

# Andy Armstrong: A Summer Internship with Michael Matz

*Written by Rachel Hunt / Interviewed by Jennifer Demaro*



*Photography by Julian Milinkowsky unless otherwise noted.*

The sky is still dark when Andy Armstrong is greeted by a chorus of nickers as she walks through the barn doors at Vintage Farm. It is five in the morning and she is ready to start another day of training under the tutelage of Michael Matz, three-time U.S. Olympic show jumping team member and trainer of the Thoroughbred racehorse Barbaro.

Andy's equestrian career has not always been graced by such an illustrious athlete and mentor. She began as a "typical horse-crazy little girl" who constantly begged her parents for riding lessons. Like many parents of equine-obsessed girls, Andy's mom and dad wisely caved to her equine obsession. After nearly a decade of riding lessons, Andy came home to a green-

broke Arabian gelding named Bug, who shared Andy's passion for jumping. Bug helped Andy's passion for equestrian sport continue to grow, so when Andy heard about Lake Erie College's Equestrian Teacher/Trainer program, she jumped at the opportunity!

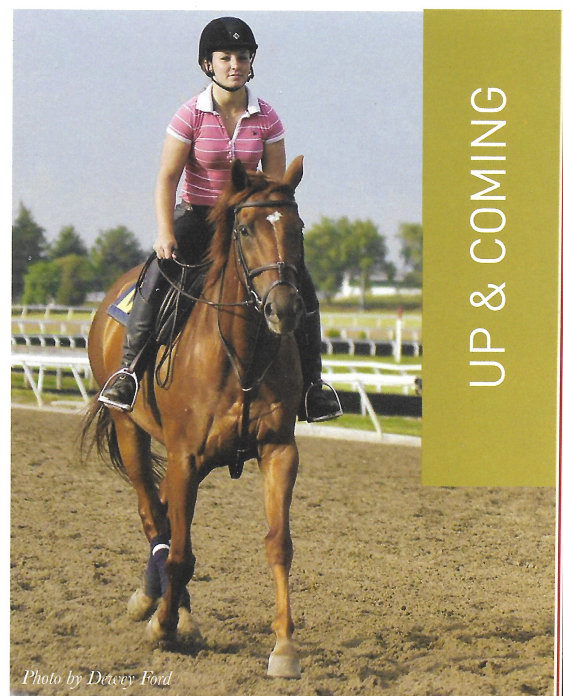
Upon arrival at Lake Erie College, Andy realized that becoming a standout rider wouldn't be easy. Also a college swimmer, she had tight muscles in her shoulders and calves and lacked the polish of her peers, many of whom had been showing their entire lives. However, Andy was gritty and determined to succeed in her new environment. With the support of her mentor, Mary Pardee, Director of Riding at Lake Erie College, Andy began to thrive.

Thanks to her tremendous work ethic and positive attitude, Pardee describes Andy as "the type of student that I will walk through fire for!"

It wasn't until Andy started to connect with a school horse named Trey that her talent for working with off-the-track Thoroughbreds became apparent. Trey was anxious and lacked focus, but Andy's patient demeanor and methodical approach was just what he needed. After a summer at Andy's home, he came back to the school "a different horse."

With a love for the Thoroughbred breed sparked within her, Andy adopted her own off-the-track Thoroughbred mare from New Vocations Racehorse Adoption





UP & COMING

Photo by Davey Ford

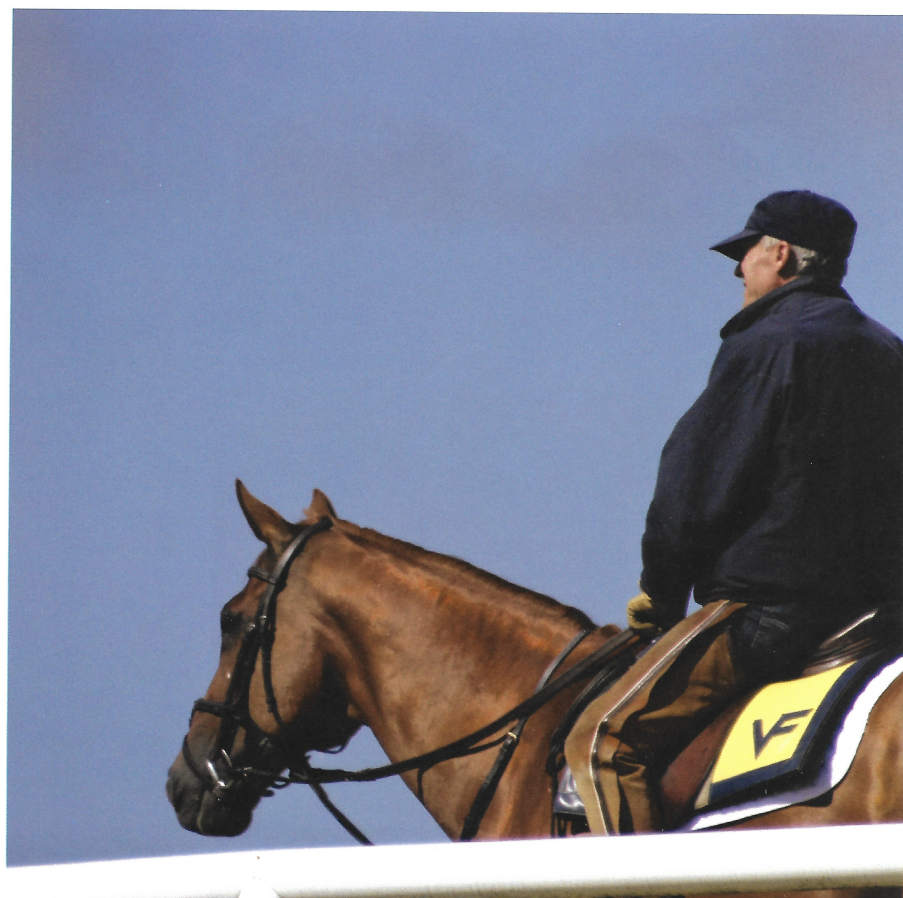


Photo by Andy Armstrong



Photo by Andy Armstrong





Program named Shakespeare's Juliet, called Ladybird in the barn. After watching Andy work tirelessly with Ladybird, Pardee realized that training Thoroughbreds is Andy's gift. She encouraged Andy to procure an internship with Pardee's own equestrian hero, Michael Matz—a living legend in the world of show jumping and racing!

Life working under Matz sounds chaotic, but Andy describes it as "true efficiency in all things." In a single day, Andy not only gallops five to seven racehorses, she

also feeds, administers medications and treatments, prepares and cleans tack, holds horses for the vet and farrier, and does paperwork, among other tasks.

Because Andy realizes that she can never learn enough, she already has plans for her future, after her summer internship with Matz comes to a close. She will return to Lake Erie College in the autumn and has been offered a working student position with Advanced level three-day eventer Danny Warrington upon graduation.

She has recently acquired a new Thoroughbred, one of Matz's racehorses, who she fell in love with. She also worked as a riding instructor at Hinckley Equestrian Center in Hinckley, Ohio.

One day, Andy hopes to have her own eventing barn and compete at the top level of the sport. Articulate, bright, dedicated, gritty, passionate, and appreciative, Andy has a lot for which to be hopeful and is certainly one of *Equestrian Culture Magazine's* riders to watch.





#### WHAT EXPERIENCES LED YOU TO YOUR INTERNSHIP WITH THREE-TIME OLYMPIAN MICHAEL MATZ?

It all started when I really connected with one of the school horses, an off-the-track-thoroughbred named Trey. He was very anxious and his mind would be going a hundred miles an hour all the time, but somehow we clicked and he would settle very nicely with me. When Mary Pardee offered for me to take him home for the summer, I leapt at the chance. I spent the summer just focusing on relaxation, rhythm, and stretching of both his mind and body, and he returned to school very refreshed and relaxed. Later that fall, I had to make the hard decision to retire my Arabian due to a mystery lameness issue, so I started searching for another horse, one to hopefully make my debut on into the professional world.

I was searching the New Vocations website when I came across one picture of my OTTB mare, Shakespeare's Juliet, free jumping an eighteen-inch vertical. She jumped it so well, with her knees up to her eyeballs, that I decided she was the one I wanted to have as my partner. She was very personable and sweet on the ground, but our first several rides were less than spectacular. However, I knew that somewhere in there was a sensitive, talented mare who just needed someone to find the right way to explain everything to

her, and I was sure I could find the key if I just kept quiet with her and gave her more patience and calmness than she gave me fire and temper. Her potential slowly began unlocking after a couple months, and after witnessing our progress, Mary suggested that I should focus my career on retraining OTTB's for their second careers.

#### WHO HAVE BEEN YOUR MENTORS IN YOUR EQUESTRIAN CAREER?

Mary Pardee has definitely been the biggest influence on my career. She has always known exactly when she could push me hard to get me to give my best, frequently even when I thought I already had given my best. She has been there through every head bobbing lameness, brilliant success, floundering moment when I didn't seem to be moving either forward or backwards, and glow of pride when I have done something intuitively correct that once would have stumped me.

I cannot thank her enough for believing in me and giving me the chance to prove that this backyard rider wants it enough to overcome any obstacle in my way. My mom and my dad, while not necessarily big equestrian influences, definitely have been my mentors. They both spent my childhood telling me that if I could dream it, I could do it—but that I had to work hard to get myself

there. My mom planted the love of horses deep into the fiber of my being. My dad gave me the tools to not allow myself to be ruled by my emotions, and to remember that ninety percent of the game is played between my ears.

#### TELL US ABOUT YOUR EQUINE COMPANIONS.

My first horse was registered as Thee Storm Dancer, but I called him Bug. He is my heart horse, and always tried his absolute hardest to do anything I asked of him. He took care of me enough to give me confidence, but he knew when I needed to take a well-deserved slide into the mud. Then, he showed me the horse's true spirit by standing patiently as I wiped the mud off, cried a little, and clambered back on so he could give me a chance to do it the right way. He is now plump and happy being leased out to a wonderful children's horse camp in my hometown, where he is loved, groomed, and gives lessons to little kids learning how to ride.

My second horse and current project is Shakespeare's Juliet, or Ladybird. She has progressed so far this summer with the help of [my coach] Danny Warrington, and I am so excited to see how far she will fly. She has come from responding to anything she didn't know (and many things that she did) with a temper tantrum, to letting me work on myself.



My newest addition to my equine family was actually one of Mr. Matz's racehorses! His name is Lost Sailor, and I fell in love with him the first time I rode him. He is such a sweetheart, and his great movement and good looks definitely are a bonus! He is a very big boy and he grew a bit too fast, so he retired with a low bow. We have an excellent prognosis from our vet, so hopefully after some time in the field he will be ready to ease into his new career. I couldn't have asked for a better herd of horses.

#### WHAT IS A TYPICAL DAY WORKING ON MICHAEL MATZ'S TRAINING FARM LIKE?

On an average day, I arrive at the barn at around five in the morning, and the first thing I do is check the set list—the list of who is riding who and when. We typically have between five and seven sets, with between eight and eleven riders and horses each set. I grab the tack for my first and second set, get it set up outside the doors of [the horses'] stalls for their grooms. Then, I go check in with Peter Brette, Michael Matz's assistant trainer, and the two heads of the barns. I usually help set up the morning feed, give morning medications to the horses, and complete any other tasks I can find.

When it's getting close to five-forty, I strap on my helmet and safety vest, check my tack on my first horse, and the groom takes him out for a walk around the shedrow before I am

given a leg up onto my first ride of the day. All of the Vintage Farm horses and riders congregate at the annex of the two paths leading from each of the barns, and Mr. Matz comes down on the pony and leads the way to the track. We walk onto the track and line up along the outside rail to receive our instructions. Once we are all settled and our girths are tightened, we trot the wrong way on the track back to our assigned positions. Once there, we shorten our stirrups, check our tack one last time, and wait until we are ready to gallop our assigned distance.

The gallop is a very unique experience itself—quite indescribable, but very wonderful and thrilling. Once we arrive at the end of our gallop, we come to a walk and lengthen our stirrups as we walk back off the track towards the barn. When we arrive at the barn, we let the horses walk around the shedrow until our hot walker is ready to catch our horse in their stall. Then, we ride them straight into their stalls for the quick removal of tack and the hot walker takes them back out. After that, I take my tack to my third horse and check tack for my second horse. This repeats until all of the horses for the day have been exercised, typically finishing up around ten-thirty to eleven.

After this, we clean tack and I help give injections or medications for the afternoon, then assist wherever I can, be it holding

horses for the farrier or the chiropractor, using the P3 machine (a stimulating machine used to increase blood flow and loosen tight muscles) on certain horses, helping the vet, or getting paperwork ready to ship horses out to race. The whole operation is a beauty to watch; it flows effortlessly and efficiently from one process to the next. It is wonderful to watch true efficiency in all things at this barn.

#### IF YOU COULD WRITE YOUR OWN JOB DESCRIPTION, WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE?

My perfect job would be to work around all of the wonderful people that I have met over the summer. I think that you can never stop learning, and to be in a position to learn from the best is the most wonderful opportunity. I would love to be able to gallop out for Mr. Matz in the mornings, then to go to Danny Warrington's barn and school my own projects and any others I could help with. I would love to have my own eventing barn and to compete myself, as well as have some of my own riders and horses to teach and train, but until I know everything that I can absorb from these two wonderful horsemen, and then add several more years, I know I still have much more hard work to do. Until then, I will be watching and learning, preparing myself for my dream to become my reality. U





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