, without the confident guidance of Hollnagel, might otherwise be spooked by the slightest twitter of birds.

Every winter, Hollnagel tries traveling to warmer states to join her more-competitive colleagues at winter horsemen's congregations. They gather in places like Ocala or Aiken, S.C., or Southern Pines, N.C. Currently, she's training with Will Faudree, whom she brought to Wisconsin to teach a clinic to her students. She hasn't yet decided if she's aiming for the four-star ranking held by riders like Faudree.

AMERICAN CAMELOT In earlier days, photos of the Milwaukee Polo Club, and two pages from a Milwaukee Journal feature.





SADDLE UP
One study found that 17 percent of Wisconsin residents go horseback riding at least once a year.



Without constant exposure to riders and horses at that level, her skills may develop too slowly.

"It's hard to make it work from here," she admits. She has to keep pressuring herself to be better, and without those trips south, as disruptive as they are for a married woman, she couldn't stay motivated. "You just have to make it work," she says. "You have to be selfish."

Jimmy is ready to start jumping. He canters to the fence and launches himself, but is spooked by his own strength. Three times higher than he needs to be, his back

is arched like a cat, his knees snapped up to his chin, his nose poked down between them as if he doesn't dare take his eyes off the jump. Secure and lightly balanced, Hollnagel stays with him, and when he lands on the other side, she quickly steers him into the edge of the ring, using the fence to help slow him down. Jimmy goes over the jump twice more, and Hollnagel ends the lesson with a pat and a warm, "good boy, good boy."

As far as Hollnagel knows, she's the only rider in the metro area competing at her level in three-day eventing. While

that makes it harder to develop her skills, it's a huge benefit to her business. In Aiken or Ocala, she could join her peers at local shows, but she'd have to compete for students. So she's resigned to her solitary training, and to transporting her horse to the Kettle Moraine in a trailer to do trot sets in the snow.

"It could be worse," she says. "We could be in Alaska."

The Polo Set ★

The storied history of our polo plutocrats began in 1952, when Robert Uihlein started the Milwaukee Polo Club. Uihlein was CEO of Schlitz Brewing, then the second-largest brewer in the world, and the Uihleins were the first family of Milwaukee.

The matches were at Uihlein Field (now defunct, but then located at about 70th Street and Good Hope Road). Matches drew 3,000 to 5,000 spectators. In 1976, *The Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that more than 1 million people had watched the team play.

Jim Huber, the polo club's current president, calls Uihlein one of the great patrons of the sport. The Milwaukee Polo Club hosted teams from as far away as Santa Barbara, Calif., and New York. Uihlein hired

professional players from Mexico and Argentina for the team. For young, local talent, he might arrange a job at his brewery to allow a player enough time to improve his game. In a sport where fewer than 50 players in its entire history have attained a handicap of 10 (they start at minus-2, and anyone at 5 or better is considered a professional), Milwaukee once boasted multiple players with handicaps of 8.

The city played host to the National 20-Goal Tournament (winning it twice), and the quality of competition was so good here that in 1963, the Cowdray Park team traveled from Sussex, England, to challenge Brew City. In preparation, *The Milwaukee Journal* reported, Mrs. Uihlein stocked the refrigerator of the team's borrowed Lake Drive home with eggs, cheese and "plenty of Schlitz beer."

Milwaukee, the *The Sentinel* declared in July 1964, had become the "summertime polo capital of America."

But those days are long gone. After the death of the elder Uihlein in 1976, his sons moved their polo-playing operation to Florida. What was left of the club merged with one from Oconomowoc, and their playing field now sits off Highway VV, just west of Merton.

According to Huber, who's been a full-time polo player since he retired from practicing law in 2003, the club draws about 300 spectators to its Sunday-afternoon games.

On a Sunday in August, the visiting team is from Duluth, Minn. But as often happens in a sport with too few players, only two Duluth members have made the trip. Standard polo matches are played four-on-four, so Milwaukee fills out the visiting squad with its own riders, and Huber supplies the extra horses.

Despite its upper-class image, says Huber, it's not the expense of polo that new players find daunting. It's the time commitment. Most of those who play are second-generation. They've grown up in the sport and are accustomed to devoting weekends to it. Huber's daughter, Kathy Coakley, says polo is what her family has always done on Sundays. Now, with children of her own, she's back on the field with daughter Maggie, pitching in as grooms for Huber. Too little to help with this, Maggie's brother has

been banished to the scoreboard, where he will post the numbers for the match. His father and the family dog, perhaps in a gesture of male solidarity, eventually join him.

Milwaukee wins the game by two goals. If Duluth hadn't been able to send anyone this weekend, Huber says, the team would have scrimmaged instead, probably with a similar scoreline.

Because this is Milwaukee and not Palm Beach, the food tent is serving beer and brats. After the game, the riders linger, ready to answer questions from fans. Kids and dogs take over the field, and Huber's granddaughter is giving pony rides on Matté, one of Huber's even-tempered mares. He trains all his own horses – picking them up at racetracks in places like Nebraska and Iowa. Some work out. Some don't.

Once the season is over, Huber will give his 20 or so horses a rest. Then, like most full-time polo players, he'll head down to Aiken to train. In Wisconsin, he says, riders can develop their skills, but, "you're not going to have the competition here that you'd have in Florida."

Beezie Madden, 46, knows this all too well. A two-time Olympic gold medalist in team show jumping and the first woman in the world to pass the \$1 million mark in competitive winnings, the Mequon native started riding at the old Milwaukee Hunt Club in River Hills. When the club folded, she moved with many of its members to the farm of her parents, Joe and Kathy Patton.

"I wouldn't call it the mecca of show jumping," Madden laughs when asked to describe Wisconsin. Madden moved to New Jersey for her senior year of high school so she could compete at the top level of her sport while still eligible as a junior rider. Wisconsin, she says, was a good place to start, largely because she wasn't competing against 50 kids every weekend, and because she didn't have the six or seven ponies you'd need to compete at the higher levels of show jumping.

It was "more of a down-home, take care of your own horse," kind of place, she says.

She learned to do everything herself, and though she left the state because she "got hungry for the East Coast shows and the competition," she believes the do-it-

yourself ethos in Wisconsin makes a rider more of a horseman. Now, she says, she doesn't have time to take care of her own horses. She's turned into the kind of rider who waits by the ring for her horses to be brought to her.

The Cowgirl ★

On a chilly day in late October, just after getting home from school, Christy Thatcher is all business, striding from her family's Germantown farmhouse and heading to the old cow barn that stables three horses for Christy and her sisters. Bee Leagured, Christy's 15-year-old quarter horse, which she calls Webster, pokes his head into the barn from his paddock, while his two stablemates crowd up against him.

Christy tugs the chestnut horse into the barn by his halter and clips him to the crossies for grooming and tacking up. She's wearing her bright-blue official 4-H anorak, on which all of her championships have been embroidered. In pride of place over the breast pocket is the 4-H State Horsemanship Award for 2008, and descending down her back, in order of importance: Grand Champion in Hunt Seat, Reserve Champion in Pleasure Driving, and top-10 distinctions in Western Pleasure and Western Horsemanship.

Christy, a senior at Germantown High School, won the 4-H championships three weeks ago, and in the waning light of October, she and Webster are practicing for their last competition of the season – the state intercollegiate championships. But she's also looking beyond Saturday's competition to her winter horse sport: mounted shooting.

"We dress up in olden days costumes and I have my pistol and I go galloping and shooting," she says. "Everyone just goes in and shoots. It takes about two hours."

Christy's father is responsible for her involvement in this anachronistic pastime. Last winter, after hearing about the upcoming competition, he came home and told Christy he needed to borrow her saddle and horse. But where Webster goes, Christy goes, and in that first competition, she took fourth place, even though she'd never before fired a gun. Her father, who doesn't know how to ride, took 11th.

"It worked out," she says cheerfully, jogging Webster around the ring. "We had the right horse."

In the gathering darkness, Christy's

THE CLUBS

WISCONSIN QUARTER HORSE ASSOCIATION: About 800-1,000 members. The state has an estimated 40,000 quarter horses.

4-H CLUB: Some 6,000 kids are

involved with horse projects, far more than the number for dairy projects. At last September's State Expo at State Fair Park, more than 800 competitors qualified by winning a blue ribbon at their county show.

AMERICAN SADDLEBRED HORSE ASSOCIATION: More than 3,500 registered members of this national group are in Wisconsin. Their annual show in July at State Fair Park attracts more

than 300 exhibitors. **WISCONSIN HUNTER JUMPER ASSOCIATION:** With some 300 members, it hosts six shows, which typically draw more than 100 competitors each.



Susan Nusser talks horse sense on WUWM's "Lake Effect," May 6 at 10 a.m. and again at 11 p.m.

bright-pink helmet stands out against the black branches of the trees separating the tidy riding ring from her family's restored farmhouse. Ambling along in a typical quarter horse jog, Webster's hooves softly whoosh into the crushed stone footing of the ring. Christy nudges his side with the heel of her boot, and he skips into a canter.

After his warmup, Webster is negotiating the obstacles in the middle of the ring. He's backing through the PVC pipes arranged in an L. His head a little too high, he's off-kilter, and at the turn, he kicks the pipes out of place. Christy moves on, walking him up and over a wooden footbridge, his hooves clomping loudly. They are old friends, the execution of these obstacles a much-repeated conversation between them.

Webster's shuffling gait, so comfortable for moving cows over long distances, which is what quarter horses were bred to do, means he doesn't have the bouncy, rhythmic canter horses need if they want to get up and over fences. But it's Webster's all-around quality that Christy likes, not his jumping ability.

"So many people have told me he's peaked, that I need an upgrade," she says. "But I just keep proving that he's the horse for me."

Christy wants to be a large-animal veterinarian, so her work with Webster is also a kind of preprofessional training. Though UW-Madison is her first choice for college, the University of Kansas just sent a recruitment letter offering tuition

abatment to anyone who goes into large-animal practice after graduation. Small-animal and specialty equine vets are much better paid; those are lucrative fields. As a result, the number of large-animal vets has shrunk so dramatically that there is now a critical shortage of veterinarians for the nation's livestock and feed animals.

Finished with her ride, Christy dismounts and leads Webster back to the barn. The horses are Christy's project; she does the riding and the chores, but her father helps out sometimes. She manages to squeeze in a ride every day, between school, band practice, her job at Farm and Fleet, 4-H and Future Farmers of America.

Webster sighs as Christy pulls off his saddle. Outside, bands of indigo creep up the eastern horizon as night falls. Inside, little tokens of her life are artfully arranged on a bulletin board posted in the barn: photos of her with Webster, small banners of her championships, a poster of a quarter horse, and one of Ireland, where Christy will be going soon on a family trip.

Still, as the busy teenager clicks off the light, leaving Webster and his two stablemates to their hay and grain, she confesses that what she really loves is "just plugging around" on her horse.

The Therapists ★

Sehrena's lesson is passing too quickly. She and Tazia and Chardonmay get just one hour a week. The therapeutic rationale for the riding lessons runs something

along the lines of Winston Churchill's philosophy: "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."

The Helping Hands program is more accustomed to working with the outside of a person, typically offering physical and occupational therapy to riders with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and autism. Maintaining balance on a moving horse is one of the only ways a wheelchair-bound person can develop core strength.

The students from St. Rose are the first to whom the program has provided behavioral and emotional therapy. At the very least, the school can use the riding lessons as leverage, an incentive for better behavior from the girls.

Sehrena leads the girls in their warmup. She and Chardonmay stretch up to the horses' ears and back to the tops of their tails. They cross over and touch their toes and reach up toward the sky. But Tazia is not interested in stretching. When the students don't listen, Deb Goelz, the riding instructor at Black Star Farm, tries to "build up" the other girls, hoping the peer pressure will get them to cooperate.

"Sehrena and Chardonmay," she calls out. "I appreciate that you're listening."

Unrepentant, Tazia complains about the cold and wants to know when they're going to start trotting. The other girls are cold, too. Their hands are stiff, making it difficult to hold the reins, and the ballet flats on Sehrena's feet not only offer little protection from the cold, but are dangerous. Without a proper heel, her feet could slip through the stirrups and entangle her if she falls off.

Goelz's goal for these riders is the same as Hollnagel's, Thatcher's and even Beezie Madden's – controlling the pace, tempo and direction of the horse. Goelz breeds and trains the horses herself, and they're even-tempered and mostly calm. The horses understand their job, says Linda Michalica, the program's fundraiser and marketing director.

"You can have a horse that's ballistic in the paddock," Michalica says, "but when the rider is on, they're controlled because they understand how precious that cargo is."

Goelz would like the girls from St. Rose to stay with her longer. But the goal of St. Rose is to place them with families as soon as possible. Then they're gone.

"It's unfortunate," says Goelz. "We get them riding pretty good, and then they



THERAPY...
Using horses to heal at the Helping Hands program.



... AND TRAINING
Chrissy Hollnagel and her horse taking flight.

SHE REACHES UP TOWARD HIS EARS, RUNNING HER HAND DOWN HIS NECK. THEN SEHRENA SAYS "THANK YOU" TO NO ONE IN PARTICULAR AND RUNS TO THE VAN THAT WILL TAKE HER BACK TO THE CITY.

move on." So far, no one who's come to Black Star Farm through the St. Rose program has ever returned once she left the residence.

The papery yellow leaves of the birch trees flutter in the cold. On the far side of the ring, the girls prepare to trot. At the head of each horse is a program volunteer, a teenage girl whose job is to support the rider and control the horse if something goes wrong.

Sehrena, Chardonmay and Tazia start out sitting up straight and correct as they trot down the long side, but the horses' bouncy gaits are uncomfortable. The girls end up curling in their shoulders, trying to control the movement of their bodies. Goelz watches them and sighs. She's worried about their

footwear and wishes they had gloves.

But by now, the girls don't care that their hands are frozen, their feet are cold, and their riding style is ungainly. They are hanging on to the saddle horns and laughing. Goelz's big-hearted horses trot the length of the ring, their riders' engaged faces lifted into the slap of cold air.

Then the lesson is over. With darkness closing in, Sehrena untacks Sully back at the hitching rail. From a shallow pan, he licks up some special treats, thoughtfully crunching them between his giant molars. When he's done, a volunteer leads him back to the paddock.

With the gate open and Sully about to slip away, Sehrena darts over for one last goodbye. Her feet, vulnerable in their

flimsy shoes, are wedged between the deep mud at the edge of the paddock and Sully's soup-plate hooves. She reaches up toward his ears, running her hand down the top of his neck. Then Sehrena says "thank you" to no one in particular and runs down the driveway to the van that will take her back to the city.

Goelz and Michalica and the rest of the Helping Hands staff watch her go, shouting goodbyes to the other girls who follow Sehrena to the car. The training is making a difference, the staff feels. Almost everything that happens here is some kind of triumph. Sometimes it's a wheelchair-bound kid who, after his first time on a horse, beamed at his volunteer and said, "Now I know what it feels like to run." Sometimes it's the more subtle process by which a young girl with serious emotional challenges learns to trust by starting with a horse.

"We sob," says Michalica, explaining their response. "We cry often here." ■

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THE CRIMINAL

AMID THE PALMY DAYS of Milwaukee's polo-playing prime, the city was connected to the criminal legend of Silas Jayne. Jayne was a tough Chicago operative who became the universal suspect for every crime that happened around the Windy City and Milwaukee equestrian scenes. If he offered to buy your horse, Chicago horsemen would advise you to sell. Because if Jayne couldn't have it, he would kill it.

Jayne was finally convicted of conspiracy in the death of his brother, George Jayne. But Silas was also suspected in such Chicago crimes as the murder of John and Anton Schuessler and their friend Bobby Peterson in 1955; the disappearance from Indiana Dunes State Park of three women who had previously been seen riding at George's stable; the disappearance of Helen Brach, the candy heiress who never returned from a 1977 visit to the Mayo Clinic; and a string of arsons that destroyed the farms of his competitors, including one at Homer Adcock's Nimrod Farm in Waukesha County, which killed 22 horses.

Even though he died in 1987, Jayne's influence was so pervasive that people are still afraid to discuss him, for fear his associates might retaliate. Said one local horseman who refuses to speak by name about Jayne: "There were a lot of fires around here." Jayne, he suspects, was behind many of them.