



Alaska's beauty keeps horsemen like Julie Eaton and her daughters in the state, even if it doesn't have the biggest horse show scene.

(Anne Lang Photo)



The Eatons Have Devoted Two Generations To Horse Showing In Alaska

And they've contributed to the formation of a close-knit community of Alaskan horsemen.

Anne Lang

THE ROOTS OF Eaton Equestrian Centre in Anchorage, Alaska, reach back to 1969, when Julie Eaton left her native Buffalo, N.Y., and moved to Alaska with her husband.

Already a talented artist, Eaton developed a new passion in 1975, when she began riding.

By 1980, Eaton was a single parent of two daughters—Dana, 7, and Britta, 10—looking for ways to supplement her earnings. That's when the concept of a riding school took hold.

"Before that," Julie said, "I'd worked to help develop a public equestrian center in Anchorage, so I'd learned a lot along the way. I'd been a working artist, but I let that go to devote myself full time to my new business."

Julie launched the EEC, one of the main hunter/jumper show barns in Anchorage, in 1980, and she still owns, manages and teaches there along with daughters Dana and Britta and Dana's husband Michael.

EEC offers a full boarding, lesson and training program. The attractive facility makes efficient use of 2.5 acres, with a spacious indoor arena, 16 box stalls, two paddocks and numerous 12'x24' turnout pens. A second-floor trophy room overlooks the arena, and the Eatons' cozy A-frame home sits on a small hill just up from the stables.

"I knew that hunter/jumper riding isn't a traditional sport in Alaska," Julie confessed. "But this type of business allowed me more time to spend with my daughters, because it's based at home."

Of course, considerable capital was needed to develop EEC. "My first horse was appropriately named Empty Pockets," said Julie with a laugh.

She wasn't shy about seeking counsel from experts. She credited Victor Hugo-Vidal, a frequent judge and visiting clini-

cian in Alaska, "for giving me great advice over the years and for bringing suitable hunters and jumpers to the area."

Like most trainers' children, Dana and Britta rode from an early age. When they got older, the girls helped their mother with the beginner students. Over time, Britta's interests became focused primarily on teaching and breeding, while Dana quickly rose through the state's junior ranks and set her sights on show jumping.

During one Christmas visit to Julie's hometown of Buffalo, she arranged for Dana to take a lesson at Susie Schoellkopf's barn.

"Susie saw Dana ride," Julie remembered, "and invited her to compete in a local horse show class. Susie was so kind, and it was a wonderful experience that affected Dana later in life, when she chose

to go to school at Canisius College in Buffalo."

Canisius had an intercollegiate team, and Dana took along a horse, Second Chance, or "Stilts," a Quarter Horse bred in Alaska by the Eatons, out of Julie's mare Empty Pockets.

"Dana braided at shows and did other work to help defray her riding expenses in New York," said Julie.

Later, Dana earned a master's degree in economics at the University of Oregon, where she met her husband of 10 years, Michael Enz, a professor who now spends winters teaching economics at Framingham State College in Massachusetts. But Enz spends college breaks and summers with the Eatons in Anchorage, where he helps manage some of the AHJA shows that EEC organizes.



Julie Eaton developed Eaton Equestrian Centre in 1980, and her daughters Britta Eaton (*shown on Nashville*) and Dana Eaton have shared her love of horses.



(Anne Lang Photo)

Although it keeps out Alaska's harsh winters, the Eaton Equestrian Centre looks much like any other equestrian facility on the inside.

A Rising Star

While still an undergraduate, Dana qualified for show jumping at the North American Young Rider Championships, a rare coup for an Alaskan, although fellow Alaskan Danielle Turner also rode in the NAYRC during the same years as Dana.

At the 1993 NAYRC, Dana rode Empire State, leased from Beezie Madden, and finished seventh overall. In 1994, Dana again qualified for the NAYRC, this time finishing fifth on Stilts. Earlier that summer, Dana and Stilts had won tricolors at Detroit (Mich.), Cincinnati (Ohio) and Saratoga (N.Y.).

Rather than being treated like an oddity, or ignored, for being from such a far-flung territory, Dana said she was mostly met with friendliness on the prominent show circuits and at the NAYRC.

As Julie observed: "There's such a mystique about Alaska that it actually ended up opening more doors for Dana than perhaps if she'd been from a more mainstream state. People are curious, and they want to see what you can do."

"There are riders up here who can go and compete successfully anywhere."

—Julie Eaton

Knowledge and skills passed down from both generations of Eatons have benefited countless students at EEC. Several of the school's riders—and Dana—have competed at the HITS Desert Circuit shows in California in recent years, earning championships in jumper divisions ranging from level 3 to level 7.

All of this, plus the accomplishments of riders from several other Alaska barns at the major winter show circuits, underscores a message that the state's hunter/jumper contingent wants the world to receive: "There are riders up here who can go and compete successfully anywhere," Julie pointed out, "given the right environment."

But stereotypes tend to linger.

"A few years ago," Julie said, "there was a picture in the newspaper of a moose jumping over a fence. He was in perfect form, with a beautifully rounded neck and his chin tucked between his knees. But that photo also seemed to symbolize what many outsiders probably think of when they try to imagine the hunter/jumper scene in Alaska: A moose going over a jump." She ruefully shook her head.



"I knew that hunter/jumper riding isn't a traditional sport in Alaska," said Julie Eaton, shown on her homebred mare Second Chance in 1989. "But this type of business allowed me more time to spend with my daughters, because it's based at home."



Like many Alaskan trainers, Dana Eaton (second from left) does a little of everything at shows—braiding, longeing, grooming, riding, schooling and training.

“What’s frustrating,” Dana added, “is when judges come up here thinking that we don’t know how showing works on the outside. We only have four shows, but we take them very seriously. We may not have the money that a lot of people outside have, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have the preparation and the presentation.

“A lot of our kids can really ride,” Dana added. “They want to be challenged by the courses and the judges. They want the tests to be legit; they don’t want everything dumbed down for them. Even if some of them might not ride as well as outside riders, they want a chance to try.”

Grassroots Knowledge

At EEC, as with many stables anywhere, students start by learning basic horsemanship, including horse care. Some of this education stems from practicality.

“We don’t have staff,” explained Dana, 36, “but we have several working students. Britta feeds in the morning. Working students feed in the evening, and they clean stalls.

“There’s a unique sense of community and a hands-on dynamic that exists in the hunter/jumper world here.”

—Dana Eaton

“Some of our clients prefer to work for their lessons,” Dana said, “so it’s a good situation all around. But some families do it because they want their children to have the full experience of caring for horses—to actually work and learn along the way.”

Some EEC students help groom at shows, and this assistance is crucial for Dana, because, like many Alaska hunter/jumper trainers, “at the shows, I’m braiding, longeing, grooming, riding, schooling and training. That’s one of the things that sets us apart from the outside.”

Britta, 39, is appreciative of help from EEC students at home, since she juggles management of the stables, teaching lessons and supervising EEC’s breeding program. The Eatons also have an Irish stallion, several broodmares and assorted homebred colts and fillies.

Said Britta: “We haven’t always been able to afford to go outside and make pur-



(Anne Lang Photo)

chases to get what we want, but through the years, we’ve been pretty successful at breeding to get what we want. One of Dana’s jumpers [now retired], whom we bred and who did levels 7 and 8, wouldn’t have been affordable for us to buy.”

Overall, it’s a good life at EEC, and the Eatons are content to call Alaska home. “I always enjoy showing outside,” Dana

mused, “but I also love coming home, because there’s a unique sense of community and a hands-on dynamic that exists in the hunter/jumper world here.”

Julie concurred: “When the girls became adults, I started looking outside for a place to move to. But there’s just something about the people here. Obviously, I ended up staying.”

Holding Their Own

Grand prix show jumper Hap Hansen, of California, has visited Alaska numerous times to judge and conduct clinics over the past 20 years.

“When I first went up there,” Hansen said, “the riding was a little bit on the novice side. But over time, it’s improved a lot. They try really hard, and they have good professionals. But they’re really handicapped by their short show season, by only having a few shows, and by only having a limited pool of horses for people to buy.”

Hansen believes that numerous Alaska hunter/jumper riders could hold their own at recognized shows in the Lower 48. He referenced Emily Geppert, who trained with him at the HITS Desert Circuit (Calif.), and earned the circuit championship in the older children’s jumpers on a horse she leased from Hansen.

Wilson Dennehy—trainer, judge and former national equitation champion—is based in Colorado, but his connections to Alaska trace back several decades.

“I came up here to judge a horse show in Fairbanks 34 years ago,” Dennehy said. “Since then, I’ve been back here many times to do clinics, usually several times a year.

“The improvement that the whole thing has undergone has been fantastic, phenomenal,” Dennehy declared. “What’s helped the progress are people like Dana [Eaton] and her mother, who’ve had some good, proper training, and are now training others in turn. So the number of decent riders here has expanded tremendously.”

Dennehy, 71, can relate to misconceptions about geographical areas.

“I grew up in Illinois,” he said, “and back when I won the Maclay and the Medal Finals, people still thought Chicago was full of cowboys and Indians. So I know exactly what it’s like to be stereotyped.

“Truthfully,” Dennehy added, “I think a lot of people don’t even know what’s going on up here. They just assume that the riders are very backwoods. Yes, maybe they’re not as advanced as riders in some other parts of the country, but there are some very competent riders and trainers in Alaska. And things are getting better all the time.”