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STARRING IN A SUPPORTING ROLE

How three **ASSISTANT TRAINERS** are building a foundation for their future.

BY **TORI BILAS** AND **KARA PINATO SCRO** FOR JUMP MEDIA

Young professionals TJ O'Mara, Cody Wooten, and Leigha Schrader have forged their own paths as assistant trainers, recognizing the opportunities presented and making the most of them in their own ways. Whether working with someone new or with a team they've known for a long time, each one of these young equestrians has found the role that's right for them at this stage in their career. Now undertaking more responsibility and independence, O'Mara, Wooten, and Schrader are navigating their specialties within the business while still learning from the head trainers and experts working above them, proving there is always more to learn as professionals in this industry.

Echoing lessons learned

TJ O'MARA IS NO STRANGER at Stonehenge Stables, based in Colts Neck, New Jersey. Although he started his current, full-time position in January of 2020, he began riding with head trainer Max Amaya at age 12, nearly 10 years ago. During his teen years, O'Mara admired successful riders like Brianne Goutal and Jessica Springsteen, who both came out of Amaya's program. As he achieved his own accolades, including topping the 2016 Platinum Performance/USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals, the 2016 Pessoa/US Hunter Seat Medal Finals, and the 2016 Excellence in Equestrian Championship, O'Mara began to envision his own bright future as a professional

member of the Stonehenge team.

Stonehenge Stables is a true team effort where assistants don't fit into specific roles, but instead they all pitch in to help manage and smoothly operate a stable of roughly 40 horses. O'Mara describes himself as a flat rider, a show rider, an assistant trainer, and an aide to the stable manager, with dreams of training and riding at the highest level of the sport.

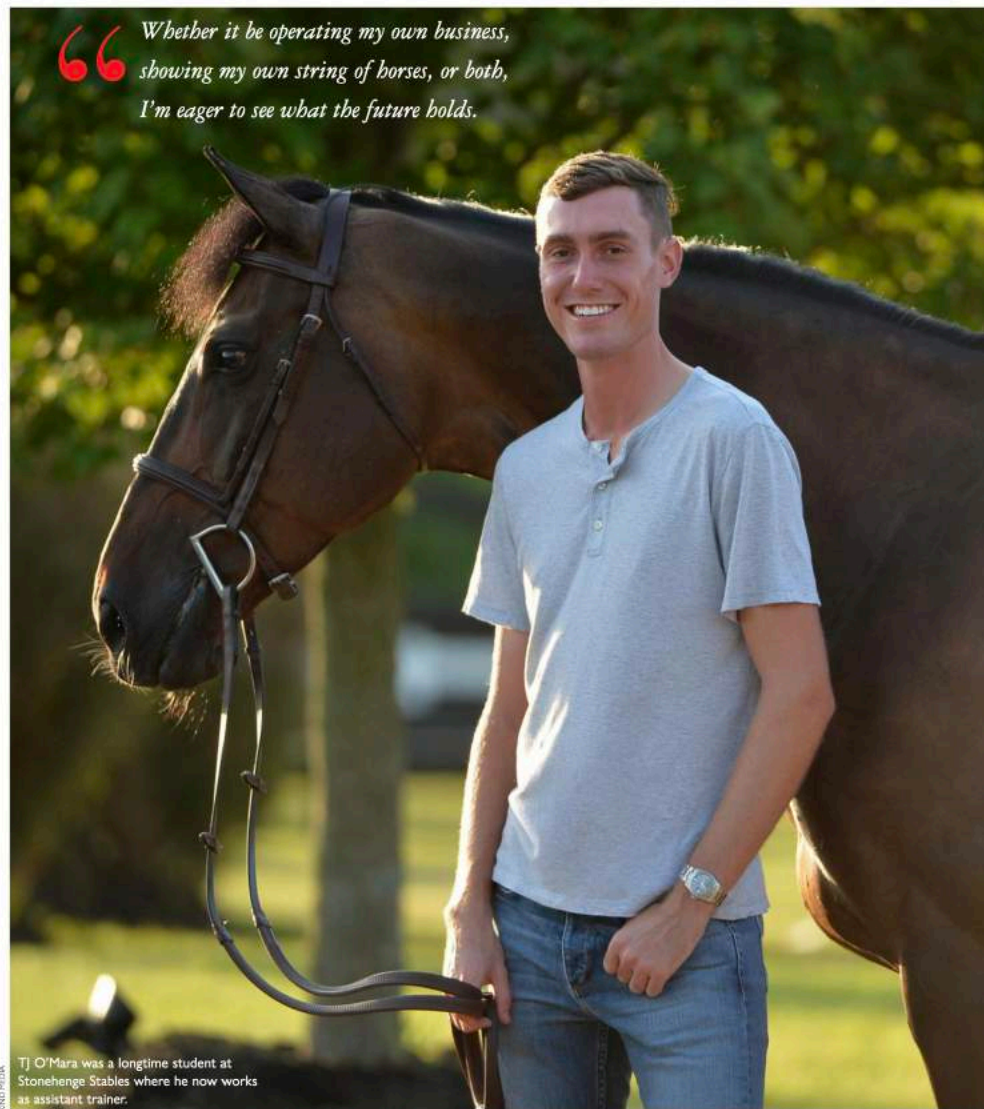
"Some say you have to pick one or the other once you get to the highest level of our sport, but my plan is to see where that path takes me," O'Mara said. "Whether it be operating my own business, showing my own string of

horses, or both, I'm eager to see what the future holds."

As he attempts to climb the ranks in show jumping, he realizes the experience he's gaining is not only helpful for his own riding, but it aids him in training young riders as well.

Still looking over his shoulder as he influences young riders is Amaya, who taught O'Mara all he knows about the sport.

"The majority of what I teach I learned from Max, so the students I teach are getting lessons derived from Max, with my own experiences added in," said O'Mara, now 22. "I'm hoping that they look up to me the same way I looked up to Max when I was their age."



“Whether it be operating my own business, showing my own string of horses, or both, I'm eager to see what the future holds.”

TJ O'Mara was a longtime student at Stonehenge Stables where he now works as assistant trainer.

Investments for the future

A NEWER PARTNERSHIP on the show circuit, **CODY WOOTEN** and Caitlyn Shiels are working together to grow True North Stables, based outside of Chicago in Antioch, Illinois.

A combination of personal connections and word-of-mouth led Wooten to the role of assistant trainer at True North in 2019, where he has seamlessly become a crucial team member, helping to attract and train clients for the elite midwestern operation.

Without any major junior championships to his name, aside from placing second at the USHJA Emerging Athletes National Training Session in 2013, Wooten has instead relied on his strong work ethic to reach this point in his career.

As part of a small team at True North Stables, his role is critical and his skills are put to the test every day dealing with business management, client relationships, young horses, and other aspects of running a show stable that are not necessarily taught along the way.

Wooten has always been a big-picture thinker, and his mindset for his role at True North Stables is no different. "The equestrian world can get showy," said Wooten, age 26, originally from Eldersburg, Maryland. "People sometimes choose a job that will make them look the best from the outside, rather than choosing a position that may have more long-term growth for them, simply because that growth takes too long."

The long-term vision is what Wooten holds most valuable as he navigates his place in the sport. Rather than focusing purely on showing and his riding career, Wooten has delved into the

Cody Wooten holds a long-term vision for his role at True North Stables, and in the equestrian industry as a whole.



"People sometimes choose a job that will make them look the best from the outside, rather than choosing a position that may have more long-term growth."

investment side of the business, buying and selling horses both to earn money and elevate the caliber of horses coming out of True North Stables.

"Working with sale horses allows me to integrate my personal goals with my

current job," Wooten said. "Producing top-quality young horses looks good for the business and allows me to invest for my own future, which is something I value in the long run."

"My trainers have taught me to love the horse first. You will face challenges wherever you go, but if you direct your focus back on the horse, you will remember why you started."



Leigha Schrader, pictured with Hadwin, is the assistant trainer at Days End Farm Horse Rescue where she trained Hadwin before adopting him as her own.

an impact on a variety of horses."

Schrader is responsible for training rehabilitated horses—including helping them regain musculing and learning to trust humans. A significant part of her role is dedicated to determining the type of work a horse wants to do and helping it excel in that job so it can find an appropriate adopter.

"I love seeing my training horses begin to trust humans and light up in our sessions," she said. "It's the best part of my day."

While Schrader was putting in the elbow grease to go professional, she was also pursuing her undergraduate degree in business full time. Now, four years into her job, Schrader is working on her master's degree in contemporary communications with an expected graduation of December 2020. While balancing school and a career as a horse professional can be an exhausting undertaking, Schrader says the horses make it all worth it.

Despite the differing trajectories taken by each of these young professionals, it's clear that a love for the horse, dedication, and hard work bring great learning and career opportunities. These three individuals have proven that paths don't simply present themselves in this sport, and they have each paved their way to their own definition of success in a supporting role within a larger operation.

Schrader summed it up nicely when she said, "This industry is hard. My trainers have taught me to love the horse first. You will face challenges wherever you go, but if you direct your focus back on the horse, you will remember why you started."

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Love the horse first

LEIGHA SCHRADER'S JOURNEY to professional horsewoman started when she began volunteering for Days End Farm Horse Rescue (DEFHR) in Woodbine, Maryland, at the age of 12. While this might have been a later start compared to many professionals born into the business, it didn't stop her from turning her passion into a career.

Schrader volunteered at DEFHR throughout her teenage years, logging more than 6,500 hours and earning numerous volunteer-related awards including a President's Volunteer Service Award from President Barack Obama in 2015. During this time, she

also competed on eventing and hunter circuits and rode and worked alongside a number of trainers. All of these experiences influenced Schrader's decision to pursue a career as a professional trainer. At the age of 19, she accepted a permanent position as assistant trainer at DEFHR, working under head trainer, Sara Strauss.

"This position has allowed me to develop my skills while still having plenty of guidance," said Schrader. "I love working under Sara. We are aligned in our goals and expectations, yet we excel in different areas, which gives great balance to our team and allows us to make