

# Through Grit and Spirit

by Maddy Butcher Gray

**M**ost of today's professional horsemen stepped into that role like they step into their jeans every morning. Born into it and charged with big tasks at a young age, they come to the job naturally.

While the rest of us were learning how to drive a car, they were learning how to drive cattle. They were staying on colts while we were trying to stay on varsity.

Families like the Blacks and Neuberts, for instance, gave their children fine head starts for carrying on a tradition of exemplary horsemanship.

But within this next generation, there's a share of outsiders, too. Through grit and spirit, they've worked their way into the field from a different perspective—not as natural-born talents but as students.

Kyla Pollard is one to watch.

"There are very few people as dedicated as Kyla," said friend Jonathan Field, one of Canada's most prominent clinicians. "She's always first there and last to leave. It's like a quest for her... The way Ray [Hunt] and Tom [Dorrance] worked, Kyla is a good representative of that way with horses. And she remains humble in the process."

The long-legged, 38-year-old got her start in the pony clubs of New Brunswick, Canada. By high school she was trading stall mucking for a chance to ride, exercising horses for others, and learning from a large animal vet.

After graduating from the University of New Brunswick and the Maritime Forest Ranger School, Pollard interviewed for forestry positions. It came down to two job offers: one in Maine, one British Columbia. Same job, same pay. She couldn't decide.

The Canadian interviewer phoned the young candidate from his home. He was sitting on his patio, trying to convince her to head west. His horses called out and Kyla heard them.



Horse from Horse Protection Association of Florida Winter 2012. Photo by Morgan Silver

The conversation switched to this shared "hobby" (as stated on her resume). She took the job.

Settling into a new life in Fort Saint James, B.C. (about 500 miles north of Vancouver and 500 miles west of Edmonton), Pollard finally acquired a horse of her own, a Morgan-Arabian gelding with plenty of go. Too much go.

"He'd take off on me," said Pollard, who resisted the advice to move to a bigger bit and discovered Pat Parelli's program and the methods we generally call "natural horsemanship."

"I dug in and learned everything I could," she said.

It didn't take long for Pollard to gravitate toward Ray Hunt. She audited his course at the Gang Ranch (which hosted him annu-

ally for many years) and loved what she saw.

Pollard was scrambling together funds to return and participate in the next Hunt clinic there when she learned of his passing. It was a wake-up call, she said.

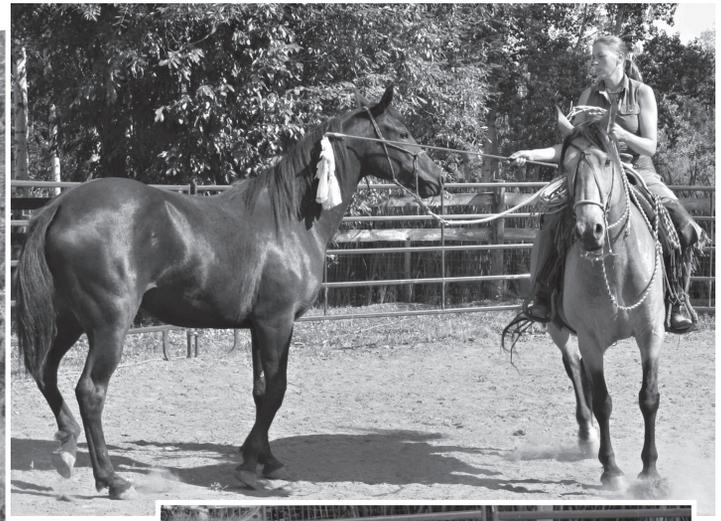
"Ray's death was a big turning point for me. It made me realize these guys don't live forever. From that point on, I vowed to ride as much as possible with his and Tom Dorrance's best students."

At this point, said Pollard, horses became "a major focus and push for basically every decision I made in life."

She started saving money and vacation days for further education.

The next pivot point came at the Mane Event in Chilliwack, B.C., where Martin Black was starting a colt in the three-day Trainers Challenge.

"I was enthralled. You could not keep me away from that



Photos top left to right: Paso Fino from Horse Protection Association of Florida Winter 2012. Photo by Jennifer Black. Client Horse Colt Starting at Home. Photo by Carl Pollard. Bottom left to right: Wrangling for Golden Bear Outfitting. Photo by Gerry Raker. Horsemanship Lessons with Student Photo by Carl Pollard.



round pen,” recalled Pollard.

A few weeks later, Pollard booked a plane ticket and was on her way to Black’s colt starting school in Texas for two months.

“I thought I had a really good handle on my horsemanship, a high sensitivity,” said Pollard with a laugh. “I so did not. Martin showed me a whole different level of acknowledging where the horse is coming from and how you can make it better for the horse.”

Over several years, Pollard worked closely with Black and followed his advice to ride as many horses as she could.

In short order, Pollard has ridden or started nearly 400 horses and has acquired fans on both ends of Canada.

Heather Touchie is one of them. She rescued a yearling from a notorious New Brunswick neglect case involving dozens of dead and starving horses. She wasn’t sure how he’d be under saddle, given the gelding’s “horrible start,” said the horsewoman.

Kyla agreed to work with him and was “absolutely excellent,” said Touchie. “She instilled a lot of confidence in him through her work. Kyla was very aware of what this horse would need to be mentally ready for whatever job he’d have. She set him up for success.”

Pollard likes to set students up for success, too. Often, she’ll lecture and present theoretical matters before heading out to the arena.

“I like to prepare them mentally so that when we do get to ride, they understand,” said Pollard. “You can set the tone for the class by providing a theory lecture.”

Among today’s horsemen and -women, Pollard sets herself apart by her willingness to put herself in the student’s saddle.

Sometimes literally.

“That’s a big difference I really liked with her,” said client Jocelyne Noel. “She’ll jump on the horse and see what you’re dealing with. She’ll correct it in the horse and then help you correct what you’re doing. That’s helped a lot.”

For Pollard, once a student, always a student.

This fall, she worked for Golden Bear Outfitting, an elite outfitting company in northwest B.C. She led a pack of five horses over miles of remote, challenging terrain. Her boss had a good chuckle when Pollard told them she didn’t own a gun or know how to fire one. It being bear country and all, she picked up that skill, too.

“I’ve been there. I find myself not being critical, just accepting the fact that everyone starts somewhere. Maybe their whole life, they used the horse as a tool. Like a motor bike. Then the person starts to have some awareness of where the horse is coming from. They didn’t realize it. So I’m very empathetic to people’s learning experience,” she said.

Her life as a student, once considered a handicap, might just be her finest asset.

Back in B.C., Valarie Crowley has watched Pollard work with Crowley’s daughter, Willa.

“She responds to the needs of the student, the mood of the horse,” said Crowley. “The most beautiful part of Kyla’s instruction is the respect and love that she has for her horses. Willa knows that she is not just learning to ride a horse. She is learning how to develop a relationship with a horse, and through this relationship, earning the right to ride.”

Learn more at *Khas T’an Horsemanship, Prince George, BC, Canada* [tourismfortstjames.com](http://tourismfortstjames.com).