

John French

“Horses, Life, & What Is Important”

by Diana De Rosa



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John French pondered for a moment taking time to formulate his thoughts before verbalizing them. He was thinking about his career as a top Hunter/Jumper rider and his many successes. They were and still are important to him but...

“I love horses, competition and the lifestyle; however, I don’t want it to be the only thing in my life,” John explained. He was at the Rolex FEI World Cup in Las Vegas at the time and had just finished helping his U.S. teammates win the World Cup Team Hunter Challenge. Although proud of that victory, he considers his win of the 2006 Monarch International Show Circuit Magazine Professional WCHR Finals to be an even greater achievement.

“In the Hunters I think the Pro Finals is the most prestigious competition you can win. First, you have to qualify to be one of the top four riders in the country. Once qualified, you have to prove your skills by riding unknown horses in both a traditional hunter class as well as in a handy hunter class.”

In addition to his Pro Finals victory, in 2006 he also won the Emerson Burr Trophy for the Hunter Horseman of the Year and the Zone 10 Equestrian Athlete of the Year. In 2007, John was Champion in both the Regular Working Hunters on Andiamo and the Green Conformation Hunters on Scout at the Devon Horse show. He was also awarded the Show Hunter Hall of Fame. At the 2007 Washington International Horse Show he was the Leading Hunter Rider. In the six-year-old jumpers John and Natsu were the USEF National and Zone Champions, and won the YJC 6-year-old Championship.

With all those victories you'd certainly think that John would be satisfied with his accomplishments. Although proud, he accepts them with a demeanor that is gentle and quiet yet reflective.

There was a time when he wanted horses to be the only thing. Then it started to overpower his life. It became too important and he too competitive. John realized it was time to rethink whether this really was what he wanted the riding to be about.

“Often, we don't realize until it is too late what is ultimately important in life. Spending time with people I care about and giving back to the community is what gives me the greatest sense of satisfaction.”

How It All Began

His love for horses started at a young age and once bitten by the horse bug, there was absolutely no turning back.

“My mother was a riding teacher, and I have an older brother whom she pushed to ride. By the time he was 6 he didn't want to ride anymore. My mom decided that I was going to have to prove to her that I wanted to ride.”

John was only 3 when he impressed upon his mom that riding was something he really did want to do.

“I didn't grow up like a lot of kids on the horse show circuit. I did Pony Club and fox hunting. We lived in the Maryland area. I would go fox hunting on a small pony and jump these 3'6" coups. We couldn't afford to go to the Big 'A' shows, so we would go to a couple of shows a year. When I was 15, people would ask me to show their ponies. I was small enough. Even in my last year as a Junior, I was catch riding in the Large Ponies.”

While still a junior and acting as his own trainer, John won the Maryland Equitation Finals and was second in the Virginia Equitation Finals.

“My mother was a great teacher for me until I was about 14. After that I learned by watching riders that I admired and emulating them. Also, I started getting instruction from trainers who had asked me to catch ride.”

Once riding ponies was no longer an option (because he was too old), John began working for Danny and Brian Lenehan and in the years that followed he also worked with Rick Cram, Gary Kunsman and Patty Heuckeroth. John admired them all and wanted to glean as much knowledge as he could from each one.

“They are just real horsemen, and I learned a lot. I finally felt I had enough to start out on my own and decided to go back to New Jersey.”

And so John was slowly building a business. One day in need of a horse for a client he called Pam Hall, who was living in California.

“When she returned my call she said that the trainer at her barn was sick. They had 10 horses going to a horse show and needed someone to ride them.”

That sounded good to John, who hopped on the next plane out.

“I thought I could go ride, make money and look for horses. Then they asked if I could come back for another show. Sadly, they found out that their trainer was diagnosed with a terminal illness and wasn’t going to be able to train anymore. So, for awhile that became my life. They kept flying me back and forth every two weeks.”

John started to recognize that there was more for him in California than in New Jersey. “So, I packed my bags and drove to California and haven’t looked back since. I love the people and the weather, and I like living near San Francisco. It’s probably where I am going to stay for the rest of my life.”

Recognizing What Is Important

In California things continued to improve for John, who was riding and winning more and more. Yet, as time passed, John recognized that the horses were starting to take control of his life. What once was making him happy was causing him stress. He had mistakenly believed that success in competition would fulfill him professionally and personally.

“I realized that I was feeling a void. I thought the next win or accomplishment would fill it and make me happy, but it wasn’t. When you are competing every week, it is easy to lose perspective.”

“In time, I realized that happiness is internal. I felt the most satisfied after helping others. It made me realize that I need to take breaks. If I allow my success to dominate my life, then when I have a bad round it is too devastating. Stepping outside of it reminds me that how I do does not define who I am.”

About seven years ago when he was not sure that he wanted to train horses anymore, he traveled to a Buddhist retreat, “There I learned that I was not alone. We are all struggling for acceptance not only from others but from ourselves.

“In our culture we often equate happiness with success. Now instead of focusing on whether or not I am winning, I feel grateful that I am able to spend my life doing what I love doing. It is important for everyone involved in this sport to realize that winning is great, but giving back to the sport is equally satisfying.”

Life Beyond The Horses

And so John has discovered that there are other things that don't involve horses that he truly enjoys. He likes to swim and revealed that he used to be quite a gymnast.

“When I was in high school, I had to choose between riding and gymnastics. I used to do half time shows for football games. I would do back hand flips all across the field’

John also loves “working and talking with the elderly. I have some neighbors whose spouses have passed away. I enjoy talking to them and taking them places. It's fascinating to listen to them.”

There are also a number of other people that John looks up to.

“I like Robert Thurman, Uma Thurman's father. I read a lot of his books about what is important. Kathy Kusner is another person who is amazing. She has taken her experience with the horses and helped to create the program Horses in the Hood, where she raises money for inner city children in Los Angeles. She turns children's lives around by teaching responsibility and compassion with and through the horses. I admire her.”

“My true mentor is my father, though. He is the most grounded person. Unfortunately, I don't get much time to spend with my family as they live

in Baltimore. When I am having difficulty, it is great to go home and talk with him because he always has a different perspective. He's not into the horses at all and can give a realistic point of view. He always helps to keep me grounded."

Bringing The Sport Of Hunters To An International Arena

On a wider scale, John is eager to see the sport he loves become more international. The World Cup Team Hunter Challenge was a competition between four Olympic Medalists (Rodrigo Pessoa of Brazil, Marcus Ehning and Christian Ahlmann of Germany and Michael Whitaker of Great Britain) and four top Hunter riders. In addition to John who lives in Redwood City, California, his teammates included Louise Serio of Pennsylvania; Scott Stewart of New Jersey and Peter Pletcher of Texas.

John's team won but that victory had to be earned because Hunters are not used to the crowds commanded by the Dressage and Show Jumping riders. The sport of Hunters really only exists in the United States and sparingly abroad and John believes that needs to change.

"I would like to get more involved in promoting the sport and see it evolve into something more international where we can have prestigious classes at other shows and in Europe. I've shown jumpers and represented the United States in Europe. I would like to have that kind of camaraderie in the Hunters competing internationally as a team."

John explained that Hickstead (GBR) is one place that does have Hunter classes, but it's a little different than what we know as a Hunter.

"It would be nice to do a Classic abroad against foreign Hunter riders and show some differences in our style. I don't know why it can't be more of an international sport. Most of our horses are coming from over there, and we need to have something more to reach for."

It's very true that we seem to be missing something for the Hunters. The Jumpers have the World Cup, the World Equestrian Games and the Olympics. The Hunters have none of that. The World Cup Team Hunter Challenge might just be the thing that will bring the Hunters to a new level because that competition proved that an audience can be entertained when watching Hunters.

So, while John in one breath wants to get a reprieve from the horses, in the next he shows how for now horses will continue to be an important

part of his life. In between, however he'll spend some time learning from his elderly friends, he'll keep his father's words of wisdom fresh in his mind, and he'll look for new and different ways to enjoy and appreciate the Hunter sport he loves so much.

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