



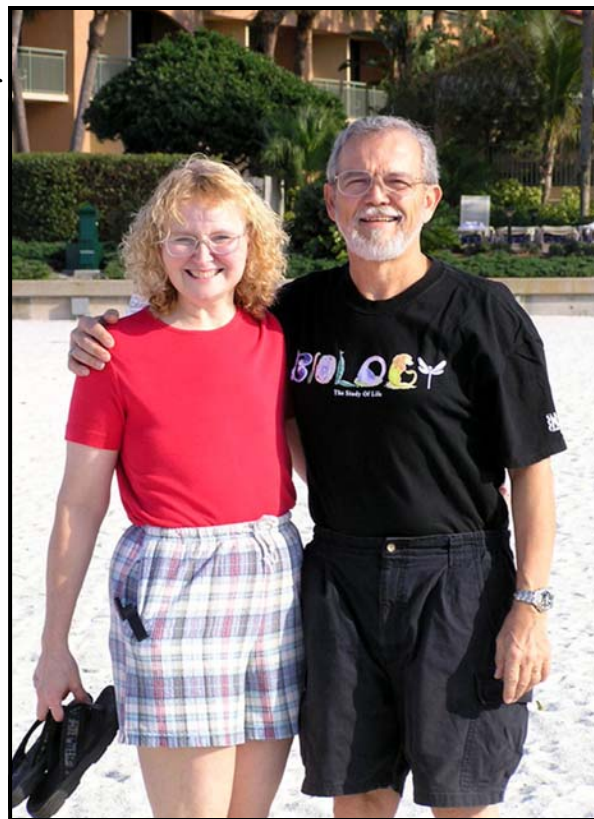
A Letter from Colleen Pace

Many of the associations in the U.S. horse industry, of which many of us are members, are so old and large that it would be near impossible to figure out who originally started them; and who really controls them now. We can't even tell from the outside the legal status of the various organizations. But, the American Association of Riding Schools, Inc. is a young company. It is a for-profit company and, at least for now, I own it.

I suspect you will read this article once; and never refer to it again. But, if you are considering registering your stable with the AARS, you may have an interest in knowing something about the founder of the company. So, I am going to take a moment to tell you about my personal, academic, and professional background. I will explain my reasons for believing you can succeed with a novice level riding lesson program, and my motivation for wanting you to succeed.

On my 50th birthday exactly, in the middle of chemotherapy and dead bald under a wig, I accepted the *All Industry Marketing Award* from the Western and English Trade Association. The business model for the American Association of Riding Schools® had garnered the award in the “Best New Product” category. The ‘product’ is intangible because it is simply a business plan.

At San Diego’s Bahia Resort I was in the company of representatives from some of our industry’s best known manufacturers: Wrangler® Western Wear, Sundowner® Trailers, Roper® Boots, Montana Silver-



smiths®. As I approached the podium to accept the AIM Award from the then reigning Miss Rodeo Queen, she related to the dinner guests a couple of the comments on the judges’ cards. One suggested that the American Association of Riding Schools® was the closest thing to a Welcome Wagon® the horse industry had ever seen. Another said it looked like a department store window to our industry. It thrilled me to think that someone - other than my closest horse



owning friends - recognized that the format of my novice level riding lesson program, my fascination with small business, and my commitment to earnest customer service systems might have merit in the horse industry. Over a fifty year period, just maybe, I had grown from the kid most unlikely to ever own a horse to the person to have developed a program that, *in its simplicity*, can help the horse industry grow exponentially.

As riders and business owners, we are part of an industry that traditionally offers a very narrow crack through which can slip those few horse enthusiasts who

have an immediate interest in purchasing and competing with a horse. I was suggesting a gate so wide open that it would be as easy to find a suitable lesson stable as it is to find a dance studio, gymnastics center, karate school, or skating rink.

Fifty years is a long time, especially considering I'm just sixty-two as I write. But, good business ideas don't come suddenly. They usually come from someone's need that is not being met. If that need intersects with the right academic and work experiences, there is a chance that the synergy will create something unique, something that could catch and become "a good business idea."

This good business idea - the American Association of Riding Schools® - started in a typical subdivision somewhere around 1960. I was the third of six kids born into a totally non-horse family. That's me in my first cowboy suit in the picture at the right and my second cowboy suit in the



picture below. A lot of horse owners come from such an unlikely pool of people. Maybe, you did,

too. Like other horse crazy kids, I galloped around the house on my hands and knees lapping up Cheerios® from bowls on the floor because they were made from oats. I saved my babysitting money because I knew I would own a horse. Where I would keep it was an irrelevant question. What *is* relevant is that research solicited by the Horse Industry Alliance indicates that, in

one of three U.S. families, someone is born with such an intrinsic interest in horses.

During my freshman year of high school, my folks decided the eight of us had truly out-grown our house. They purchased a six-bedroom farmhouse on a land-locked ten acres with a small barn. We researched our only known source for purchasing a horse - our local newspaper - and settled on a pretty four-year-old grade gelding that was a biter and a barnstormer. Had we

known the most rudimentary skills of horse handling, we would have taken note that the teen seller never handled the horse. As her father saddled and bridled the horse, he knew he was dangerously passing it from one ignorant kid to another. It's easy to understand how little we knew because you and I still meet people today, like we were then, all the time. As we



become more involved with horses, some of us tend to forget that those people are still out there; and then we don't look for ways to better serve them. It's a point I'd like to stress - that when we're on the inside we become oblivious to just how "on the outside" others can be. At high school graduation, I sold my horse to purchase a car. Though not admitting it at the time, I had grown afraid enough that I didn't miss him. It would have made me feel better if, at the time, someone could have said, "Don't worry; you'll own more than thirty great horses before you're through."

I had done well in our high school business program, landing one of the three pick co-op jobs at General Motors, and garnering the State of Michigan Miss Future Business Leaders of America award. This was enough to secure a position as a departmental secretary at the University of Michigan-Flint. I tell you this because it is, to a great extent, my nineteen years with the university that equipped me with the skills to serve you now. By the time I retired, I was known on campus as the Answer Queen. Whether I was serving students, faculty, administrators, or someone from the community, I knew how the system worked and, as is the case with any good secretary, became very good at helping other people meet their goals. Today, I can change that sentence to say, "Whether I am serving riding students, riding instructors, other professionals in the horse industry, or a member of the general public who has an interest in horses, I know how the system works and I have an interest helping them meet their goal."

I eventually became the secretary to the dean in the university's School of Management where I monitored a hundred thousand dollar budget, helped design and deliver academic and promotional programs, and often served as a liaison between and among university units and

the greater Flint community. In addition to being employed by the university, I also completed my degree there. I took night and weekend classes while working full time (often while simultaneously offering riding lessons at home) and, in 1989, graduated with a bachelors of business administration – high distinction. Everything that I learned in class and that came across my desk in the School of Management was immediately applied to what I knew about the horse industry. It’s much easier to do well in an academic program when one can immediately apply what they learn to something that already interests them. My senior thesis was



titled, “Customer Service in the Horse Industry.” At the time, there was essentially no research on customer service in the horse industry; so I studied customer service in service industries in general and then applied it to the horse industry. The first half of the semester was spent studying car washes, hotels, restaurants, amusement parks, golf courses, nursing homes and day care centers. I then compared their challenges to what I saw as customer service challenges in the horse industry.

I enjoy seeing what I do at the novice level as a small part of a much larger horse industry. And, I enjoy seeing the horse industry as a small part of a much larger recreation industry. My interest in studying an issue in a larger context serves me well as I continue to flesh out the American Association of Riding Schools. I am constantly comparing it to established nationally-known recreation businesses, especially franchises, such as Jazzercise® and Gymboree® to learn new and better ways to run a recreation business. For example, over thirty years of offering riding lessons, I have utilized numerous methods for collecting lesson money. I evaluated systems being used at various stables, but eventually settled on a method drawn from the daycare industry. It is one that requires a moderate amount of record keeping but that ensures an expected gross income and a dependable salary for instructors; and is one with which parents are already familiar.

I’d like to return for a moment to that horse I sold when I graduated high school. Maybe,

I would have never owned another horse. But, my first husband purchased an eight-week slate of lessons for me as a gift early in our marriage. Being re-exposed to a live horse re-inspired me to keep them part of my life. But, those initial eight riding lessons also gave me a second reason to say, "There must be a better way to learn about horses." My instructor would eventually become nationally known for training Arabians. But at the time I was there, she was taking in anyone just to get her new place off the ground; and she made little effort to hide her quiet relief when my sessions were over. It was so obvious that she felt novice level lessons were beneath her abilities. I left every lesson feeling that, for the money, I had deserved better. I at least deserved that she be polite. Rather than continuing lessons there, we went looking for another stable.

For some unknown reason I had an affinity for high-stepping horses. I don't know where it came from; I didn't even know which breeds were known for such attributes. But, a tack shop owner in Lansing told us where we could find some high-steppers. I will never forget the rush I felt when we walked into an indoor arena for the first time. A three-year-old Saddlebred was being long-lined in a biting rig. I took lessons with that trainer for two years and was told by numerous of his clientele how lucky I was to work under such an esteemed horseman. The fact is that I learned very little from him. I learned to pick up canter leads, to stay on frantic horses while aluminum cans rattled over head, and how to run my schooling mare into the wall when I couldn't get her to break her canter. I learned that it made no sense to expect one's horse to stand still for mounting because they were too tall to mount alone anyway. Isn't that silly? I was not allowed to see the grooming area, and nothing real was ever explained. When I asked to be taught to use electric clippers, I was told that was what trainers were for.

It is funny how many trainers think that if their clients became informed, there would be no work left for the trainer. It's simply not true. In Martha Stewart's book, *The Martha Rules*, she says the same thing about professional caterers when she writes, "Many caterers might have smiled like Mona Lisa when their clients asked them questions, worrying that if everyone learned to do these things themselves, what would be left to cater." As we all know, Martha has made her fortune empowering people to care for their own homes without knocking the business out from under professional caterers. Educated customers make for more business, not

less; because the more they know, the more they want.

I am thankful, however, to that Saddlebred trainer for introducing me to the breed that has since been my personal favorite – the American Morgan Horse. As the owner of a stable registered with the American Association of Riding Schools, I am discouraged from telling my customers that Morgans are better than other breeds – because they're not. In fact, my two trail horses today are Haflinger and Quarter Horse mares. Having a personal favorite is different than disparaging all of the other breeds; especially to new horse enthusiasts. Knowing I wanted to serve novices, my trainer suggested that Morgans were simply shorter, and that there was a better chance of finding riding style versatility in that breed. During the 1970's, the AMHA was promoting the idea that a family could take their single pet Morgan into a variety of English, western, and driving classes. That appears to be less possible today.

Although I had been designing stables on paper since I was fifteen, it was at this point, before I had ever seen a show ring, that I began to formulate an actual business plan for a riding school developed especially for non-horse-owning beginners. My mother owned five small businesses - a clothing store, teen club, restaurant, bridal dressmaking, and porcelain dollmaking - so thinking along the lines of small business was natural to me. Years later, when the dean of the business school would compliment my ability to cool tempers in a committee meeting or settle a distraught student, I would remind him that I learned a whole lot more about caring for people in my mom's restaurant than I did in his business school. The memories my sisters and I have of working together in mom's ventures are priceless. And, if I had never continued with horses, I would still be in some sort of business today.

If you scan my resume, it looks like two people living parallel lives. On one side there is my high school business co-op, my four-year degree in business administration, and my nineteen years of full-time employment at the university. That side includes topics in bookkeeping, taxes, personnel, project supervision, public speaking, and procedures manuals. Everything is related to offices and support systems. On the other side is my first riding program (SummerBreeze Stables), my first retail mail order business (Godiva Gardens Gifts), my first publishing business (Nature-Plus), and my recently retired riding school (Riverbank Farm). Everything is related to small business – both service and retail. It has to be more than just co-

incidence that the American Association of Riding Schools spans both sides of those parallel careers. It's a beautiful merging of my love for horses, my respect for academic support systems and the learning process, and my fascination with small business. And, whomever it was that coined the cliché, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach," ought to be shot. *Doing* is not just about talent. Competitive people are clueless to the joys of being noncompetitive. My husband is a university biologist and he so prefers teaching over research. His cliché is, "Those who can, do. Those who believe others can, too – teach." If marketing professionals in the horse industry would realize that there is a rewarding place for every horse lover – competitive or not - our numbers would grow exponentially; and the rewards for the entire industry would be greater. Unless, for shame, those competitive folk have some cockamainy idea that keeping the gate closed is a form of competition.

If you take a moment to think about my paltry introduction to horses, it should be obvious that, if I wanted to develop a business related to horses, I needed to know more about them. Most horse professionals become good at competition at the amateur level and then decide to try their hand at turning it into a business. For me it was backwards. I had an intrinsic interest in small business and never had an interest in advanced show ring competition. My plan was to secure the horse handling skills necessary to care for non-horse-owning novices; and then use those skills to build a viable business that would care for those riders better than my instructors had cared for me. I thought there would be a market for that, and I felt it was an honorable pursuit.

Over the years, the pieces came together. When I was twenty-four, my husband and I purchased a forty-acre farm in Owosso with a really old house and barn. We named it Summer-Breeze Stables. I continued my lessons on the Saddlebreds because the trainer had befriended me enough to let me tag along when he visited other class-A stables. Unlike his usual clientele, I wasn't visiting these stables to consider a horse purchase. Instead, I was an observer of people and processes. I don't have a particular angst against class-A full-service stables. People who enjoy them will continue to enjoy them. It's just my opinion that it's not where people should start – whether or not they can afford it. At the same time, I was applying everything I learned in my college business classes to what I was planning for my riding school. It made all

my classes that much more substantial and immediately applicable.

Without going into needless detail on the purchase of my first Morgans, it suffices to say that I began my schooling program in Owosso with that breed. We joined the Michigan Justin Morgan Horse Association, and I immediately offered to volunteer at the youth group retail table selling books, shirts, and bumper stickers while meeting the members of the club. I then volunteered as an assistant youth leader. To this day, I tell our riders that the first step toward horse ownership should be volunteering one's service to a horse club.



On paper, I began to formulate lesson plans for novices by combining those parts of the AMHA youth badge program that could be completed by non-horse-owners, with materials from the local 4-H horse extension program, and independent information gathered from equine books and journals. I wanted the end result to be an introductory riding and horse management program specifically for people who did not own, and might never own, a horse. As I incorporated my lesson plans into the novice level lessons I was now offering, I learned what topics non-horse-owning novices found valuable and what they did not. I learned that those things that I might find fascinating might not necessarily fascinate others.

One area I truly enjoyed was encouraging my riders to sort out the differences between facts and opinions; in order to develop their own values related to horses and horse ownership. I also quickly learned that, at the novice level, riders were more interested in developing their own relationship with an individual horse or stable of horses; and less interested in the social part of horse activities. Field trips to horse shows were not as well attended as I had thought they would be. The social part happens later on; and only if they happen to find a group of people like themselves. Early on, I decided the process was two-part: first they wanted to learn about horse behavior and their relationship with the animal while they were riding and caring for it. Then, for some, came a secondary interest in learning what other people were doing with their horses. From that smaller secondary group, riders would differentiate themselves as either

competitive or non-competitive. Our lesson format therefore evolved along those same lines. Given their own clear view of the hobby, people tend to follow the 80/20 rule. For all those who come into lesson programs, 20% end up staying with horses. Of that group, 20% go on to some form of competition. If the industry wants to expand the group that enjoys competition - because they say that's where the real dollar per capita is spent - then it would be in their best interest to support those instructors who are willing to work the non-owner market in order to pull those numbers through.

Just to let you know I'm not crying sour grapes relative to showing and competition, I'll tell you that I did participate in competition for a brief period; but only vicariously through my son, Andy. He showed for three years in the youth English Pleasure and Saddleseat Equitation divisions on the Michigan Morgan circuit. He placed second



at the Michigan All-Morgan on a little mare that was concurrently offering twenty lessons a week to non-horse-owning novices back home. But, after three years he said enough was enough; he really just wanted to trail ride and play baseball. In retrospect, he probably would have more enjoyed the fun of speed-and-action on the local 4-H circuit, but I had developed a couple close friendships in the state Morgan club and thus destined Andy to class-A showing. Now in his thirties, married and with twin girls, he is today still no more competitive than me. He's just a great guy with a home that is always filled with friends. And, if he will forgive me for forcing him into a saddle suit, I will forgive him for trading his horses for a Harley®.

Over the next three decades, I developed teaching modules and classroom materials for novices; adding and subtracting materials constantly, sorting out what was worth my time and money and what was not. The methods I used to attract customers, the information I provided while they were with me, and the manner in which I kept my books evolved as I both continued to learn about the horse industry and continued my service to teachers and students at the university. During my senior year, the dean of the business school - who also happened to be

my academic advisor, my boss, and my personal friend - encouraged me to pursue a doctorate in accounting. When I insisted I wanted a career in the horse industry, he asked whether I believed I could get on the cutting edge in that industry. I told him I had little interest in the cutting edge; that I believed it was, to a great extent, full of broken horses and bitter people. That's a little harsh; maybe just a reflection of my noncompetitive nature. When he asked what I wanted to do in the horse industry, I told him that I wanted to be a great novice level instructor; but that I realized that might not be a worthy use of an honors degree. Without understanding the horse industry, just understanding business, he responded that therein was my challenge – to find a way to make it worthy. And, thus was born the idea for the AARS.

So, I now return to the cover page of this article where I say “...I will explain my reasons for believing you can succeed with your own novice level riding school, and my motivation for wanting you to succeed.” My reason for believing *you* can succeed is because I did. After reading the past few pages I just have to bet that, if you've been riding under supervision for any number of years, you have more horse related expertise than I had when I first started offering lessons. Beyond that, the information contained in the *Instructors' Learning Library* available to instructors registered with the AARS should give you most everything you need, outside of your horse handling and riding skills, to launch your riding program. My reason for wanting you to succeed is because, if the AARS is going to grow, we'll need dynamic and deserving leaders to take it to the next level.

In the remaining three links on the *Riding Instructors* page of the ucanride website, I'm offer some very general insight about handling money, financing a business, and researching land and building use. Should you register with us, the *Learning Library* (operating manual), which will be e-mailed to you in segments over a short period of time, offers more specific information about opening your riding school, attracting new, non-horse-owning families to your stable, and offering the most important things they need and want to know in the most simple and efficient manner possible. There is substantial information related to what I've learned about hiring, training, supporting, managing, reprimanding, and firing employees; and what you need to know to streamline your financial records so that what you do is both profitable and legal. I can do this for you so that you don't have to waste time and money during your

first few years of business researching it yourself.

Some of the topics may be a little boring, some you will find interesting, and some I trust will be downright enjoyable. I hope you've enjoyed reading this article, and that you've gained some insight from it. If you register with the AARS, I will visit with you by e-mail and, possibly, by telephone. I would look forward to that; and I would look forward to working with you. I would especially look forward to sitting on a hay bale in your barn, coffee mug in hand, cat on lap, knowing that you were glad we met.

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