

Carleton Brooks: Sharing His Perspective on the Sport

The winner of the 2021 USHJA Lifetime Achievement Award has made his mark by putting the horse first.



Carleton Brooks' famous "Tip of the Cap" photo was taken at HITS Tahoe while riding Sleepwalk. Brooks briefly raised hogs in Indiana before starting his successful showing career, below.

winning the most championships in PCHA Hunter divisions at A-rated shows. In addition, he's trained 12 USEF Horse of the Year winners.

In 2021, he was saluted yet again, earning the USHJA's Lifetime Achievement Award, along with David Distler (profiled in the March issue of *USHJA In Stride*).

Valuable Perspective

If you called Brooks an old-time horseman, he would take it as a compliment.

He has a deep regard for his horses, and wisdom learned through decades of involvement in the industry.

Brooks, who runs Balmoral Farm in Los Angeles and Malibu with his wife, Traci, grew up in Indiana. He briefly raised hogs and considered a farming career, then opted for horses. He showed in Virginia and the Carolinas before turning professional and moving to California in 1976, seeing a big future in the Golden State. And he was right.

Much of what he learned at the start of his career was passed along from the

trainers of that earlier era, who didn't cut corners. They stressed attention to detail, something he sees as too often lacking today.

"When's the last time anyone polished their stirrups or their spurs?" he responded when asked for an example of that trend. But the big picture involves far more serious matters.

Not only has Carleton Brooks seen it all, but he has also done it all.

Formerly a top rider at the highest levels, he's now a full-time trainer and a sought-after clinician. A motivator who inspires his students, Brooks says what's on his mind, soft-spoken words flavored with a low-key sense of humor.

Since 1985, the Californian has been a United States Equestrian Federation R-rated judge, officiating at hundreds of shows, including top competitions across the country. His dedication and achievements have been formally recognized many times.

His résumé is rich with awards and accolades. Brooks was inducted into the National Show Hunter Hall of Fame in 2019 for his years of distinction in the



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CARLETON BROOKS

Hunter ring. Additionally, he's trained numerous national champions and has served on many boards and committees, including the USHJA, the USEF and the Pacific Coast Horse Shows Association.

Brooks, 64, is a five-time winner of the Sallie B. Wheeler Leading Handler Award and the PCHA's Lorraine Lorimer Award, given to the professional rider



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TRICIA BOOKER

While he was coming up through the ranks, his mentors emphasized the importance of taking the time needed to develop a horse, rather than rushing to produce a product. “The riders and trainers of that time appreciated the opportunity to have that horse and savored the process,” said Brooks. “Now, it’s instant gratification. That’s how the world is, not just horses.”

Those making haste are often the ones in a hurry to post the photos of what they’ve done on Instagram or TikTok. While Brooks emphasized he isn’t talking about everyone, he cited one segment of those involved in training and showing who have a narrow view.

“They forget about the horse and how they operate,” said Brooks. “They don’t understand the natural movement and function of the complete horse. They’ve forgotten that they are an extension of

the horse, and that the horse should be ridden from the nail heads in the shoes on the ground, upward. That’s where you start. That’s the root structure of a tree.”

Brooks himself retains the lessons he learned early on. He keeps his eyes open, studying what the farrier and the veterinarian are doing, but most of all he observes his horses at rest, at work and in between. “I watch them in the stall, constantly observing them,” he noted, adding that’s the way he learns how best to care for and train them as individuals.

These days, however, Brooks finds himself in a growing minority. Instead of looking at their horses or what’s happening

around them at a show and learning from it—as was standard practice in an earlier era—many trainers and riders are all too likely to be on their phones.

“The art of observation has disappeared,” Brooks said, adding that he sees

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Clockwise from left: Carleton Brooks showed Gail Greenough’s *Outrageous* to success in the Open Jumpers at the Cow Palace; Brooks with Twinkle Gorman’s *Conformation Hunter Penn Square*; and with fellow judges at the USHJA International Hunter Derby Championships

too many people riding just for themselves and forgetting about the horse. “The old generation always tried to leave a horse better when they got off than when they got on,” he said simply.

In today’s sport, if a horse doesn’t work out, those involved may believe “it’s not their fault.” Brooks said the difficulty factor can begin with the purchase of a horse. Sometimes the buyer doesn’t ask the correct questions or doesn’t know the right questions to ask, he said. What’s important in training, Brooks noted, is the process. “The complete, overall process is lacking,” he said.

Brooks believes in treating every horse like he’s the best horse you have ever had, or will have. “No detail is too small to pay attention to,” he said. “Have empathy for the animal and then the rider.”

Not everyone does, he’s observed.

“Stand at the in-gate for eight hours and watch how many riders actually stroke a horse with compassion,” he said, emphasizing that need for empathy for both horse and rider. “I can’t teach you ‘feel,’ but I can set you up to learn feel.”

Taking the Time

One major change Brooks has observed is that most everyone is now in a hurry, which can make it difficult for some to justify taking as much time as necessary to train a horse correctly.

“Horses are non-speaking; the only way they can communicate is through their actions and their body,” he said. “How many people today see through their horses’ eyes? How many people even know how a horse visualizes things? How many people know how the horse is shod—‘no foot, no horse’? They don’t observe their horse’s natural way of going.”

He mentioned that a good ballet teacher watches how a student moves, reacts to situations and capitalizes on that knowledge. The same applies to the sport of figure skating, which most people understand.

“I always use the analogy that what we’re doing [in the Hunters and Equitation] is basically figure skating,” he said. “It’s a performance-based activity with gracefulness, and it’s subjective.”

He noted that when Olympic Games medalist Kent Farrington was a teen, his trainer, Nancy Whitehead, had him shadow professionals, and Brooks was among those he followed. Brooks believes in paying that kind of help forward, too. “I’m always happy to share, and I’m appreciative for the opportunity,” he said.

Even today Brooks appreciates those who take the time to learn. “Kent watches, has empathy for the horse, looks at it as the complete picture,” said Brooks, who added that not everyone realizes the importance



Carleton Brooks, pictured with wife Traci, finds satisfaction in taking time with his horses and enjoys the training process in and out of the show ring.

gence at home,” he said, noting that peer pressure drives some of that. They say, ‘If Joe’s stable is at a horse show, we should be at the same horse show.’ If people say they’re taking a week off from a horse show, to most that’s to rest, not re-prepare. Granted, some need to take a break and rest,” said Brooks, but there’s a way around that in terms of improving performance.

“You can train a horse at the walk,” he added of taking the time. “I can’t tell you how many hours I’ve spent on horses at the walk, trying to accomplish something.”

Similarly, he said too many people see someone else doing something and

think they should do it, too. “But they forget about the steps in between,” he said.

Brooks firmly believes in the importance of guidance, both for humans and horses. After a new rider was having problems with a horse, Brooks observed, “He’s taking you past the distance. Let

him take you past the distance and support what’s happening on the landing side. Pretty soon, he’ll help himself find the right distance.”

That’s just what happened, and Brooks told the delighted rider why: “You didn’t make him do it; you guided him.”

Brooks still rides every horse at home, but he has no plans to show again, despite a brief comeback in 2019. “Possibly this time I’m actually done,” he suggested, pausing a moment before adding, “I still have boots and a brand-new pair I’ve never worn, so we’ll see what happens.”

of taking the time to simply observe.

“I think they don’t know that they’re supposed to pay attention,” said Brooks. “In the old days, the whole way walking to the ring, you watched what was happening in the schooling ring, you watched the course, then rode your horse.”

He said now it’s not unusual to see competitors at the ring who don’t even know their course, and the trainers arrive from another ring in a hurry and aren’t familiar with it, either. “They come to the ring, get on the horse, and jump. How can the trainers help students study for the test if they don’t know what the test entails?” asked Brooks.

Part of what’s changed since Brooks started out is the number of competitions, the number of rings going at each show and the year-round opportunities to compete.

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