



Finding the Right



The USHJA Owners Task Force members continue their 'Taking Ownership' series with tips and guidance to help horse owners find the perfect professional.

By Megan Lacy

Horse owners in this sport typically love their horses, both to compete and to achieve the goals they set for themselves. In addition to their equine passion, they balance other aspects of life outside of their horses' lives and the show ring.

Accomplished owner and rider Jennifer Gates, of Washington, is currently juggling college studies in California with an aggressive competition schedule that spans the country. She noted that because owners can't always be around, choosing the right professional to

help is vital. "Finding someone who has you and your horse's best interests at heart—and who will work with you to accomplish your goals—is extremely important if you want to enjoy the sport and be successful," she said.

Gates started riding at 6 years old, when she and a friend decided they wanted to "ride ponies." As many parents do when their children become interested in ponies, Gates' parents responded to the call. A close family friend who rode recommended Parkside Stables, a nearby barn with a good repu-

tation and a safe, quality lesson program.

Gates, who now rides with Hardin Towell, based out of Wellington, Florida, noted that her first trainer was the one who helped connect her with Jack and Lisa Towell, of Finally Farm in Camden, South Carolina. Initially, Jack trained Gates until she transitioned to their son Hardin, who focuses on Jumpers (Gates' primary discipline).

Gates' progression through trainers as her riding evolved isn't uncommon in the sport, and her experience highlights

Professional for You



THE BOOK LLC

For owner and rider Jennifer Gates, the Towells—including trainer Hardin—have become like an extended family.

this person as if you were hiring any other professional—you'll want to know their philosophy. That kind of rigorous vetting right at the beginning can mitigate any surprises or bad outcomes."

For Gates, this was true. She noted that the Towells are like extended family in many ways.

"The first thing that struck me when working with the Towells, Jack and his wife Lisa, is that they are the nicest family," she said. "Knowing them all this time, they really care about me as a person. They always knew that horses were important to me and that I had a life outside of horses, too. Not only are they great horse people, they're great people, and the same can be said about Hardin."

Finding the right fit is important to trainers, too. Wendy Peralta, of Seabreeze Farm in Geneva, Florida, is a USHJA Certified Trainer with more than 36 years of professional experience in the sport. She said that when she's meeting a potential client, she's looking for the right fit, too.

"My husband (Ezequiel Peralta) and I have been doing this a long time," said Peralta. "We live at our farm, and we

are hands-on involved. We only want people who are a good fit for us. There are a lot of hours involved in this sport, so we really sit down and look at what their goals are. I like people to have attainable goals and suitable horses."

Peralta said that there are a lot of reputable professionals, and it's not just about finding the one that can help you achieve your goals. You also need someone who can help make sure your objectives in the short-term are attainable—and who will help you get there.

If there's one thing she wishes all new owners knew, it's that horses aren't machines. "You have to have empathy, compassion. You have to be flexible," she said.

Peralta added that the trainer's role is to help owners navigate the issues that arise with horses, set realistic objectives and look out for the best interests of the horse and rider. While there are a lot of good trainers in the industry, she noted that anyone can hang a sign up and offer riding lessons, which makes that up-front due diligence that Bass described critical.

For someone completely new to the sport, the idea of re-

how choosing a professional wisely from the beginning helps to make that progression smooth. It's unlikely that the person you start riding with will take you to a grand prix, but that person can pave the way for you to get there, if that's your priority.

Who becomes the "right professional" isn't only an important decision—it's also a deeply personal one. Debbie Bass, chair of the USHJA Owners Task Force and longtime owner and parent of an equestrian, said that owners should choose a professional carefully

with the long term in mind.

While there's not a one-size-fits-all approach that works in the search process, because everyone has different priorities, thinking about your priorities and then evaluating the potential professional against those will help improve your success rate.

"People should think about the qualities they want in a professional, because that professional will be a significant part of their lives for many years," said Bass. "Really get to know the person. Ask about their successes and failures. Interview

searching a trainer may seem daunting, but the good news is that there are resources. So where do you start?

Every owner or rider will have a different set of priorities, but it's important to consider and know what you want when it comes to goals, budget, training approach, personality, safety and horse care. Once you identify those priorities, you start the research.

Finding a Trainer

If you don't even have the name of a prospective trainer, one starting place is the USHJA Certified Trainers Directory. This online tool allows people to search for trainers who meet certain criteria—and then it provides information about the individual. The directory can be a great starting place; however, certification isn't mandatory in the Hunter/Jumper sport, so the list won't include all trainers.



COURTESY OF WENDY PERALTA

Wendy Peralta believes finding the right fit is important for trainers, too.

Local shows in your area are another great resource. Bass said that the Hunter/Jumper community is “chatty,” so going to a competition and talking to riders and spectators about the sport can be a great way to get information.

Besides talking to people at shows, Peralta suggested visiting your local tack shop and asking the owner or employees for their recommendations. They most likely have deep knowledge of the professionals in the area and may be able to steer you in the right direction.

Do Your Homework

Once you have a name or a few names, Bass recommended that you look up these professionals on the U.S. Equestrian Federation website (USEF.org). Check to see if they are currently in good standing with the organization.

A simple Google search will often shed light on the reputation of a professional, as well. It's important to note that all trainers listed in the USHJA Certified Trainers Directory will be in good standing with both the USHJA and the USEF.

Set Up the Interview

After you've done your background check on your potential professionals and have narrowed your choices, set up interviews and facility tours. Knowing whether you have the right personality fit should happen quickly, but Bass recommended treating the interview process as you would when hiring any other professional service provider.

Ask questions and follow-up questions. Be sure to inquire about safety policies and insurance coverage, and ask questions about

USHJA OWNERS TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Debbie Bass, chair

William Woodson, vice chair

Elaine Fresch	Ernest Oare
Nancy Lewis	Wendy Peralta
Lisa Lourie	Lindsay Vail
Chuck Mayer	Diane Wade
Erica Moe	

UPCOMING SERIES TOPICS

- Purchasing or Leasing a Horse
- Horse Care and Training
- Horse Shows

each of your priorities to make sure you've got a good fit.

Finally, during the interview it's important to consider budget, so ask about the professional's fee structures. It's a best practice to request a written fee schedule, so you can set a realistic budget. In establishing your budget, don't forget to include equipment and ongoing maintenance, including board, farrier, veterinarian and insurance. The more you talk about costs up front, the more prepared both you and your new professional will be to help you get the most enjoyment out of your experience in this sport.

Manage Your Relationship

Now that you've made your decision and put your trust and your horse's day-to-day wellbeing in the hands of your trainer, make sure to manage the relationship. Stay informed, ask questions, be engaged with what's happening with your horse, and listen to your trainer, to your veterinarian, to the entire team that will support you in this sport.

The relationship you have with your trainer is the primary one, but there are many other people who make up the support system that will help you achieve your goals in this sport.

To someone new to the sport, Gates offered some advice: "Personal recommendations are huge. You want someone with a good reputation. First and foremost, though, you want someone who will be good to your horses. In this sport, it's important to find someone who puts the horses first—not just occasionally, but literally, always. Someone who is always going to have your horses' best interests in mind, not worrying about the competition. You want someone you get along with, someone with integrity, which goes along with treating horses with respect.

"Also, something that I've been lucky to have with the Towells is that even though Jack is extremely experienced and has been in the sport forever, he's always willing to learn something new," Gates added. "He's never stuck in his ways. He never stops learning. I think that's a really important quality for a trainer—someone who loves the sport so much that he's continuing to learn and continuing to grow, even once he could say he knows it all." 