

Three Innovative Entrepreneurs

BY EMILY DAILY AND EMILY RANDOLPH JUMP MEDIA

Forty years ago, if you were to compile a list of jobs in the equestrian industry, it likely would fit on one page. Today however, that same list is seemingly endless, with job titles spanning well beyond rider, trainer, veterinarian, and farrier, to new roles created by the entrepreneurs who have recognized needs within the ever-evolving industry. Nicole Lakin, Laura Connaway, and Elizabeth Ehrlich are three such entrepreneurs. All three accomplished women are life-long riders and horse lovers, but each of them also recognized that a professional riding or traditional equine career was not where they were best suited. Instead, they have each forged their own innovative career path within the industry that they love.

Technology-based solutions

For **NICOLE LAKIN**, it was her work as a hunter/jumper barn manager that sparked an idea and ultimately a new career for the 31-year-old New York University graduate.

"I did a tour of Spruce Meadows one year with 15 horses," said Nicole of her time working for Max Amaya's Stonehenge Stables. "I would be back at the barn trying to make grain and have a question for Max who was down at the International Ring 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 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," explained Lakin. "I realized that there was really a need for something more."

While Nicole had very limited background in application and software development, she set to work creating BarnManager, a cloud-based software designed to simplify and streamline barn management responsibilities and record-keeping. Launched

in 2012, it is now the official barn management software of US Equestrian.

"Launching BarnManager was definitely one of the more exciting experiences of my life," said Nicole, who devoted more than a year to researching application and software development options, mapping out features, drawing up design concepts, and conceptualizing marketing and branding. "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."



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Connecting with customers

AMATEUR GRAND-PRIX rider **LAURA CONNAWAY** launched an equine insurance agency that focused on sport horses, giving her the chance to better connect with her customers.

Over 20 years ago, Laura Connaway recognized a need and opportunity for an equine insurance firm specializing in sport horses, and Connaway & Associates was born.

Laura, who competes in the grand-prix jumpers as an amateur, wanted to create a company where she and her customers could find common ground, and at that point, no such insurance agency existed for equestrians.

"Years ago, when I would go to insure my own horses, I had no idea who the person sitting behind the desk was," said Laura. "If you had a problem, you could call, but they might not be able to answer your question, or maybe not even take your call. I thought it would be great if there were somebody out there who was your contemporary, knew the sport, and answered your questions face to face. It would be a lot more personal, too."

With her team holding down the fort at home in Arkansas, Laura takes her mobile office on the road with her when she travels to shows. This modern practice gives her the chance for more facetime with clients, and also allows her to stay completely connected to her agency's daily business. "I log into my home computer remotely, and I can work exactly as if I was in the office," she said.

Laura and her team's ability to be relatable is also a huge benefit for their customers. Because her agents are horse owners, they've often encountered the same types of problems that their clients have. "It's not just a flippant thing with



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us, because many times we've experienced something similar with our own horses," said Laura.

For Laura, being able to enjoy the sport she loves and get to know so many riders through her work is something she doesn't take for granted. "Balancing my work at Connaway & Associates with my time in the competition ring is, for me, a privilege," said Laura. "I consider myself lucky to work within an industry that I love and alongside people who are as passionate about horses as I am."

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A personal approach

Former lawyer turned entrepreneur, **ELIZABETH EHRLICH**, pictured with her horse Bella, utilized her research skills to create all-natural equine supplements.

Elizabeth's pathway to a career within the equestrian industry was less direct, but, like Laura, she discovered

that a personal touch with her customers was the key to success.

Having shown on the northeast hunter-jumper circuits as a junior, Elizabeth took a break to pursue a legal career in Manhattan. In 2012, she relocated to Wellington, Florida, to begin work with a different law firm, and soon found herself back in the saddle again.

A few years later, when her new mare, Bella, was treated for gastric ulcers, Elizabeth became determined to get to the root of the problem and prevent them

from flaring up again. Frustrated with the options on the market, she utilized her exceptional research skills to create something on her own. After months of tweaking ingredients and testing results, she invented an all-natural gastric-support supplement she called Ulceraser. Elizabeth shared the product with other owners and trainers, and soon demand exceeded supply. In 2016 she decided to launch her own company, Equine Elixirs.

At a time when high-tech mass marketing seemed to be the new norm, Elizabeth discovered that customers appreciated her honest and personalized approach. Face-to-face conversations were ideal for promoting her products. Riders were eager to chat about their horses, and Elizabeth was willing to listen.

Elizabeth said she feels like a kid in a candy shop when interacting with top riders and trainers, many of whom she idolized as a young rider. "Every time one of these big-name trainers asks for my opinion, I'm tickled pink that they value what I have to say, and that they trust me to help be part of the process and the solution.

"One of the things that is most exciting and rewarding to me is that the riders who I admire for their skill set appreciate me for my skill set," continued Elizabeth. "Trainers will often ask me for my opinion on a particular horse, and what kind of product could help a certain issue or improve a specific problem. I love the challenge of working with the very riders that I admire to help bring out the best in their horses."

For all three of these women entrepreneurs, they've successfully found a way to set themselves apart and carve out their own niche within the equine industry.

EQ+ CONTACT INFO | PAGE 113