



Calling All Riders...

By Lori Teresa Yearwood

It's a big world of equestrian sport out there. And those who call it their passion are as different and important as the innumerable disciplines and breeds that make up the big picture.

Some, more than others, find themselves at a loss when they try to see themselves in the pictures and stories broadcast by the media and publications—the same ones that are supposed to portray “the whole of the sport.”

This feature article serves as testament to the power of one person raising her voice to ask a question or make a suggestion.

The subject line of a recent Letter to the Editor to **EQUESTRIAN** magazine was written in all caps: A SUGGESTION FROM A USEF OUTSIDER.

EQUESTRIAN magazine receives countless letters, e-mails and phone calls each month regarding a wide spectrum of issues—from content to suggestions for future issues to countless press releases regarding a dizzying array of horse shows and horse happenings. However, the content of this particular e-mail stood out and spoke to a topic that had yet to be featured in the Federation's almost seven decades of producing a monthly communiqué to its members.

The writer of the e-mail explained, quite eloquently, that every time she read a horse-related magazine, she felt excluded. Every time she searched the magazine racks for a publication that represented the world of horses that she lived in, she left empty-handed.



Courtesy/ Lesa Ellanson

*Above: Lesa Ellanson, an experienced horsewoman from New York, prompted magazine staff to consider what might be missing in **EQUESTRIAN**.*

*Opposite: **EQUESTRIAN** magazine represents a wide variety of members— young and old, grassroots riders to the high-performance level, from every background, and a multitude of ethnicities.*



Darlene Wehler



Courtesy Lesa Ellanson

Above: Lesa Ellanson hopes for a world where all riders are recognized for their special abilities.

Above, right: Wendy Ying has reached the top levels of driving and continues to excel in her sport.

And the truth was, she wasn't really an outsider to the United States Equestrian Federation®. In fact, she was a USEF member. But Lisa Ellanson, an African-American horse trainer, teacher and manager of a world-class equestrian center in upstate New York felt like an outsider.

"...Where are the articles about the ground breaking trainers, instructors and riders who represent populations other than the affluent or white people?"

The writer went on to ask some pointed questions. *"Do you cover only people who are affluent riders and owners, white owners and riders, active-on-the-circuit owners and riders, must-be-friends-of-USEF owners and riders?"*

As editor of **EQUESTRIAN**, Brian Sosby has literally received thousands of e-mails in his seven years with the Federation. There have been e-mails of praise. Then there are the other e-mails—ones that remind him that there is always more to be done. Representing the spectrum of the USEF's 28 breeds and disciplines and its 87,000-plus members is a very big task and a concerted group effort. To acknowledge the good comments is to do the same with the more negative ones.

Some would say that approaching the task would require thinking outside the box. For Sosby, the idea of thinking "outside the box" is in itself too constricting. "To me," said Sosby, "there is no box."

The e-mail continued....

"There are those in the hinterlands who show, train, instruct and own horses that are successful in many other ways than winning a national, zone or a 'something-of-the-year' title. And while we may not fit the currently published version of your reader demographic, nevertheless, we are out there."

And so the idea for this feature article was born. It is not based on statistics—there are few to encapsulate the ethnicities of equestrians in the show world. Nor is this story

based on any singular news peg, though the timeliness of this piece is continuously reinforced by such high-caliber equestrians as Matt Mills, Lily Zilo and Wendy Ying. Mills, an African-American from Arizona, gave an unforgettable performance at the Adequan/USEF National Open Reining Championship in late June,

taking the title and adding his name to the record books. He is the first African-American male—and the first ethnic minority ever—to take one of the Federation's individual national championships. In early September, at the FEI World Equestrian Games in Germany, Mills helped Team USA bring home a Gold medal. Zilo, an American dressage rider originally from Hong Kong, will compete in the Asian Games in Dohar, Qatar, in December.

She will compete as one of three riders on Hong Kong's first dressage team. Ying competed last year at Catton Hall in England along with Prince Phillip in the 2005 World Combined Pony Driving Championships.

"I was proud to be there in England," said Ying, whose father is Chinese-American.

“While we may not fit the currently published version of your reader demographic, nevertheless, we are out there.”

Lesla Ellanson

Sosby continued reading the e-mail.

"We are not a Eurocentric, homogenous monolith. But, we are hardworking, bootstrapping fox hunters, dressage riders, hunter/jumper equestrians, reiners, and yes, trainers, scribes, instructors and even judges. We buy tack and horsey goods, and we are members of federations and associations. We have children who hold an Olympic dream."

Two of Ellanson's former students, both of whom she said she trained for 10 years—Un Jin and Hyun Jin Moon—have gone on to represent their country, South Korea, in the Olympic Games. Before that, in 1974, Ellanson founded a riding program for her local seminary in Dutchess, NY. And yet, Ellanson said, some people are shocked when they see her in her expensive black-sequined gowns, handing out awards at equestrian events. "They see me and they say: 'Here, hold my horse for me.' I look over my shoulder at them like, 'Who are you talking to?'" she said. "I do not know why they are surprised."

Sosby said, "I knew she was right when I read her e-mail. And, I knew we had an obligation to cast **EQUESTRIAN** magazine's net wider still."

USEF Chief Executive Officer John Long agreed that the sport's demographics had broadened and participation levels have increased over the years. He also acknowledged that it has a ways to go. "From a diversity standpoint, women's participation in equestrian sport has been significant in the last 40 years primarily because of access—both geographic and financial," said Long. "Other forms of diversity have not had this benefit. But today, with equestrian sports becoming more mainline and with more television coverage being broadcast, we are putting our sport into the homes of first time viewers. Television has changed a number of sports within this context and ours will change as well."

Bill Moroney is the president of the United States Hunter Jumper Association, and has attended more horse shows than he can count. Moroney said that there has been a steady increase in the number of ethnically diverse riders at shows. "Over the past 10 years, I feel that we have seen much more diversity at hunter and jumper shows and throughout equestrian sports overall," said Moroney. "I believe this speaks to the fact that equestrian sports are becoming more mainstream and accessible to more people."

"It is a topic that needs to be met," said Sosby, "with a wide eye and a sense of respect and acknowledgement for the people who don't get the limelight for one reason or another. It harkens to our determination to celebrate and show the breadth and depth of our sport. For the vast majority of people *in* the majority, race is a non-issue,"

Here are some of their stories.

Forward Movement

After nearly three decades in the horse world, Michigan's Christopher Ewing still remembers the offhand remark someone tossed his way at one of his first horse shows. "It was early on, when I was first starting to ride. Someone made a racist remark. It came from a couple of young guys who were showing their jumpers. I overheard them looking at me and whispering."

Their remarks sank heavily into Ewing's soul. But in that moment, he decided to use its energy to push him forward instead of allowing it to hold him back.

"I wanted to make sure that my horses went better. They had to move prettier. They had to jump better. They had to be quieter. They just had to be better horses," he said.

He felt like everyone had their eyes on him, and that they secretly, and some not so secretly, wondered: "How good can he be? He's black, after all."

Like many, Ewing's love of everything equine has been passed down through the generations. His grandmother, he said, took him to his first riding lesson when he was 13, and she was one of his biggest fans. "My grandmother said that my



Randi Muser

Awards are nothing new to actor, TV host and executive producer Christopher Ewing. From winning an Emmy to winning championships in the show ring, Ewing strives to be above the rest.

great-grandfather would have loved to have seen me ride because he was very much into horses as well.”

By the time he was 16, Ewing was showing and winning in the hunter/jumper circuits. His mother sat in the clubhouses of the fancier winter shows. Later, she would tell her son how the black waiters and waitresses would keep an obvious eye on Ewing as he rode.

“My mother said they would stop and watch. And they would clap afterward. Then they would go back to their work. It was almost like, ‘Wow, one of ours is out there riding.’”

By the time he was 18, Ewing was buying horses at the racetracks, training them and selling them as hunters. Today, Ewing is an Emmy Award-winning television producer, an actor, a model and the founder of a non-profit organization called Hang On To The Dream Foundation, which reaches out to kids and “gives them what they need to accomplish their dreams,” Ewing said. Sometimes it’s a set of paintbrushes. Sometimes it’s money for a saddle or an equitation class.

And, of course, Ewing still devotes himself to horses. People travel from around the country to learn about his training methods and “natural horse psychology” as a teacher and trainer who specializes in Warmbloods and Thoroughbreds. All but one of his clients, talk show host and actor Montel Williams, has been white.

“Whenever I give clinics, and the students are waiting to learn how to ride, the thing I always say to them is: ‘Hey, I wasn’t born to learn to ride a horse. I’m just some kid from Detroit. If I can do it, anyone can do it.’”

So in the end, Ewing has found a way to be grateful for all of his experiences: “Because I felt I was perceived as not being ‘as good as.’ So, I worked harder and harder and harder. And as for those people who were the nay-sayers? They created who I am.”

A Leap of Faith

When Isaida Sanchez of Jacksonville, FL, took her daughter, Aida, to her first horse show, she was more nervous than her daughter, who was the one competing. “I’ll be honest,” Isaida said, “I wasn’t sure the horse world was the place for us.” She said that the only other people speaking Spanish at this



Flashpoint Photography

Aida Sanchez has never given much thought to any negative comments thrown her way.

particular show were the ones who were tending to the horses.

She worried about Aida. How would her daughter be perceived? How would the other young equestrians treat her? Would she be ostracized? In the beginning, it felt more like an emotional ordeal for the mother than a fun adventure for the nine-year-old little girl.

Nearly a decade has passed and Sanchez is glad she and her daughter took the cultural plunge. “It’s actually probably been to her benefit to be Sanchez and not Jones or Smith. It’s given her spine. She’s got character.”

Aida is 17. A jumper, she and her horse, Castle Rock, just finished their first grand prix where they finished ninth out of 20 riders.

Aida says being of Dominican heritage has not affected her riding life at all. That doesn’t mean there haven’t been “incidents,” she said. It just means the teenager doesn’t give them much “air time.”

“I have heard people say, ‘Oh, she’s the Mexican...she can’t ride.’ But they say it joking around. Maybe somebody else...it might affect them. But, it doesn’t affect me. I’m proud of my heritage. If someone is like that, it’s ignorance on their part.”

“Besides,” she said, “in the end, you and your horse are all that truly matter—regardless of what color you are.”

Focus

Cristina Gomez is 16. Her father, a Mexican-American, has helped train riders for the Mexican Olympic team. He is so good at what he does, she said, that her singular goal is to get good enough to beat him.

So every day, Gomez and her mount, Riley, practice their combined training

exercises in Woodbury, CT. “I ride a hot Thoroughbred, and I have to ride him every step, every day that I ride. If I miss a day of riding, I pay for it.”

She is so busy, the teenager said, so totally excited about her horse and her dream of becoming a professional international rider, that she doesn’t pay much attention to the color of her skin or anyone else’s. “I mean, until you called me, I haven’t really thought about. It just doesn’t occur to me.

“I train just as hard as anybody else. Whether I’m a better rider or not has nothing to do with my ethnicity. It’s about how hard I worked that year, and the horse I have and how my day went. If you don’t want it bad enough, then you don’t want it bad enough. If you do want it bad enough—well, it doesn’t matter where you are from.”

Mandy Ling of Tennessee is 28. She says when she was a teenager showing, she felt a lot like Gomez. And by the time she got to the national levels of the hunter/jumper circuit, she felt too stressed out about her competitions to worry about being the only Chinese-American she could spot in the show ring. Sure, there were times when she would see another girl of ethnicity, or her mom and she would make note of another girl who may have been Asian. “But the protocol,” Ling said, “was pretty much that you don’t talk too much to anyone who isn’t from your barn. We were so busy trying to win.”

The reflection of what it was like to be “the only one” didn’t really sink in until now. “I would say, it would have been nice to have more ethnicities. It wouldn’t have mattered whether the person was Hispanic or Native American or what. It just would have been comforting. Even if it wasn’t ‘PC’ to walk up to one another and say ‘Hey, you know, it’s nice to see someone else like me at this level, too.’”

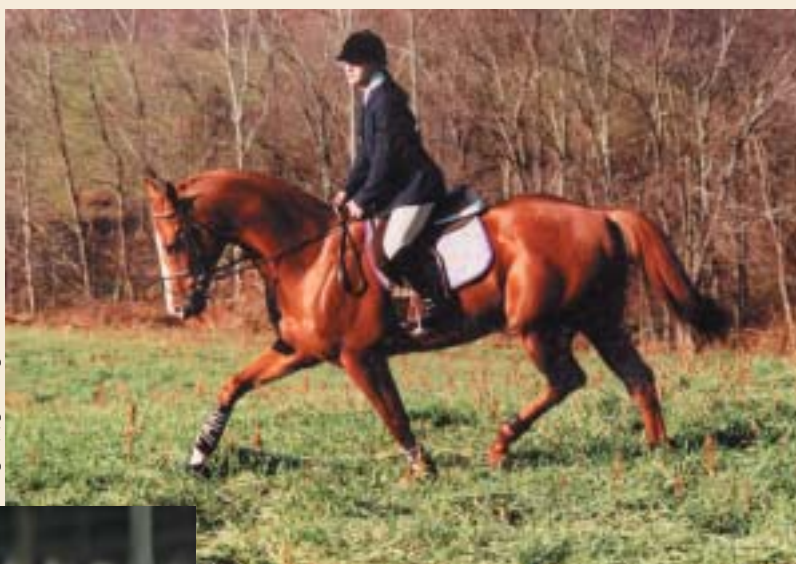
An Elite Lifestyle, After All

But even while Ling said it would be great to appeal to more people of color in the show world, she conceded in the next breath that economic challenges can be a hindrance—regardless of race.

“I don’t know how you afford it,” Ling said. “I mean, you can preach saying, ‘Oh, yeah, you can be a working student.’ Or, ‘Oh yeah, you can work yourself through this.’ Well, there is a handful that has. But, if you don’t have some sort of means to get your foot in the door, I don’t see this as happening to a lot of people.”

If the horse world is, indeed, a microcosm of the world at large, it is not a stretch to see why showing—a sport that requires thousands of dollars in disposable income—is a sport that could be extremely hard for some to break into...anyone for that matter. Ling’s father was a doctor, and her family was far from poor. Yet, she distinctly remembers how she and her mother “had the audacity to ask him to leave his work at the University of Tennessee and go into private practice so we could more easily afford the expenses of the show circuit.”

To his credit he refused, Ling said with a laugh. At 14, she did what many young riders without excess funds do. She tried her best to save the family money by learning to braid her horses, as well as those horses of other people. “I probably braided three a day,” she said. Meanwhile, the family boarded their hunters at home instead of in a show barn to save money, and when they went on the road, Ling and her mother ate at less expensive restaurants. “And, we weren’t shy about spending the night in a Motel 6,” she said.



Courtesy Cristina Gomez



Windcrest Photography

Above: Cristina Gomez’s main goal in showing is to be as good as her father, who has trained riders from Mexico for the Olympics.

Left: Mandy Ling’s focus on winning has helped her get to the national level in the hunter/jumper arena.

“My dad has been telling me that if you work hard enough and you are good at what you do, you can get anything. He was right.”

Matt Mills



Wallenberry

Above: From not having what he needed to compete to finding a way to make it to the top of the reining world and showing at the World Equestrian Games, Matt Mills has proven that hard work, self-confidence and determination pay off.

A Positive Attitude Helps

Recent reining champion Matt Mills has no trouble remembering those days—after all, they aren't that far away. Just a few years ago, when he went to shows, he remembers pulling his parent's Silverado and straight-load horse trailer next to the big fancy rigs everyone else seemed to be driving. That wasn't the bad part though. The bad part was that if Mills was showing more than one horse that day, which he almost always was, he had to drive back and forth to the boarding stable to load the horses because there wasn't enough room in the trailer to make one trip. While he was driving, there was often a troublesome thought on his mind: "Do I have enough gas to get back?" More than once, he overdrew his debit account to buy gas.

But even that wasn't the worst feeling, Mills said. No, the worst feeling came when he entered the show ring and knew in his heart he didn't have the horse he needed to win.

"It was frustrating to know that I was going to lose before I even started," he said. "It was like riding in the NASCAR with a Volkswagen."

But facts are facts—and the facts were that many winning reining horses cost thousands and thousands of dollars. At the time, Mills was riding a horse that cost \$3,500.

"I didn't know what to do about it, and I didn't have a plan," he said.

Mills considered other professional alternatives. He studied and passed a test to become an emergency medical technician, as well as a test to become a firefighter. He was on waiting lists for a job.

"And then right at that same time I started my business, Matt Mills Reining Horses, and I met my wife. And then the next thing you know, I had 15 to 20 horses, and I was back to thinking I could do it again." Almost by coincidence, his soon-to-be wife introduced Mills to a woman named Bobbie Cook. It turns out that Cook, owner of Out West Stallion Station in Scottsdale, AZ, was looking for a trainer. And Mills was looking for a barn in which to train.

"I interviewed him, and we just hit it off right away," Cook said. "I liked his work ethic. He is as honest as the day is long. I trusted him."

She trusted him to the point that she asked the then 25-year-old Mills to find her a breeding stallion. Funny how things work out: Cook needed a stallion; Mills needed a horse. Mills's wife told him about a horse she had heard about. Mills told Cook. Together, they flew to California to see a five-year-old Quarter Horse named Easy Otie Whiz.

It's bad manners to ask someone how much a horse costs. "So, let's just say that the horse I owned before Otie cost \$75,000 and Otie cost a lot more than that," Cook said.

Fast forward two years. With prize winnings of \$125,000 last year, Mills is the sixth highest ranking prize winner with the National Reining Horse Association (NRHA). "It's gotten to the point now, for me, when a little trouble comes up, I don't sweat over it. I know it's going to be okay in the end.

"My dad has been telling me that if you work hard enough and you are good at what you do, you can get anything. He was right."

Legends Create Legends

"My father was a legend in his own time," said Hugh Parker of Amenia, NY. "He opened the path to show horses. I have four brothers that show now, and I have three sons who show now, and I have three grandsons who are interested. It was my father's dream to be a horse trainer and show horses.

"In those days, show people were just people who said: 'My horse is better than yours.' My dad went to work for a man who was in American Saddlebreds. My dad was never allowed to show himself, because he was black."

In 1954, the Parker family moved to New York to work for Trotwood Farms. When the farm went out of business, they bought a few of the horses and began to train them.

"We became great grooms," Parker said. "Ours looked better than everyone else's, their tails, their coats. We polished them to the hilt."

As the Parkers matured in their experience and talents, the industry and culture around them began to evolve as well.

"We found ourselves in great demand," Parker said. Eventually, the family bought a barn in Millbrook, NY. Parker's father, Joe Parker, Sr., showed at Madison Square Garden.

"We were received very well by the horse people in the business. We didn't have a lot of racial barriers because my dad would never allow us to think that way. He would say: 'Whenever you think it is a racial thing, check your homework. Maybe it is something you didn't do or something you forgot.'

"My dad always told us, 'Never put yourself in a position to be discriminated against.'"

But, sometimes there was no way around it. "He (Parker, Sr.) was approached and told quite a few times that: 'If you show, you won't win.' Or, they would offer to pay him not to show. Or, they would offer to buy the horses."

His son chose to leave the world of Saddlebreds and enter the world of Arabians when there were virtually no other African-Americans in the field. "I worked for a place called Black Watch Farms. There were no black grooms, no floor sweepers, no black people cleaning the bathrooms."

If he had dwelled on it then, the imbalance would have held him back, Parker admitted. So he didn't. Today, Parker's family owns, runs and shares a 40-stall barn, which is filled to capacity.

The Final Dream

Every summer, small groups of teenagers from around the country, and sometimes even the world, spend a few weeks with Lesa Ellanson and her horses at New Hope International Equestrian Park.

Some of the youths come from troubled backgrounds. Some do not. Some are white, some are not. All begin their days at 4:30 a.m., when Ellanson takes them to the barns to muck stalls and tend to the horses.

Many youngsters arrive at the 100-acre farm with Olympic dreams in their eyes. "And I say to them: 'Okay...come with me. I'm going to show you the opportunities available,'" Ellanson said. "I'm going to put you to work. You're going to start out the way all great riders ever started out.'" She then tells them that they will start with a shovel in their hands, as they head toward the stalls to muck.

It doesn't matter who has ridden before and who hasn't. Money doesn't mean anything either. The horses and their care is where we all begin, Ellanson tells the kids. Stories of transformation in this program are common. There was the 15-year-old boy from California whose mother is Japanese and whose father is Hispanic. The teenager had problems with smoking, drinking, drugs and gangs. Ellanson told him he would be expected "to work like a dog" and ride every day.

"He didn't know the first end of the horse from another. Well, I bought him his helmet and his mother bought him his half-chaps, and he learned to sweat and to cry and he got mad, and now he is out there cantering in the field."

The program is called "Chung II Guk," which means "The Way of Heaven." Ellanson named it that because she has a dream.

"Everybody's ideal in the world is to live in harmony. Everyone has a dream that there is no more racism, no more sexism, no more borders. We can just travel and be nice to each other." She knows she is going out on a limb, she said. But just imagine.

Calling All Riders

No one in this story claims to speak for another. No one attempts to paint a broad picture of his or her race or culture, or the experiences of his or her race or culture in equestrian sports. Many were not even sure, at first, if they wanted to talk to a reporter about the topic. They said they felt so blessed to do what they loved, and they didn't want to come across as "negative." They just wanted to give voice to some feelings and thoughts; maybe inspire a few upcoming riders who wondered if there were any openings for them in the sport, too. Some believe that it is "a generational thing." Some said that the issue of inclusion and ethnicity is practically non-existent, while others said that it is still an issue to be dealt with. Opinions were widely varied. One constant was clear, however. The bond between a horse and rider is color-blind. ■



The equestrian world has honored minorities in the past, such as Morgan trainer Sullivan Davis. In 1981, Davis was named the American Horse Shows Association's (AHSA) Horseman of the Year. While minorities were predominantly trainers in the past, more and more African-American, Latino and Asian-American riders are making their talents known in the horse show world, breaking down any barriers that previous generations may have endured.

Lori Yearwood has been published in O magazine, Reader's Digest and Real Simple. While at the Miami Herald, she received two nominations for the coveted Pulitzer Prize (in feature writing). Yearwood lives in Oregon and can be reached at skode@skodeshorsetreats.com.