

Three's A Crowd

When Horse Ties Don't Bind

BY CALI CANBERRA

After years of writing about others (novels & marketing materials hyping Arabian horse investments in the 1980s), I'm branching out by writing about myself. This puts me in a vulnerable position, unsure of whether anyone wants to know what I have to say. *Women & Horses* asked me to write about the bonding relationship of mothers and daughters with horses. Initially I was eager and agreed. After a couple of weeks of avoiding writing the article I realized why I couldn't do it. My daughter and I didn't bond because of horses. In fact, they've been the wedge between us.



If I could design my life and my loved ones like I can make characters in my novels do what I want, feel how I want them to feel, and think how I want them to think, then my daughter Nicole would have shared in my love of horses and all that is entwined in a relationship with a horse. But no, this is real life, not fiction. Her interest in horses wasn't meant to be. In fact, I'm certain she often resented my passion for my horses.

Growing up, in her young mind, the resentment, or jealousy, was justified. For reasons beyond my control, she has no siblings. Nicole wanted 100 percent of my attention and love and devotion. But, I had horses before I had her and I couldn't imagine living without them. I dreamed of having two to three children since I was a lonely only child. I dreamed of my husband and children and I bonding through a love of horses. When I gave birth to my daughter I was elated since girls are generally more likely than boys to live and breathe horses.

Life was wonderful in those early years of marriage and motherhood. Although my husband didn't ride or train horses, he completely supported and encouraged my involvement. He even founded and worked at an Arabian horse brokerage business with me in the 1980s when Arabians were a hot investment. I took Nicole with me to farms when I studied their breeding programs and searched for horses to buy, and she joined Steve and I at a few high end auctions.

When Nicole was five years old, we lived in an equestrian community where Grand Prix hopefuls trained. Never having seen a rider take a spill, Nicole was enthralled by the jumpers and their riders flying through the air with ease and power and confidence. One day she maturely said she wanted to show jumping horses. When I told her she had to take riding lessons to learn the skill she gave up the idea entirely. At five years old she thought she could do anything she set her mind to. Well, to be honest, that's what we taught her, but we didn't intend the message to mean that you didn't have to go through a learning process. It was immediately after that when her interest in horses began to wane.

The following year, with the money we made from selling a group of horses to Paolo Gucci (yes, the designer, *Gucci!*) we moved to Steamboat Springs, Colorado and built our own farm. In my mind, it wasn't just for me. It was so my daughter would have the life that I would've loved to have had growing up. The quaint mountain resort ski town offered a lifestyle and sense of community we could have never experienced in Southern California. In elementary school Nicole discovered herself in a new way. The D.A.R.E. program taught

kids to just say 'no' and thanks to my husband and I encouraging her to speak her mind, the day came when Nicole just said 'no' more and more frequently when I suggested we do something with the horses. Occasionally, with prodding from me or from a friend of hers begging to go horseback riding, Nicole would give in and ride. She seemed to enjoy herself once she did it, and she had such a natural seat with wonderful balance and light hands. I was in my glory. I don't recall exactly when or how

my dream vision of our family life was shattered. I suppose it began subtly with her lack of enthusiasm until there was very little interest except when a mare delivered her foal and the foal learned to stand and nurse.

Children learn to say 'no' – as they should, but when Nicole started saying 'no' to being with me and the horses, I was so disappointed. We had a beautiful farm at a ski resort, gentle and quality horses, and attractive safe and clean facilities and tack.

What was the problem? She never had to feed or water the horses, clean a stall, shovel the snow, or do any chores. Desperate for us to enjoy the horses together, I offered to do all the grooming and tacking up when she wanted to ride. Finally, she came of age and spoke from her heart. One day, this young dear child of mine summoned up the courage to look me in the eye and tell me she didn't like being dirty, she hated the smell of horses and the barn, and more importantly – horses were my thing, not hers, so stop pushing it on her. At her

young age she was strong enough to take a stand and claim her individuality – I was so proud of her. Still, a part of me shriveled inside. I was devastated. What had I done wrong? How could this be?

In hindsight, I know my pain was because she altered the picture I had of an ideal family and I was going to miss our time together doing what I loved to do.

Nicole became quite good at snow skiing and she loved reading and creative writing. These things didn't smell.

When the investment horse market crashed and I finally realized it wasn't going to recover, we left Colorado. Our family traveled in a motor coach, home schooling Nicole for nine months while looking for a place to start a new life and new careers. Nicole decided she wanted to be a whale and dolphin trainer when she grew up. I thought, "At least it's a career with animals – in fact, the smartest animals." I encouraged her to pursue looking into it when we

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were at *Sea World* in Florida. Fortunately, she discovered that you absolutely had to have a college degree and had to be a good swimmer. Until then, she thought non-recreational swimming was pointless, going back and forth in a pool and having to do specific perfect strokes and breathing. But, she wanted to train whales and dolphins so much that in high school she joined a local year-round swim club. By her sophomore year she swam for both the nationally-ranked club team and her high school's varsity state team. For two years in college at UNCW she competed on their NCAA Division I level swim team.

I was thrilled that she found a year-round activity that she had a passion for, but initially I was afraid that (unlike with horses) she would learn very little about life from simply swimming. Little did I know! As it turned out, she learned goal setting, determination, dedication, commitment, teamwork, how to work through pain, how to handle losses at competitions, and how to be a good sport – win or lose. The swim team was like an extended family. She learned just about every life lesson I learned from owning and caring for my own horses. Most importantly, she actually had a passion – something she lived and breathed for, just as I did with my horses.

She smelled from chlorine and I smelled from horses. She had 'the feel' in the water and I had 'the feel' of a great ride. Unfortunately, I had as little interest in the sport of swimming as she did in horses. Of course, although I would rather have been horseback riding on the weekends, I went to the majority of her swim meets – but she knew my heart wasn't in it. I couldn't remember her times and which teams her team beat and who she did better than – basically, everything that was important to her. I'm sure

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she had her own disappointment in me because of it. I know that just being there wasn't enough, but it was the best I could do.

As Nicole discovered swimming, I began writing fiction about the elite-end of the horse industry in the 1980s. Although I was never much of a student and never went to college, I felt compelled to use my knowledge and experience in a productive manner. A new career emerged as a writer. Certainly not nearly as profitable as breeding and brokering high-end horses, but definitely equally as rewarding, if not more. When I started writing my first book, *Trading Paper*, Nicole wrote for her high school's award-winning newspaper. She had always done exceptionally well in writing classes. In college, she pursued psychology (probably to try to understand her quirky mother!) and journalism, reasoning that one field or another could be a backup career if she couldn't actually get one of the few jobs available training whales and dolphins. Last summer she did an internship at *Swimming World* magazine in Scottsdale, Arizona (where I started in the Arabian horse business in 1982). Now, she's an editorial assistant at a new national magazine, *Worthwhile*, a publication about bringing passion and purpose to your career. As I write this article, she's writing her first article for *Worthwhile*.

My writing has evolved from writing about the negative things in the horse industry to writing something worthwhile – an inspirational novel involving horses and people healing each other in spirit and body. *Storytellers* is about people finding their purpose and higher-self with horses – and about terminally ill people learning how to die, all influenced by Native American traditions, rituals, and way of being. Nicole will be one of my editors.

Through writing, we do have a passion in common. We have experienced many of the same things from our hobbies. Perhaps I did set a good example for my daughter, and maybe she learned something from me. In her early adulthood she matured enough to understand that just because you love something else (swimming or horses) it doesn't diminish the love you have for each other.

Horses may have once painfully pulled us apart, but they probably make us closer now. The joy and fulfillment the horses have given me allowed me to let my only child grow and develop into the woman she is meant to be. I didn't need to mold her into what I thought she should be, although it looks as if ultimately we'll professionally be in the same field.

At this moment, after I've spent the day with my horses and she at *Worthwhile* magazine, we're drinking green tea and both on our laptops at a rustic coffee shop writing articles for great new meaningful magazines. ■

