

By Melissa Birks

"Trot down center line and leg yield to the right," directed Hannah Ross' riding instructor.

Hannah trotted her horse down the line and then steered it to the left.

"Hannah," asked her instructor, "where are you going?"

Hannah answered, in a high-pitched girly giggle, as though being woken from a dream: "I dunno."

Do it again. Down the line she went, off to the left. The third time, Hannah didn't leg yield in the wrong direction -- she trotted her horse in a circle for some unknown reason.

That day holds a cherished place in Hannah's family lore. She was about 10. She's now 17. In July, she placed third out of 14 riders in the Junior Young Riders Open Preliminary division at the Maui Jim Horse Trials, held in Wayne, IL. The performance secured Hannah her first spot on the Young Riders Region IV team that competed at the North American Junior and Young Riders' Championships in August. She was the only Iowan on the team.

"You have a lot of kids come in and out, wash out, decide this isn't for them," says trainer Cindy Burke, who has operated Kindred Spirits Stables for 11 years.



Hannah Ross rides "Fantasia" in the cross-country portion of a Horse Trials, 2006
- photo by Derith Vogt -

Monticello Teen Leaps Beyond Early Insouciance with Drive and Determination

"You can love horses all you want," Burke says. "But you have to have the dedication and determination to keep getting better, because this is the most dangerous horse sport there is. It literally is. You can do everything right and be killed."

'Happier than a little pigeon'

In the beginning, Hannah kept her dedication and determination a secret, even to herself.

During an interview at the Lamplight Equestrian Center, which houses the Maui Jim Horse Trials, the petite brunette with a megawatt smile admits: "For a long time, I just sat there on the horse. I was happier than a little pigeon to be sitting on a horse. And I ignored everything she (Burke) said."

The more interesting arena sat outside of the barn -- in the meadow with the steep banks that dipped down to a pond. Hannah and her barn mates would ride there bareback after lessons. They'd play games with no rules other than to ride fast

and hard and, if possible, stay on the horse's back. Hannah was around 10, the horses she rode even younger.

"I remember one of the first babies I rode, we'd come down the hill and she'd buck, buck, buck, and I'd hold on to her ears coming down the hill," Hannah says. "Everyone's yelling, 'Come on, Hannah, run faster!'... We had a blast."

Hannah carries the barn record for falling off the most times -- seven -- in one day.

"She fell off, but learning to ride bareback to understand the basics is the best teacher," Burke says. "And riding lots of different horses."

The Memorable Day

The Memorable Day happened sometime in that era.

"That's the night I had the conversation with her parents," Burke says. "I have no idea what else I can do. I've showed her. I've talked to her. I've ridden it and I've showed her. I have no idea what else to do." Her parents

had the discussion with her. Within six months, it was almost overnight in terms of how her riding changed."

First, Cathy Ross-Garron cornered Hannah in the kitchen. If Hannah didn't improve, the financing for lessons would evaporate.

"You're trying to comprehend what that means," Hannah recalls. "Suddenly, it dawns on me: Oh, crap. I'm not going to be able to go the barn anymore. Oh, crap."

Shortly after, Mike Ross cornered his daughter in his kitchen and issued the same threat.

"That was kind of an eye-opener for me. That brought me around."

Today, Hannah rides at Kindred Spirits as often as seven days a week. Before she got her driver's license, her stepfather, Roy Garron, would drive her to and from the barn, about a half-hour from their Monticello home. Hannah events on Burke's 16-year-old bay thoroughbred, Fantasia, but she trains on several other horses.

"Hannah came to us; she said, 'This is my time. I know I can do it. I want this really



Ross schools "Lynn," Derith Vogt's young TB mare
- Derith Vogt photo -

bad.' So we made the commitment that we would support this," says Ross-Garron, whose commitment includes soliciting donations from equine product vendors for auction. Proceeds help pay for Young Riders to attend competitions.

Facing her 'bugaboo'

On the last day at Maui Jim, Hannah ranked third after dressage and cross country, her favorite discipline.

"There's something about going out in the open field [cross country] like a bat out of...." and here she ratchets her voice down to a respectable whisper "...hell, at a 3-foot-5 solid obstacle. It's just...GO!"

"Stadium jumping for her has always been her bugaboo," Burke said, moments before Hannah would take on the 12 stadium jumps. "It has more to do in her own head with being in front of a lot of people at one time and being worried about all of that. So my job is to not change anything when we go in; it's to remind her of what we do all the time."

At Kindred Spirits, Hannah jumps higher than the 3-foot-6-inch obstacles in Open Preliminary, and more jumps with tighter combinations. Still, she says, she struggles with keeping focus.

"Coming into a double, I'm thinking of the last jump, and I remind myself, no, no, you've got to focus on the first jump and get over that one first - then think of the next one."

Hannah completed the course without error and in time, although Fantasia ticked a few rails. They left the arena maintaining third place. "It'll work," Hannah said, giving Fan a pat on the neck.

True to the thoughtful student she's become, Hannah asked her teacher what she saw in the arena. Burke said that Hannah seemed to let up on the accelerator - her leg on Fantasia's barrel - and that caused the horse to slow ever so slightly at the jumps. The result: a ride that lacked its usual "snap."

"But if that's as difficult as it comes," Burke said, "that's fixable."

That's what Hannah would fix at camp, the week before heading to Lexington, VA, for the NAYRC (North American Young Riders Championships), held July 31-August 5, 2007.

Never once did anyone hear her utter the words: "I dunno."

UPDATE:

Hannah Ross came away from the NAYRC in 8th place, from a field of about 30 riders. The Region IV team won the silver medal, or second place, among the 10 competing regions.

