



# THE HORSE SHOW REVIEW

*The Voice of the Horse Show Exhibitor*

EST. 2003

JULY/AUGUST 2010

VOL. VIII, NO. 1

## A Conversation with Hap Hansen

*The show jumping icon opens up about talent, show nerves, and his game plan for tough Grand Prix courses*

by Penny Cox

It's Saturday night, and from the bleachers, the jumps don't look that big. But suddenly you're invited down on to the field to see how big they really are.

It's those five-foot jumps with the oxers five to six feet apart that take your breath away. And there's the glare from the overhead lights on the water jump that makes it look like the sun.

The course looks tight and hard. You look around and see the best in their field walking the course with heads down, pacing out distances and going over the strategies for competition.

Do you suppose the \$100,000+ purse makes a difference? Is it the money? Then there's the mount and how sound your horse is. What is the horse going to think of that water

---

**"Hap rides very simply and naturally, nothing is made complicated."**

*George Morris,  
USEF Show Jumping chef d'equipe*

---

jump with the reflection? Does your mind go in all these directions?

You're a winner and have won many times before, now you just need one perfect round! You'll have courage enough for both of you going over the water jump...it's that triple now you're thinking about. Most of us have never faced the thrill of this type of competition.

Recently I had the privilege of talking with Hap Hansen and asking

him how he became a jumper Grand Prix rider. What does it take and how do you do it? Is it innate? Can you learn it? Is it the horse and the rider combination that's perfect? What exactly?

Hap Hansen has traveled the course of a Grand Prix rider for years, and through his eyes, talent and gifts, has offered some insights. Hap is a world class act! Right down to his world class name.

You sense an aura of greatness just sitting with him. He's gentle, but you know that he is also a tough and formidable competitor.

Hap, how do you do it? When I asked him, he started off with a smile and a twinkle of those light blue eyes of his. He has a kindness that shows a true heart and that of a gentleman. He laughed.

"Twenty years ago I had two great horses that I wanted to take to the Olympics, so I went back east to stable with George Morris at Hunterdon, New Jersey. Back then, just as it is today, getting into the Olympic Trials was very complicated with many elements."

Hap continued, "I'd been at Hunterdon for three months working through the trials for the Olympics. I'd been riding all morning. I went in, cleaned and showered, and was done riding for the day. As I walked by the arena, George was giving an amateur rider a jumping lesson. There seemed to be some difficulties with how the lesson was going."

George had been to the Olympics before, and had done very well for America. He was at the top of his



*Hap Hansen with Pikadero*

game and was sought after for his ability to make great riders.

Hap recalls "George stopped the lesson as I walked by the arena, and asked his student to get off her horse, which she did. Next he asked me to get on the horse. I was a little resistant, but did what George asked me to, but at this point I was in blue jeans and tennis shoes.

George gave me the course, and without another thought, the horse jumped it perfectly and we went back to stand in the middle of the ring with George and his student."

Now George asked his student what the difference was between her riding and Hap's. She talked rapidly for two or three minutes saying Hap held his hands this way and kept his leg here and found his distances here and there. George was quick to correct her. "NO! Hap has *talent*."

Immediately after telling me this story, Hap, the gentleman that he is, seemed to be humbled for that. He told me that it's not something you can learn; in his years of experience, you either have it or you don't.

Hap didn't say this to offend, but just as a matter of fact. Hap believes that riders

---

## Hap Hansen

can always improve, but there is a certain "talent" needed to reach the top of the any field. Becoming a Grand Prix rider and successfully competing at that level is no different. You might call what Hap has a "gift", and he has certainly taken advantage of his.

George Morris would later describe Hap's talent in his 1993 book The American Jumping Style. "Hap Hansen rides simply beautifully. He also rides very simply and naturally, nothing is made complicated. Horses jump particularly well for him, even on short acquaintance. He combines strength and power with softness and finesse."

Hap's first trainer was Jimmy Williams in Flintridge, California. "I went to Jimmy Williams when I was about ten years old," he said. "I was fortunate enough to have parents who did what Jimmy asked. My parents didn't buy me a string of horses, but I had nice horses. Plus Jimmy would give me extra horses to ride."

Hap was a good student and as he was going through his junior ranks, both Jimmy and Marci Williams shared in his training. Hap grew up at the same time as renowned rider Susie Hutchinson, and as we know, Jimmy also provided us with some other great riders, like two-time Olympian Robert Ridland, who was just a little bit ahead of Hap.

I asked Hap what his secret was. With another smile, he replied, "Hard work, talent, nice horses, great trainers in both Jimmy and Marci. All these things helped to make me the rider I am today. 'Mousie', as we nicknamed Marci, and Jimmy, gave me a great start and a bunch of nice horses to ride."

I wanted to know if Hap was a natural athlete. "I didn't do too many other sports. I was pretty good at tennis. I didn't give baseball much of a chance, and once I got to that age, I was riding every day after school." But at that point, he did not believe he was being groomed for the Olympics.

He got his first job at 19 after he had been a junior amateur rider. "I took over a string of about six to eight jumper horses at Bonita Valley Farms in Chula Vista, and that's where I also started riding saddle horses," he said.

When asked about what he remembers from back then, he said that he admired George Morris, but that the respected trainer was far away on the east coast.

At the time, Hap didn't have the opportunity to go back east to meet and train with George. You can tell by talking with Hap that his mentor was Jimmy Williams, who felt Hap was a talented and gifted rider.

Currently Hap has a training facility at the historic Rancho Osuna, in Rancho Santa Fe, California. "Rancho", as the community is called, ranks third in the nation for expensive homes and land. In this beautiful spot, Hap has an arena and barn with quite a few horses in training, along with adult amateur and junior riders.

His work ethic is legendary, and when you talk with him or his professional staff, the dedication and attention to the clients and horses are hard to match at any barn.

Of course I wanted to know what happened at the Olympics that year he moved east to train at Morris' Hunterdon. "The Olympic committee named the team and I was positioned second in reserve."

When asked if he would do it again, the 57 year old laughed and said, "Well I'm not getting any younger, but if I had the right horse, yes, I would."

He also said that his main reason for giving the Olympics another go would be to ride for and serve his country, not for the mere glory of being able to say he rode in the Olympic Games.

Next Hap offered his thoughts on the experience of first entering the Grand Prix arena, and provided some tips.

When competing, he prefers the middle to three quarters of the way through the lineup so he can watch the other competitors.

After he walks the course, he keeps going over the jumps in his head so that they're embedded in his mind before he ever enters the ring on his horse. Then he looks for the steady four strides or long five, and strategies for a difficult section.

Once the class begins, now all he has to do is concentrate on regulating the horse with precision to gain the right distance between jumps.

He believes that the actual track and what you go over at that point should be second nature, especially since riders only have 45 seconds to complete the course.

Hap laughs when I ask him if he does anything to relax before a class, or does he prefer to have the adrenaline rushing? I want to know if he has to ask himself to calm down.

"Yeah, I keep telling myself I can do it, but I do get nervous, as I think most people do. It wouldn't be as competitive if it wasn't like that. I think I heard [show jumping champion] Joe Fargis say that if you didn't have the nerves, you wouldn't have the adrenaline push. You have to try not to let it bother you, and keep it under control."

I ask Hap about courage and commitment. "It all depends on the horse you are sitting on, because you can ride a couple of bad ones and you can lose your courage really easily. You can get riding too defensively. It's awfully nice when you do find a nice horse."

There's a smell that most of us have come to know, love, and recognize. It's the combination of alfalfa, fur, old wood, and leather that makes your senses relax. Time becomes sweet and flies by too swiftly.

And in the middle are the hearts of these great animals who show trust and courage. We ask incredible feats of horses, for many of us have a true love and admiration for them.

The competitiveness is ours, and though they could refuse our many conflicting requests, most don't. They are faithful and obedient. They tolerate our many demands with great athletic ability and achievement.

In the midst of all this, sometimes we also find a great and gentle rider - one who is consistent and seems to give back to his mount just what the horse needs, without confusion, just precision and talent.

The man I'm talking about would always stop at the end of giant grand prix course and let his horse grab a sweet mouthful of grass on the way out of the arena, as a thank you for a job well done. ★