



Nicole Lakin Turns Adversity into Opportunity with BarnManager

By Emily Riden, Jump Media

Nicole Lakin started riding when she was seven years old, competing in the short stirrup and hunter divisions before transitioning to an A-circuit show barn and getting her first taste of the jumpers. Then, when the Reading, PA, native decided to give the equitation a try as well, she began training with Beacon Hill Show Stables and Max Amaya in Colts Neck, NJ.

It's a story that starts out not atypical to that of many other riders who have competed successfully on the hunter/jumper circuit as juniors and amateurs. But the pages of Lakin's story that ultimately led to the chapter she is on today – riding as a successful amateur and running her own company as the founder of BarnManager – are anything but typical.

In 2006, Lakin was competing at the Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, FL, when she fell off her then-junior jumper, Alaska. In the six years that Lakin rode and competed Alaska, she fell off a total of two times; this particular time she hit the ground hard. Out of fear of a broken rib or similar injury, Lakin was taken to the hospital to undergo chest x-rays. There, the chest x-rays did in fact reveal broken ribs, but also something worse: stage three Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

"Hodgkin's is a relatively slow-growing cancer, which is incredibly lucky," Lakin, now 29, explained. "But on the other hand, I was already at stage three of four. So it's very likely if I had not fallen off that day and gone to the hospital, it could have gone unnoticed."

Following an initial surgery, Lakin spent the next four months undergoing intense chemotherapy treatments, all the while insisting that she continue to be able to be around the horses.

"I really wanted to be able to ride," said Lakin. "I sort of tried to play it tough, and I told my mom that I would only do what the doctors wanted me to do if I was able to ride. I was lucky enough that my doctors agreed. But the first time I went to ride post-surgery and after my first treatment, I don't think I really realized just how weak I had become in such a short time."

"Instead of getting frustrated because it wasn't really within my control at that point, I sort of threw myself at taking care of my horses back at the barn and spending as much time with them as possible," Lakin continued. "It really became clear to me how much they do for us. I felt like I had the time, and I wasn't riding as much, so I wanted to do as much as I could for them. So I spent a lot of time with the vets and learning as much as I could."

In the decade since Lakin's Hodgkin's Lymphoma diagnosis, she has often been hesitant to share her cancer story, not wanting it to come across as a story that requires sympathy or that defines who she is. Most recently however, Lakin has realized that her experience with cancer has in fact defined her in many ways – and for the better.

Management Role

Perhaps that first defining moment came as Lakin was unable to ride at full-strength, and she instead realized a real love for just being around and working with her horses on the ground. That realization ultimately led her to begin a role as a working student for Amaya at Stonehenge Stables eventually taking on more and more management responsibilities as Amaya's business continued to grow.

While working and riding with Stonehenge Stables, Lakin earned team gold and individual silver medals at the 2006 North American Junior & Young Rider Championships, and later she enjoyed what she considers her career highlight, jumping a 1.50m grand prix on the well-known grass International Ring at Spruce Meadows, all the while continuing to manage the horses and learn the management role inside and out.

"We were traveling a lot and there were times that I was charged with managing large groups of the horses on the road," said Lakin, a graduate of New York University and Babson F.W. Olin Graduate School of Business. "I did a tour of Spruce Meadows one year with 15 horses and was really given a lot of responsibility on the management side. I just started playing around with Excel and Word documents and making forms and things that would improve some of the troubles that we ran into managing

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Submit events by the 10th of the month preceding publication to paequest@aol.com or P.O. Box 8412, Lancaster, PA 17601-8412

November

3-4 Pennsylvania Equine Council Annual Meeting. Super 8 Motel, State College, PA. pennsylvaniaequinecouncil.org.

3-5 Southwest Virginia Hunter-Jumper Association Finals. Virginia Horse Center Foundation, Lexington, VA. (540) 464-2950 or horsecenter.org.

4 Gymkhana. Fairwinds Farm, North East, MD. (410) 658-8187 or triangleshowseries.com.

4 MDHT Fall Starter #3. Loch Moy Farm, Adamstown, MD. (301) 514-0111 or lochmoyfarm.com.

4 Schooling Show. The Ridge at Riverview, Asbury, NJ. (908) 479-6171 or theridgefarm.com.

5 Radnor Hunt Pony Club Paper Chase. Radnor Hunt Pony Club, Malvern, PA. radnorhuntpc.org.

5 Pennsylvania Hunt Cup. Rt. 926 & Newark Rd., Unionville, PA. (484) 888-6619 or pahuntcup.org.

5 Schooling Horse Trial. Bucks County Horse Park, Revere, PA. (610) 847-8597 or buckscountyhorsepark.org.

5 Jumper Show. Top Rail Farm, Cochranville, PA. (484) 645-2993 or triangleshowseries.com.

6 "Stuff the Turkey" Hunter Pace. Lord Stirling Stable, Basking Ridge, NJ. (908) 766-5955 or somersectountyparks.org.

7 First Tuesday Lecture: Advanced Imaging: Innovations in Diagnostic Capabilities. New Bolton Center, Kennett Square, PA. (610) 925-6500 or beltb@vet.penn.edu.

6-10 Standardbred Horse Sales Company's Yearling & Mixed Sales. Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex, Harrisburg, PA. (717) 637-8931 or theblackbook.com.

9 Evening of Science and Celebration. Rutgers Equine Science Center, Cook Campus, New Brunswick, NJ. (848) 932-9419 or kylehart@njaes.rutgers.edu.

9-12 Equine Affaire. Eastern States Exposition Center, West Springfield, MA. (740) 845-0085 or equineaffaire.com.

9-12 November Harvest Classic (A) 2*. Swan Lake Stables, Littlestown, PA. swanlakehorsheshows.com.

9-12 Virginia Horse Shows Association Championships. Virginia Horse Center Foundation, Lexington, VA. (540) 464-2950 or horsecenter.org.

10-12 Natural Lifemanship Fundamentals. Honey Brook Stables, Honey Brook, PA. crktrainingvideos@gmail.com.

11 Dressage/Combined Training Show. Blue Goose Stable, Cochranville, PA. (610) 999-5231 or bluegoosestable.com.

12 French Creek Equestrian Association Paper Chase. 412 Marsh Rd., Elverson, PA. (610) 469-0111 or nhf2054@gmail.com.

15 Gum Tree 4-H Club Meeting. KA Equestrian Center, Cochranville, PA. gumtree4h@gmail.com.

18 Mix 'N Match Horse Trial. Bucks County Horse Park, Revere, PA. (610) 847-8597 or buckscountyhorsepark.org.

18 High Point Awards Banquet. Quentin Riding Club, Quentin, PA. (717) 273-1151 or quentinridingclubpa.com.

18 Winter Tournament. Virginia Horse Center Foundation, Lexington, VA. (540) 464-2950 or horsecenter.org.

19 Jack Frost Jubilee Fun Show. Crescendo Training Centre, Ephrata, PA. (717) 475-3047 or crescendotrainingcentre.com.

19 The Turkey Trot Pleasure Ride & Drive. Horse Park of NJ, Allentown, NJ. (609) 259-0170 or horseparkofnj.com.

24 Black Friday Paper Chase. Fair Hill Stables, Elkton, MD. (410) 620-3883.

24 Fall "Family and Friends" Introductory Horseback Ride. Lord Stirling Stable, Basking Ridge, NJ. (908) 766-5955 or somersectountyparks.org.

25 Thanksgiving Hunter Pace. Bucks County Horse Park, Revere, PA. (610) 847-8597 or buckscountyhorsepark.org.

December

2 Donation Derby. Loch Moy Farm, Adamstown, MD. (301) 514-0111 or lochmoyfarm.com.

2-3 Winter Holiday Festival. Lord Stirling Stable, Basking Ridge, NJ. (908) 766-5955 or somersectountyparks.org.

3 Holiday Jumpers 2*. Swan Lake Stables, Littlestown, PA. swanlakehorsheshows.com.

4 QRC Jingle Bell Show. Quentin Riding Club, Quentin, PA. (717) 273-1151 or quentinridingclubpa.com.

5 First Tuesday Lecture: Tales from the Emergency Room. New Bolton Center, Kennett Square, PA. (610) 925-6500 or beltb@vet.penn.edu.

10 Jack Frost Jubilee Fun Show. Crescendo Training Centre, Ephrata, PA. (717) 475-3047 or crescendotrainingcentre.com.

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and trying to communicate with people and horses in multiple locations. I was always looking for ways to get around those communication issues and being more organized. Once I started playing around with it, I realized that there was really a need for something more."

Lakin recognized that need and a possible solution, and when many friends and colleagues agreed that the idea could be a good one, Lakin decided that she needed to go for it.

"Having gone through what I had, I know how lucky I am, and I really decided that I wanted to enjoy my life," Lakin said. "I wanted to make decisions that would enable me to live the best life that I could because life is unpredictable. I had already gotten lucky once, so who knows."

"That's really why I had the courage to follow my passion and my idea. I really felt like if I didn't try it, I would regret it," said Lakin, whose brainchild would eventually become BarnManager, a cloud-based barn management software. "That's what has been the driving force behind not just having an idea, but actually going for it and convincing people that I was worth taking the risk on."



Nicole Lakin and Quattro Queen at Stonehenge Stables, where she has been training with Max Amaya for more than a decade and more recently, managing large numbers of horses on the road. Photo by Jump Media

Today, BarnManager is being utilized to help manage barns spanning disciplines from top hunter/jumper show barns to local stables and even to horse rescues and therapy organizations, which are now able to utilize the subscription service at no cost thanks to Lakin's "Free for 501(c)(3)" program.

When Lakin first started riding in Pennsylvania or when she hit the ground in Florida after her fall, she never could have imagined that her story would involve Hodgkin's Lymphoma or that that same adversity would turn into an advantage and the founding of her own company. Now, Lakin is thankful for each experience and the setbacks that have gotten her to where she is today.

"Horses are unpredictable; life throws things at you that you never could have imagined, and sometimes your goals need to change as a result," Lakin said. "That doesn't mean that you failed, or that you aren't good enough. It just means that you have a new opportunity that you didn't have before. This lesson is something that carries over to my professional life every day. You can do everything right, and you can try to predict everything that could possibly go wrong and plan for it. But there is always something outside of your control that you couldn't predict. If you aren't willing to be flexible and readjust to the changing circumstances, you may miss a huge opportunity."

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