

NICOLE LAKIN'S UNPREDICTABLE PATH IN LIFE

By Emily Riden

It's said that one of the only predictable things about both life and horses is their mutual unpredictability. To verify the accuracy of that statement, just ask Nicole Lakin.

As a junior rider competing successfully in the equitation and jumper rings, the now-29-year-old with a degree in social and cultural analysis would have never imagined that her life and horses would take her where she is today: working as the founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of her own brainchild software company, BarnManager.

And for Nicole, what is perhaps even less predictable than where she has ended up is the path that she has taken to get there.

AN IDEA IS BORN

Nicole got her start with horses much like many other amateur equestrians showing successfully on the hunter-jumper circuit today. She began riding at 7 years old, competing in the local short-stirrup and hunter divisions before transitioning to an A-circuit show barn and getting her first taste of the jumpers. Then, the Reading, Pennsylvania, native decided to give equitation a try as well and she began training with Max Amaya at Beacon Hill and Stonehenge Stables in Colts Neck, Jersey.

Throughout her young career, Nicole racked up numerous accolades, including the team gold and individual silver medals at the 2006 North American Junior and Young Rider Championships (NAJYRC), and she had the opportunity to compete on some of North America's most exciting equestrian stages — ranging from under the lights at the Winter Equestrian Festival (WEF) to the acclaimed International Ring at Spruce Meadows.

At the same time that Nicole was riding



Nicole with her horse Wannabe, aka Biebs, and dog Monkey
Photo by Jump Media

and competing under Max's tutelage, she was spending time as a working student and getting a behind-the-scenes, hands-on look at the management and horse care side of running a successful barn. As Nicole moved on to college and beyond, she remained on board with Max, taking on even more of a full-time working student role.

"I was really managing a lot," Nicole said. "We were traveling, and there were a lot of times that I was charged with managing all of the horses on my own. I did a tour of Spruce Meadows one year with 15 horses and was really given a lot of responsibility on the management side."

The more work Nicole was responsible for, the more she realized that there was room for improvement on the communication and organizational ends of barn management.

"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 and trying to communicate with people in different venues,"

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— Nicole Lakin

Nicole said. "Even at Spruce Meadows, I would be back at the barn trying to make grain and have a question for Max, who was down at the International Ring basically a mile away, and getting in touch with him was challenging. I was always looking for ways to get around those communication issues and to get even more organized.

"I realized that there was really a need for something more. I was very lucky that I made some amazing friends that had been managers and working with horses and managing complex organizations far longer than I had. I sat them all down one night in Florida," Nicole continued. "I literally went around the table and asked them what the most annoying thing was that they were constantly having trouble with. Then, once we had a little bit of a venting session about all of the things that could be better, I said, 'If I built something to make



Nicole competing at the 2017 American Gold Cup
Photo by The Book LLC

those things better, would you guys use it?' They all looked at me, and they were like, 'Yeah, of course.'"

Nicole had no real technological background, no experience in application or software development, and little idea what she was in for, but there was another part of Nicole's path to where she is today that told her she needed to go for it and capitalize on her idea.

TURNING ADVERSITY INTO OPPORTUNITY

Circle back to the winter of 2006, when Nicole was competing at WEF and fell off her then junior jumper, Alaska. In the six years that Nicole 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,

Nicole was taken to the hospital to undergo chest x-rays. Once at the hospital, 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," Nicole 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, Nicole spent the next four months undergoing intense chemotherapy treatments, all while insisting that she continue to be around the horses.

"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," Nicole said. "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. I spent a lot of time with the vets and learning as much as I could. That's really what pushed me into becoming a more full-time working student and really getting involved that much on the management side."

Her diagnosis and subsequent treatments not only led her to her barn management role, they were also at the forefront of her mind when she made the decision to move forward with her idea that is now innovating the way barns are managed.

"I used to not want to talk about the cancer because I didn't want it to seem like I was playing the sympathy card, but it really played a huge role in the decisions that I made and choosing to actually go through with this and take the risk," Nicole said. "I feel really good now talking about it in the context of the business, but also in the context of how I've ended up where I've ended up."

"I really decided that I wanted to enjoy my life, and I wanted to make decisions that would enable me to live the best life that I could because life is unpredictable," Nicole said. "I had already gotten lucky once, so who knows. That's really why I had the courage to follow my passion and my idea."

FILLING A NEED

Today, barn managers everywhere can be glad that she did.

Nicole devoted more than a year to researching application and software development options, mapping out features, drawing up design concepts, conceptualizing marketing and branding and more before she officially launched BarnManager.

"I think launching it was definitely one of the more exciting experiences of my life," Nicole said. "After all of the work, it was just really rewarding to actually see people using it, responding and giving us feedback."

Today, the cloud-based software is being utilized to help manage barns spanning across disciplines from top hunter-jumper show barns to local stables and even to horse rescues and therapy organizations, now able to utilize the subscription service at no cost thanks to Nicole's "Free for 501(c)(3)" program. The software is accessible from phone, tablet or computer and offers digitized record keeping for the many facets of horse care with many intuitive and simple business tools that make barn



Nicole, the founder of BarnManager
Photo by Jump Media

management easy and readily accessible.

"It's always exciting when you get an email saying 'this person — who happens to manage one of the best riders in the world — told me that I have to try it. She said it's amazing, and she can't live without it.' It took a lot of time to get there, but it's been extremely rewarding," said Nicole, who recently completed a graduate degree in entrepreneurship from Babson F.W. Olin Graduate School of Business in Massachusetts.

"Horses are unpredictable, life throws things at you that you never could have imagined, and sometimes your goals need to change as a result," Nicole 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." ❏

Learn more about Nicole and BarnManager by visiting www.BarnManager.com