

# Youth <sup>to</sup> Professional

Five successful Arabian horse trainers share their wisdom on surviving the transition from youth exhibitors to professional horsemen

By Hilary Nixon



It is no secret in the horse industry that people who become involved with horses at a young age do not always continue their involvement into adulthood—they leave for a variety of reasons and some return as amateurs. A small group, however, never leaves and is successful in making a profession in the horse industry.

Navigating those in-between years is not always easy because the late teens and early 20s are a time when many life-changing decisions are made. Deborah Johnson, Crystal McNutt, Marisa Basinger, as well as Chris and Shan Wilson have made a successful transition from youth exhibitor to professional. Each trainer's journey was different, but shared a few commonalities—accomplished success as a youth exhibitor, had guidance along the way, experienced doubt in their decision to become a trainer. They all still love the horses.

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## Deborah Johnson

At age 4, Deborah Johnson was a doting horse lover, who, like other girls her age, wanted a pony of her own. On her 5th birthday her wish came true. Soon after, she tagged along with neighbors to her

first show. Within a couple of years Johnson had her first horse, a Quarter Horse mare that toted her around to shows and gymkhana events where she eventually met people who owned Arabians.

Brusally Zbrunn, a grey gelding, was Johnson's first Arabian. "We immediately fell in love with his kind eyes," says Johnson. Johnson began competing in nearly all disciplines offered at Arabian shows at the time. "What a different time it was," says Johnson. "At the national level there was saddle seat and stock seat equitation, hunter seat equitation over fences, English pleasure and western pleasure and all of these were 17 and under!"

Under the tutelage of instructor Gwen Nix, Johnson built her show horse arsenal and earned several top 10s and a national championship in saddle seat equitation.

It was the instruction and mentorship Johnson received from Nix that planted the seed in her head to become a professional trainer. She also knew that becoming a judge was one way to give back. "As a youth I wanted to judge horse shows as I thought having a diverse background in so many disciplines [would enable me to] give back to the industry. But I also knew that I had to earn a degree from a university," comments Johnson.

Johnson attended the University of Nevada and earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and a Master of Arts in Speech Communication. "Earning my degrees was absolutely worth the time, money and effort. The two degrees and experiences have allowed me to become a trainer with a high level of communication training and strategy that propel my clients to success." Not to mention the fact that earning an M.A. allowed Johnson to work at the university part-time for nine years while her own business grew.

Shortly after the 10-year mark Johnson experienced some doubt in her decision. "I had a period of reflection and really analyzed my business goals and the financial performance of my business. From there I diversified my business and created several other verticals that have been essential to surviving the current economic situation," says Johnson.

In 2007, Johnson opened the doors to the Reno-Tahoe Equestrian Centre, situated in the foothills of Washoe Valley. Johnson has trained horses in park, English, country English, show hack, hunter and western disciplines. Being a horse trainer is more than just training horses. On any given day, Johnson serves as an accountant, a human resource director, advertising, public relations and marketing manager, operations manager, hauler/driver, communication therapist, construction manager, volunteer coordinator, runner or fashion and hair consultant. There are three people on staff—Johnson, a part-time instructor and a part-time assistant—at Reno-Tahoe Equestrian Centre.

Johnson's advice for youngsters entertaining the thought of becoming a professional horseperson is, "Learn as much as you can from a diverse number of people. Don't take things personally—realize that horses and people will come and go. Appreciate what you have when you have it."

