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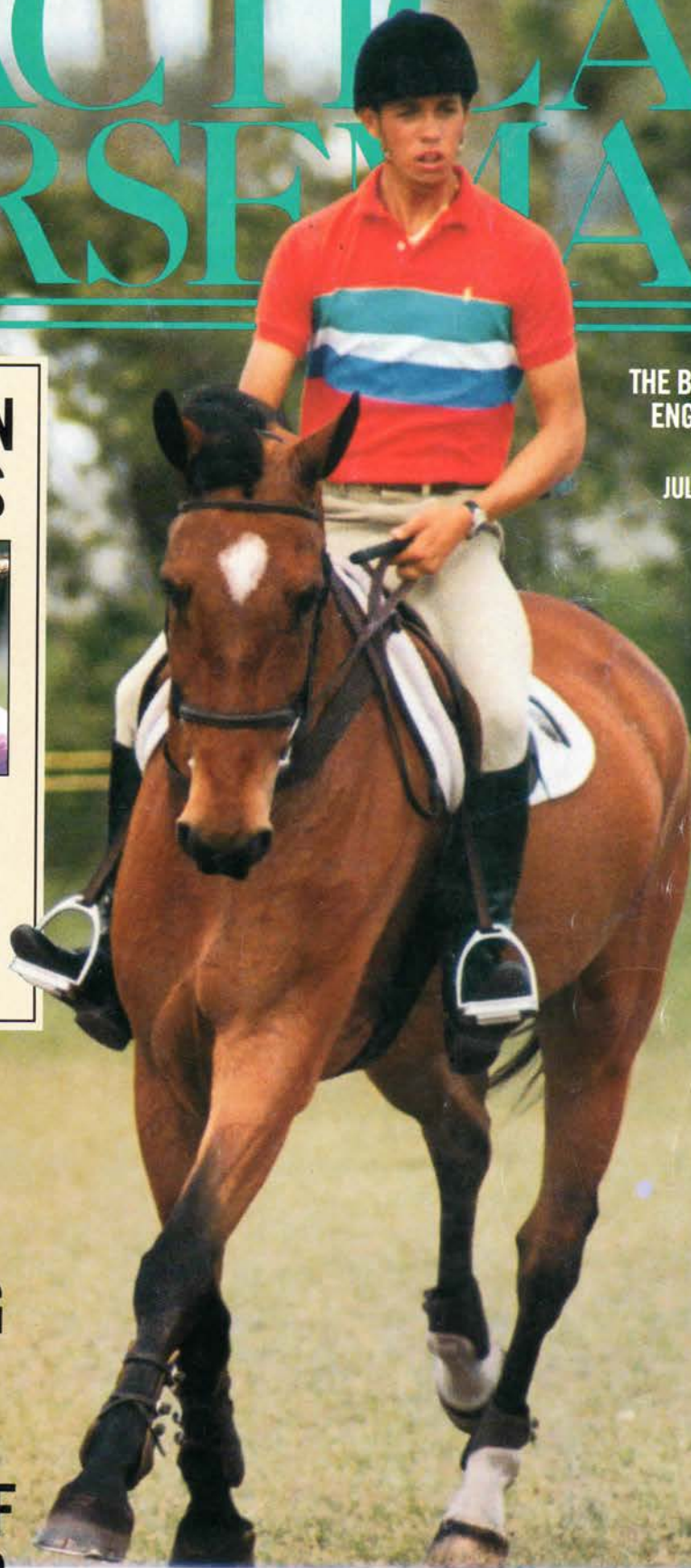
**STABILIZATION  
OVER FENCES**



**RONNIE  
BEARD**

**NICOLE  
SHAHINIAN:  
CATCH-RIDING  
KID**

**ESCAPE-PROOF  
YOUR FENCING**



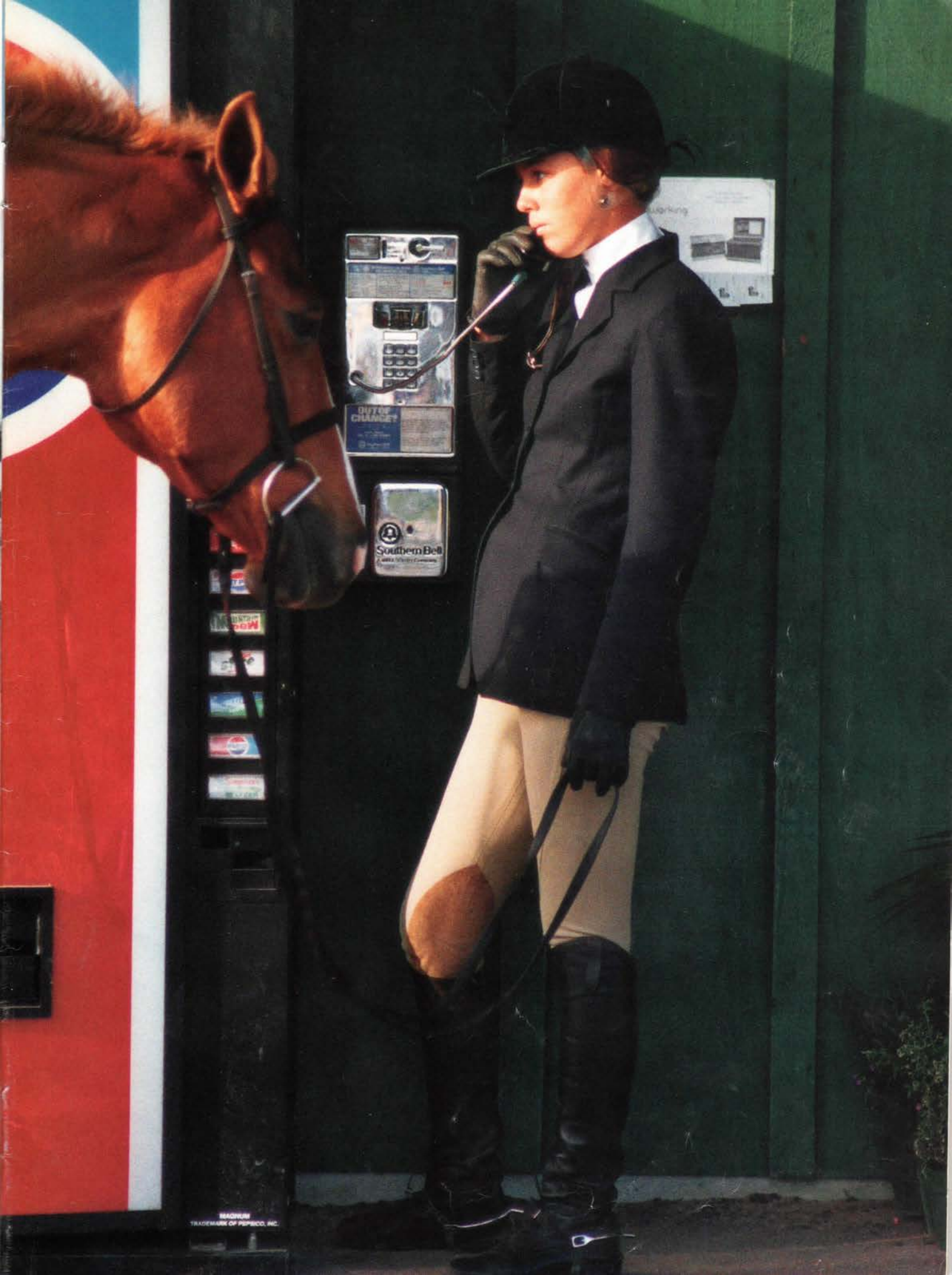
# KID

**I**t was a cold morning for Palm Beach in March, and I zipped up my heavy jacket before I stepped onto the junior jumper course. But once I was walking off the distances between the brightly painted fences, I put the below-forty-degrees weather out of my mind. I needed to analyze the course and plan my ride for not one but three horses, each with its own way of going, each belonging to a different owner who hoped to see it do well. The pressure didn't really bother me: At sixteen, I'd already been a professional catch rider for more than three years.

The three rides in the 8:30 A.M. junior jumper class were only the beginning of a typical Saturday for me on the Florida show circuit. To come later were several jumpers and hunters to be exercised, my equitation class (the least favorite part of my day), and the small and large junior hunter classes.

I'd dreamed of this kind of horse-show life since I was a little girl riding ponies with my friends, jumping snowbanks in the winter and tearing full-speed down the trail in the summer. In one of our favorite games, each of us pretended to be her favorite professional rider jumping a grand prix course. While my friends might choose to be Melanie Smith or Katie Monahan Prudent, I always wanted to be Leslie Burr Lenehan. Now, just a few years

*A day in  
the life of  
professional  
junior rider  
Nicole  
Shahinian*



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# CATCH-RIDING KID

later, not only am I catch-riding on the show circuit, but I'm riding with Leslie as my trainer. She seemed the natural choice when my mom (who'd taught me all my life) was looking for someone to put the polish on my form for the equitation classes. And Leslie helped me get some of the outside horses that

have spent so much of my life at horse shows that I see friends at every in-gate and feel supported by camaraderie whether I'm at Palm Beach or Harrisburg. And in spite of the thousands of classes I've ridden, the thrill of winning a good ribbon or championship never fades.

Brian Lenehan (who is Leslie's husband) walked the Palm Beach junior jumper course with me. We took our time, paying special attention to a sharp turn to a liverpool that some trainers were concerned about. I stood by the in-gate for sev-

up, then canter work with lengthening and shortening of stride to get him as adjustable as possible. In a few minutes I heard "Bartok in three!" — my signal from the gatekeeper that only three horses were ahead of us. Within minutes we were on course, where, despite a good warm-up, Bartok caught a rail. I followed this round with a warm-up and clean trip on Moonstruck, a gray owned by Peppercorn, Limited, who is all business in the show ring.

My last junior jumper was Big Top Pee Wee. He's the biggest



**Above, Nicole walks the Palm Beach course with Brian Lenehan: "I planned my ride for three horses, each with its own way of going, each with a different owner who hoped to see it do well." Right, aboard Pee Wee in junior jumpers: "We tried a tall vertical to back him off in the warm-up, but once we were on course, he barreled around so strongly we had several rails down."**

came my way as I started riding for more and more people.

The reality of a professional's life on the show circuit is just as exciting as I imagined when I was eleven, but it also involves a lot of what can only be called hard work. It can be a grind to ride ten or eleven horses a day — especially when some of them are difficult or even dangerous — and to keep your competitive edge after showing for weeks at a stretch. Catch-riding also means dealing with other trainers, and with owners whose expectations aren't always realistic. The rewards make up for the long hours and hard work: I

eral rounds after the class started to see how the course was riding. The liverpool turn seemed to pose less of a problem than a triple with long distances and a wide oxer, where more than one of the early riders had rails down.

About seven horses out I got on my first ride, a keen chestnut jumper called Bartok. The warm-up ring, right outside the in-gate, was a little crowded already and somewhat sloppy underfoot. I warmed Bartok up with the same routine I use for most junior jumpers: a couple of minutes walking, two or three minutes more at the trot to loosen him



horse I ride, and so strong that when I get off him I feel as if my arms are three inches longer. His owner, professional open-jumper rider and trainer David Raposa, helped me with the warm-up by setting up rails as I worked over a vertical that we gradually raised to just under five feet. I cantered a figure eight with the fence in the center: jumping, turning, and jumping again on a different lead. I hoped that the tall vertical would encourage Pee Wee to stand back from his fences a little instead of rushing at

them. It was a good try, but once we were on course Pee Wee barreled around so strongly that we had several rails down.

The outcome didn't upset me. David and I both know that I'm still learning how to ride Pee Wee; I have to alternately kick him forward when he spooks and pull back on him when he rushes. That doesn't make for very good adjustability.

The three jumpers I was riding this cold March day were all familiar to me before I got to the warm-up area; I'd ridden them before and

knew their peculiarities. There are many times, though, when I find myself getting on an unfamiliar catch-ride minutes before a class. I try a few lengthenings and shortenings to try to figure out what kind of stride the horse has before I jump the first practice fence, but what I rely on the most is my natural feel.

Riding is a skill that improves with practice, but you either have feel or you don't. My confidence with new horses goes right back to my early childhood in Leonia, New Jersey, where my parents ran a



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boarding and lessons barn. I used to slip out of the house to have breakfast with the grooms, and spent the days riding every pony in the place. At 10:00 P.M. someone dragged me indoors to bed.

Since I was comfortable with most ponies and horses, I had some showing success with mounts that you wouldn't normally recommend for the very young rider. For a couple of years I showed Pac Man, a pony who hated me so much that he spooked on course to spite me and took a bite out of my arm whenever we jogged for a ribbon. Ghostbuster, my first junior hunter, wasn't a typical packer either. He got harder to ride as I got better, and would spook on course or run out the in-gate and back to the barn. In spite of his willfulness, he was high-score junior hunter three years running in New Jersey — and he taught me how to ride tough and deal with problems when I needed to.

In spite of all the ponies and horses I've ridden, I always feel a little uncertainty when I get on a new one for the first time. I haven't let anyone hold a new horse when I'm trying to mount since the time an unfamiliar hunter flipped over on me and broke my shoulder. (The groom had a chain over his nose because he had been running backward whenever a rider tried to get on. He felt the chain as I started to swing my leg over and went straight up.) In fact, if I'm offered a new ride on a horse that I don't know at all, I let Brian know so he can check it out.

With the minutes ticking away before show time, the trainer of a new horse tries to give me as much information as possible in the brief warm-up. But once I get into the ring I may have to make my own decisions. The trainer may say, "This horse drifts left, doesn't spook, and has a big stride," but when I ride into the ring and over the first fence I



**"As soon as I came out of the ring from my equitation class, my mind was on my next ride, a small junior hunter called Cover Girl (right)."**

feel the horse spook a little to the right and fail to get down the next line all the way.

I can't just keep riding according to the trainer's information. I have a split second to take my own reading of the horse and decide what I need to change to get the best round out of him. It's rarely something drastic: perhaps a small adjustment in rein or leg pressure. Most trainers understand, and they don't come running after me saying, "Don't do that" every time I cross the ring.

On this Saturday morning, I came back for the class jumpoff with Moonstruck, but we ended up well down in the pack when he had a stop at one fence. There was no time to exchange more than a few jokes with Brian about my tough luck before I went back to the barn, where there were several horses I was supposed to exercise.

I had enough of a break, though, to stop at the gray trailer that serves as the show office and see my mom, Linda Shahinian. She's secretary for Palm Beach and a number of other shows, but we don't see much of each other because she's always in the office while I'm out riding. I told her how my morning was going and picked up some messages she'd taken for me before I headed back to the green barns where Leslie and

Brian's Fairfield Stables has permanent quarters during the Florida circuit. I took off my riding coat and put on my chaps before mounting the first of two hunters, owned by Jane Clark, that I was to exercise.

Then there was time for lunch and socializing before my equitation class. Equitation is my least favorite part of the show day, but seeing my friends around the show grounds is one of the things I like best. My first couple of years at shows were spent strolling the grounds chatting from the back of an extra horse or pony that my mom loaded for just that purpose. And when I started to compete in short-stirrup classes, I'd often halt my pony in the middle of the class to talk to friends standing at the rail, or turn around in my saddle to join a conversation behind me.

Now, the social life of the show is my substitute for what most kids my age get out of school. It's a good thing, too, because the only thing I have to do with school is the required academic work. It's crammed into a special shortened schedule when I'm not on the circuit. At the shows, school consists of lessons given by tutors. But I want to try college for at least a year or two, so I make an effort to keep up.

I also found time during the mid-



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day break to stop at the barn and play with some of the horses I ride. One of my favorites is Solid Gold, a giraffe-size Canadian palomino owned by Jane Clark that we all call Trigger. He's always looking for mischief and will walk right through crossties if he gets bored with being clipped. But on course he knows when it's time to get down to business, and if you point him at a jump he does his best to go over clean. I love to tease him on his days off, pulling his nose or grabbing his tongue until he makes terrible faces at me. He likes the teasing, and it makes us feel closer and improves our performance when I'm riding him. Not all horses benefit from that kind of fooling around, though. Some are downright mean and need to be reminded constantly who's in charge. Others need reassurance or careful preparation more than play.

Once lunch was over, I had to get ready for equitation. It's a part of showing that's been like school in that I don't enjoy it for itself. But although I do schoolwork because I have to, I try hard in equitation because I know it's good for the kind of riding I do enjoy.

For example, when I rode Trigger at the Junior World Cup in Florida last year, we made the jumpoff but had the first fence down in the second round because I didn't create enough impulsion in the first few strides. That's just the kind of technique Leslie has been trying to teach me in equitation since the first lesson I had with her. That first session took place before an equitation class at Devon five years ago. Until then I'd been taught only by my mother, who gave me all the basics but kept things light and fun. I'd won lots of ribbons, but a lifetime of riding by "feel" had left me a little casual about my heels . . . which wanted to creep up even though my leg was tight . . . and my back, which tended to slouch a bit.



## NICOLE SHAHINIAN

“W hen I was eleven or twelve I was thinking seriously about becoming a jockey. It was kind of disappointing when I realized I was going to be too tall,” says Nicole Shahinian, whose sixteen years have probably been spent as much on horseback as on foot.

Nicki's interest in the track resulted from helping her father break and train yearlings at Overpeck, the family's farm in New Jersey, when she was eleven or twelve. “I also went to the race track and galloped our horses there, though I wasn't supposed to. The regulations said you had to be sixteen to ride.”

Since outgrowing her racing ambitions, Nicki has shifted her hopes to open jumpers. “I love the

hunters, but I've done them for so long. The jumpers are a challenge—they're a lot more exciting, and there are more kinds of classes involved and more chances for travel.” Her cherished ambition is to buy and develop a jumper that has the potential to go all the way to grand prix. “I want a horse that's doing something, even at preliminary level, and that I can move up from there.”

Although success in a world that she was just pretending to belong to only a few years ago has brought the inevitable pressures, Nicki says, “This is still fun.” Riding purely for pleasure, instead of business, may have to wait until she has her own barn, as she hopes to someday, but certain memories from her short-stirrup days are still very fresh. That pony named Pac Man is still on the show circuit, for instance, and Nicki gives him a wide berth. “I'm sure if I got close enough, he'd bite me if he could.”

Leslie was a big change from my mother, and I felt intimidated at being taught by my childhood idol. She zoomed right in on my position and made it clear she expected me to listen closely and at least try to make the corrections she asked for. She had me lengthen my stirrups

so that I had to reach down more for the irons, and told me to press down with my heels. We worked on the flat: Leslie wanted me to feel where my horse was underneath me. If he was coming through from behind and carrying himself in a round frame, she said, he could



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## CATCHRIDING KID

respond more quickly to my leg and hand. Shortening and lengthening were part of the first lesson: I needed to be able to adjust my horse's stride quickly for the frequent turns and tricky distances of equitation courses. My mom and I had worked on this, too, but Leslie wanted me to make the adjustments more quickly and to a greater degree. It would be nice to say I rode out of the equitation class that followed that first lesson with a good ribbon, but I was still so young and new to the competition that I was just trying to do my best and get some mileage.

It took four more years of lessons and countless reminders to myself ("Here I am riding my equitation horse in an equitation class. I need to keep my back straight and my heels down.") before I won the Medal Finals at Harrisburg in 1990. And in the final round there, when the other top rider, Alex Wariner, and I switched horses, I think it was my natural feel that made the difference. I had been riding Kandi, a quiet and experienced warmblood leased from George Lindemann, Jr. Alex's horse was a little hotter than Kandi, but not as hot as some of the horses I'd been getting on to show with ten minutes' notice. There wasn't even a little warm-up period when we switched — I walked directly from the chute into the ring. But as I made the circle to the first jump, I lengthened and shortened a little bit without being too obvious about it, just to get a feel for the canter and how everything was going to work. By the time we got to the trickiest part of the jumpoff course, a halt followed by a counter-canter through a right turn, I was pretty comfortable and negotiated it well. Alex didn't have the same luck with Kandi, who switched leads after picking up the counter-canter.

Winning the Medal last year was an important accomplishment for

me. Many of the riders I respect most — including Leslie — won the Medal or Maclay finals as juniors, and I wanted to be part of that tradition. I didn't want to leave it to my last junior year, either, because that creates too much pressure. As it was, I lay awake some nights before last year's final thinking, "It's only a month away," and I lost several pounds on finals weekend because I could hardly eat.

At Palm Beach in March I was riding a new equitation horse, but he was responsive, the Maclay class was fairly routine — and I came away with second place. When I got out of the ring, my mind was already on the final classes of the day, a small junior-hunter division in which I was riding a nice gray, called Cover Girl, that belongs to Andrea Fuellhart-Schultz.

If my focus in equitation was on making my position as good as possible, I needed to shift my concentration in the next class to making my horse's form as perfect as possible through eight smooth jumps. I knew that Cover Girl, like most hunters, went best after a quiet, relaxing warm-up, so I started trotting on light contact, then picked up a canter and jumped a few fences — an oxer and an in-and-out. I tried to hold the quiet feel of the warm-up right through the in-gate and around the course: riding on light contact, holding my body still, and making no big adjustments. We had a nice flowing round, got scattered applause at the end, and were called back second.

A good ribbon in a hunter class doesn't pack the same thrill as qualifying for the Junior World Cup or winning the Medal Finals, but it's one of the satisfactions that makes the grind of a catch rider's life worthwhile for me. As I rode back to the barn after the last class of the day, I reflected that the Florida Circuit was almost over. I was looking forward to going home and getting a break in the routine of show, show, show. But I've been at the business of catch-riding for three years, and I know that after a week of what most people my age think of as "normal" life, I won't be able to wait to go to a horse show again. ■

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