

Karen Ososki

Bozeman, Montana

RI *Why did you decide to become a riding instructor?*

KO Becoming a riding instructor was just the perfect way to combine my life-long passion¹ for horses, learning and teaching. Teaching is a win-win scenario for me since I am able to make a living while sharing my knowledge, enthusiasm and love for the horse with others. (Did I just write “make a living”?) Being an instructor today is more important to me than ever because I am able to promote healthy and harmonious training and riding techniques. What a wonderful way to wake up each day.

RI *When did you first get seriously interested in the horse world?*

KO My family has had horses for many generations, so it was not surprising that I was born with a love for horses. During my childhood, I could be found reading horse books or daydreaming about the wonderful horse I knew I would own some day. The first horse books I could read on my own were in the *Billy and Blaze* series. After I would read, I would sit and daydream that I had a great big bay hunter (named Blaze, of course!) and he and I would gallop through the woods taking big log jumps without missing a stride. In my dreams I would always walk him until he was thoroughly cool and dry, making sure he did not come to harm as *Black Beauty* so nearly did, and then I would brush him until he shone.

Other books that stimulated my young dreams included *Brighty of the Grand Canyon*, *Black Beauty*, the *Black Stallion* series, and Marguerite Henry's *Treasury of Horses: Misty of Chincoteague*, *Justin Morgan Had a Horse*, and *King of the Wind*. Between books, I took time to follow my

¹My husband refers to it as an obsession.



Photo by Karl Ottenstein.

favorite TV steeds: Silver and Scout, Trigger and Buttermilk, Champion, Flicka, Fury, and, yes, even Mr. Ed. Oops, I guess I'm dating myself!

At the age of nine, it all came together when I went to the movies and saw Disney's *Miracle of the White Stallions*. I remember running home to tell my mom that I would go to Vienna one day and see the White Stallions perform at the Spanish Riding School. My mother laughed and said that would be the day. (Years later, I sent a postcard to her from Vienna and said – “See Mom, dreams do come true!”)

The white stallions movie completely captivated me, and I knew at that moment that some day I would ride dressage. From then on I read everything I could get my hands on about the care and training of horses. I bought an old copy of *The Complete Book of Horses and Ponies* by Margaret Cabell Self and the book *A Horse of My Own* by M.A. Stoneridge. I kept my passion alive by knowing that some day I would eat, breathe and work with jumping and dressage horses.

Remember that I said that I was born into a horse family? Well, the only drawback to my dressage and jumping dream was that I was born into a rodeo family in Montana. (I imagine that somewhere there was another little girl who dreamt of being a rodeo star but grew up in a dressage family!)

At the age of five I began riding at my cousin's ranch, and even though I came home with raw knees, I could not wait to go back. I fondly remember the summers my mother would take my sister and me around the rodeo circuit so we could be with her father. My grandfather was a “pickup man” who was also in charge of the livestock for Gene Autry's rodeo. One memorable summer I rode Gene Autry's horse Champion (not sure which one – he had several) and went to bed listening to the *Sons of the Pioneers* singing at the rodeo night shows.

Instead of watching the barrel racing like a good rodeo daughter, I would always be over watching the jumping and flat classes at the local horse show. My fascination with

people who “rode in those silly little saddles and bounced up and down” did not go down well with the family tradition; I was jokingly referred to as the “Black Horse” of the family. Obviously dressage was not common in Montana in those days, and who had ever heard of a, what did they call it? A “warmblood”?!

My professional interest in horses began after graduating high school. An article in the local paper caught my eye: a community college in Wyoming was offering, for the first time, a two-year degree in horse care and horsemanship. The program also included jumping classes taught by the regional jumping star. *I was on fire.* I could not believe it, and after many tearful, intense and long drawn-out discussions, my family agreed that I could go. I never looked back.

RI *What is your background as a rider, horse owner, etc.?*

KO Working with horses has been the greatest gift I could ever receive. Every horse I have ridden has taught me something that profoundly changed my manner and ability with horses. When I joyfully went off to the college in Wyoming, I was told to bring two horses: one horse to ride and one young horse to start. My riding horse was a 16-hand chestnut called *Big Red* (so original). The other horse belonged to my sister and was a chestnut colt that in fun we called *Little Red*. So the Reds and I went off to college. Big Red was a Thoroughbred off the track who, I was told, “loved to jump”. Early on it became clear that he had never seen a jump in his life, but luckily enough he did love it and had some talent for jumping. I also found out he had an aptitude for running because the horse shows were on a racetrack and more than once I had to do emergency stops when Big Red decided to head out in racing fashion around the track. I learned a lot from that boy!

After attending the college in Wyoming, I worked on Montana cattle ranches for a couple of years. My responsibilities included moving cows to fresh pasture and haul-

ing sweet cake to the cows in the winter (up to ten miles a day). Following those ranching years, I purchased a three-year old bay Appendix Quarter Horse gelding named Windsor. He is very sweet and together we learned the fundamentals of Hunter Jumper, Eventing and Dressage. We had many lessons and participated in many clinics in the northwest region of the United States. At the age of twenty-five he is still with me today and has become a great pasture pet.

Around this time, I had moved to Bozeman, Montana and was boarding at the hunter/eventing barn. Riding and jumping cross-country was so much fun. There was a local young cowboy who was amazing with horses and could fix almost any problem. The barn encouraged him to come and give a few clinics about his horsemanship skills. I always promised myself, that if I had a problem horse I would find this fellow and have him work with me. Over the years the cowboy has become well known in the horsemanship circles, his name: Buck Brannaman.

My husband and I moved to a sheep farm in Idaho where we “inherited” two Belgian draft horses named Pride and Prince. In their early 20s, these beautiful, gentle giants were our teachers. They were so accustomed to working, that it was easy learning how to line-drive and drive a cart. Caring for such big horses, including picking feet the size of platters is an experience in itself.

As I got older, I focused on my true passion, dressage, and participated in daily dressage training for six years. During this time, I competed in “A” shows, Regional Championships, and rode in many clinics. Some of the dressage clinicians I’ve ridden with over the years are Axel Steiner, Linda Zang, Sonya Vrako, Jeremy Steinberg, and Dr. Gerd Heuschmann.

After showing successfully at Regionals on a leased horse named Henry, I purchased my first warmblood – a chestnut Weltmeyer grandson called Walido (Lido). He was only five years old and I was already his fifth owner – a warning sign. Weltmeyer offspring >



In Memory of Rosemary Larkin

ARIA lost a great friend, Master Instructor and Evaluation Board member, when Rosemary Larkin of Chesapeake, Virginia, passed away on December 3, 2011.

Rosemary retired from the Virginia Beach Police Dept in 1994 after 20 years of service. She was a founding member and training officer for the Virginia Beach Mounted Police. Rosemary was the driving force behind the start of ARIA's Mounted Patrol Training Officer certification, which has gained national recognition for its quality, in police departments throughout the United States and internationally.



American Riding Instructor Certification Program

Nationally recognized
certification



National standards of excellence
and integrity



“The ARICP is good
for riding instructors.”

George H. Morris

American Riding Instructors Association
28801 Trenton Ct., Bonita Springs, FL 34134-3337
Phone (239) 948-3232 • **Fax** (239) 948-5053

e-mail aria@riding-instructor.com
web www.riding-instructor.com



Karen moving cattle.

have a slight reputation for being sullen and bolting and my boy did not let that reputation down. My trainer and I thought we could "fix" him, but he did not want to be "fixed". During this time, I spent two-weeks with Lido at a natural horsemanship ranch, including a three-day clinic with Buck Brannaman (fulfilling my earlier promise to take a problem horse to Buck) to see if we could work through some of Lido's issues, which included being deathly afraid of cows. At the end of the stay, Lido would move cows with no trouble, but his attitude did not change. After three years of hard work, I finally gave the boy to my trainer who eventually gave up and sold him. Because of Lido I learned how to quickly stop a bolting horse, and to this day horses that bolt do not bother me. Thank you, Walido.

Before giving Walido away, I had read *The Secret* and for fun decided to put it out into the universe that I was looking for a sweet FEI horse to call my own. The universe answered and the horse of my dreams stepped off the trailer (from Germany) three weeks later. The series of events was amazing. It all started when I mentioned to my trainer that I was looking for a new horse. *Two days later* she received a call from a colleague in Germany about a Hanoverian he had just picked up at a distress sale and said the horse was too good

to let just anyone have him. My trainer *just happened* to be going to Germany the next week and said she would try him out. She called after trying him out and said this is the horse. My husband (who had repeatedly said that he would never pay a lot of money for an imported horse) said he sounded too good to pass up. The stars and planets and the universe were all aligned that week and Woodstock came into my life.

After arriving, Woodstock quickly became the love of my life and over the next two years taught me more than any other horse. He had the most wonderful disposition but arrived physically very stiff. My training with him became very focused on relaxation, suppleness, throughness and contact. During this time, I was fortunate to work with Roland Moore, a long-time student and friend of Buck Brannaman, who taught me more Natural Horsemanship groundwork exercises to help supple and relax Woodstock and I did a couple of clinics with Dr. Gerd Heuschmann to help with throughness. Tragically all the stars fell one day when I lost my beloved Hanoverian to colic just after having him for two years. A couple of years have passed, and I am just now starting to think about looking for a performance horse again.

In the meantime, I have purchased a little Quarter Horse, Rio, who I plan to give

lessons on. Rio is a running Quarter Horse worked on a cattle ranch for eight years after retiring from the track. His owner had barrel raced him, but was selling him as a kid's horse because she said he did not want to run barrels anymore. When I brought Rio home, I hired an Equine Structural Integration therapist and a chiropractic vet to work on him. I did hours of relaxing and suppling groundwork with him. After a few months, lo and behold, the running Quarter Horse reappeared; it is amazing what a little therapeutic work can do. He is great fun, but so far only I ride him, as he is quite the hotty.

My passion for classical dressage training and riding has driven me to concentrate on horse and rider biomechanics. I attended weeklong clinics with Eckart Meyners (rider biomechanics expert from Germany) and completed an unmounted exercise certification program with Daniel Stewart, a former USET team coach. I also attended several clinics by Dr. Gerd Heuschmann (equine biomechanics veterinarian from Germany), and this past fall I completed a five-day horse biomechanics workshop with Dr. Deb Bennett (biomechanics and conformation expert from the US). I am currently taking an anatomy class offered by Equinology so I can take Dr. Hilary Claytons' biomechanics class.

RI *How long have you been teaching?*

KO I have been teaching riding on and off for over 30 years.

RI *Why and when did you become ARIA certified?*

KO I have always believed that one should have credentials in any and all specialized fields. To me, certification with a standardized national exam provides a level of assurance to potential clients that one has at least a certain level of knowledge and capabilities. It also reflects a level of professionalism and commitment to the field.

I first became certified five years ago and just completed my re-certification. I am currently certified at Level III Dressage ►

You asked. We answered.

SMARTPAKS Ship Free



You told us you wanted to spend your money on keeping your horse happy and healthy, not on shipping and handling. Like all your ideas, we thought that was brilliant. Order your horse's supplements in SmartPaks and you'll get peace of mind and total control delivered free automatically every month.



SmartPak.com | 1-888-672-1064

Free ground shipping applies to SmartPaks over \$40

and Level II Hunt Seat. I have decided to honor my roots and am currently working to add an ARICP Western certification.

RI *How has certification affected your business? Do you have any other certifications?*

KO My ARICP certifications have brought in new clients and the certifications have separated me from the rest of the field when people are looking for an instructor or clinician.

Since my certification, I have gained a greater feeling of self-confidence in my training/lesson niche, in part because of the positive reinforcement that certification provides. I now have more people approaching me to take lessons than I can accommodate.

In the past year, I became a certified Ride Right Equestrian Cross-Training and Sports Psychology instructor with Daniel Stewart. I attained this certification to better my students' "frames and frames of mind". The Ride Right unmounted exercise program helps enhance riders' performance by teaching them a series of unmounted exercises designed to improve their mounted balance, suppleness, fitness, symmetry, coordination, core strength, straightness, and posture. For my personalized unmounted program, I include lots of fun exercise equipment: balance boards, bodyblades, medicine balls, Balimo chairs, exercise balls, hula-hoops and more. My unmounted classes are filled with laughter.

The Ride Right Sports Psychology program utilizes a set of "tools" to help riders control the stress, nervousness, pressure, distractions and show jitters so often associated with riding. Some of the tools I use include "brain babble" control, stress management techniques, mental imagery, and realistic goal setting.

I maintain a current Red Cross first aid and CPR certification. The program that I am certified with includes AED (Automated External Defibrillator) training.

RI *What have you done to advance your education as an instructor?*

KO In addition to the classes and clinics

that I listed in answer to the earlier question about my background, I try to audit every clinician that comes to my area. Recent clinicians include Lilo Fore, Lendon Gray, Greg Best, Paul Balasik, Buck Brannaman, Ellen Eckstein, and Jenny Baldwin; I also traveled to Colorado for a Manolo Mendez and Dr. Gerd Heuschmann clinic.

Two years ago, I attended the ARIA convention in Florida where I listened to many of the lectures. (I highly recommend that others participate in the conventions – I learned a lot and it is a great way to network). I was lucky to go to Aachen and Lexington for the last two World Equestrian Games where I also attended lectures and demonstrations. I always buy the radio headset and listen to the commentary given by the dressage expert for each ride. This has helped me to further develop my eye and see what the judges are looking for.

I also host equestrian DVD potlucks at my house and invite all of my horse friends. We have great discussions about that night's DVD, and I am always fascinated by how each person sees things differently!

Lastly, I advance my education by subscribing to many publications, watching countless horse DVDs, and reading every horse book I can find. Currently my horse library is out of control!

RI *What other aspects of the horse business are you in?*

KO I am the owner of two other companies: Equestrian Educationals LLC, and Bridle Bookkeeping LLC.

Through Equestrian Educationals, I serve as booking agent for clinicians who promote classical techniques to insure the proper development and the well-being of the sport horse. For three years, I brought in Dr. Gerd Heuschmann, author of *Tug of War – Classical versus "Modern" Dressage*, for all of his US Clinics. We also sell books and DVDs at equine events.

Bridle Bookkeeping provides QuickBooks set up and consulting services. I donate bookkeeping for Montana Horse Welfare Council (I'm the current treasurer) and for the Gallatin Valley Dressage. >

Peer profile

I have also been involved with the local therapeutic riding center, Eagle Mount, and I am a "Top Hand" on their equine advisory board. I donate lessons to the equine director and her assistant, and I was a presenter at the Montana NARHA (Path) State Convention.

RI *What are your hobbies and interests outside of the barn?*

KO A Bernese Mountain Dog named Bo. Weaving, spinning, skiing, reading, travel, and gardening.

RI *What is your biggest success?*

KO In my personal life it is, of course, my son.

In my professional life, my biggest success was when I decided to put together a program that incorporated healthy Equine Biomechanics, Classical Dressage Principles, and Natural Horsemanship concepts. I refer to this program as *Refined Performance Horsemanship*. The program centers on Natural Horsemanship groundwork exercises that help horses mentally and physically relax and stretch. My groundwork is based on the classical "back to front" training principle and concentrates on horses using their muscles in a biomechanically beneficial way. After my students and clinic participants have developed a level of skill with the groundwork, I incorporate and teach the exercises under saddle. To help my students develop a foundational understanding of horse and rider movement, I give rider and equine biomechanics lectures and unmounted rider exercise classes at my clinics. I am currently

working on a new lecture for my clinics that focuses on equine conditioning and schooling. The positive reception that my program receives is my greatest success.

RI *What words of wisdom would you share with new instructors?*

KO Follow your passion! There's a book on career choices called *The Three Boxes of Life*, about balancing Work, Learning and Play. For me, there is no better career choice because I am able to combine these things at almost every moment!

Also, I would recommend that an instructor should learn as much as they can about their area of teaching and back their credentials with a certification. I suggest that one develop a business plan that includes realistic goals and a personal code of ethics. A good business plan will help anyone trying to "make a living" in this demanding and competitive (and fulfilling) career.

Do what you love; love what you do. Enjoy the journey!

RI *If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently?*

KO I believe that a college degree is extremely beneficial, but I should have followed my passion and acquired an Animal Science or Equine science degree instead of one in Plant and Soil Science.

RI *What are your future plans and goals?*

KO My students, clinic participants, and lecture attendees have given me quite a bit of positive feedback and encouragement to share my message with others. This is not just rewarding, it also inspires me to con-

tinue my education and fine-tune my teaching style to help a wider audience of riders and horses.

Inspired by this encouragement, I have developed my own foundation program, *Refined Performance Horsemanship* that combines natural horsemanship, biomechanics of horse and rider, and classical principals. My business plan includes taking my clinics, lectures and classes nationwide, publishing a training workbook and videos, and having my own teaching center one day.

My ultimate vision is to develop and provide a riding center where riders of all disciplines can come and feel welcome in a supporting atmosphere.

My envisioned center would provide a knowledgeable, positive, enthusiastic environment where riders can develop a closer partnership with their horse. The facility would have classroom space, exercise room, excellent riding arenas, trails, all weather track, turn-outs and boarding. Riders would be able to participate in a program that focuses on equine and rider relationships, biomechanical theory for the healthy and efficient performance of horse and rider, equine conditioning, and mounted and un-mounted rider exercises. Instructors and clinicians would be available to provide guidance and expertise towards whatever discipline the student may choose.

I never thought my career would head in this direction, but it is amazing where our journeys take us. ■



American Riding Instructors Association
28801 Trenton Ct., Bonita Springs, FL 34134-3337
Phone (239) 948-3232 • **Fax** (239) 948-5053
e-mail aria@riding-instructor.com
www.riding-instructor.com

Application for ARIA Membership

Membership Benefits

- *Riding Instructor* magazine
- Insurance Discounts!
- **Free** classified ads on the ARIA web site!
- Membership card to carry in your wallet
- ARIA color logo decal for your car window

Name _____

Address _____

Telephone _____

E-mail _____

Amount enclosed \$ _____ (Visa/MC/AmEx/Discover accepted)

Membership is available to individuals only.

\$35 for one full year from the date of application or **\$75 for three full years!**
Lifetime Membership \$750