

Peggy Cummings

By Lori Olson

The North American Horsemen's Association is proud to recognize Peggy Cummings as the 1998 Horsewoman of Distinction. Her ability to recognize and teach the bio-mechanics of both horse and rider has made Cummings a refreshing speaker, teacher and advocate in the area of equestrian mind/body awareness.

Cummings's unique perspectives in riding, and the techniques she has mastered to bring horse and rider together as partners, comes from a somewhat unique

background. Raised in San Salvador by an American mother and an English father, Cummings fondly recalls childhood trips to the stables of a neighboring plantation where her father played cricket.

"I'd do anything to be near those horses," she recalls. "I'd wash them and groom them. I'd even give them haircuts!"

Later, after her father enrolled her in hunt lessons, Cummings's infatuation with "all-things-horses" went off at a gallop.

"Once I learned how to ride, I wanted to ride every horse I had the opportunity to!" she laughs.

Cummings and her family moved to the United States

when she was a freshman in high school. Because her mother's career required frequent moving, Cummings was allowed to choose her own private school. Of course, she chose one with a riding program.

The school's riding instructor, an ex-cavalry officer, took Cummings under his wing and was very influential in her life. "My initial experience with him led me to believe I didn't know everything I thought I knew," she says. "That was when I really started to learn."

By her sophomore year in high school, Cummings was teaching riding lessons and working at an equestrian summer camp. Working with the young campers sparked Cummings's interest in teaching and working

with the horses gave her insight into what makes one horse better than the next.

"I always rode the most difficult horses," she remembers, and in doing so, she began to formulate a plan, which enabled a horse to work for an 8 or 9 week season without going sour.

"I found that if you had the horse's teeth checked, wormed him, had a good farrier, properly fitted equipment and turned him out, he'd be a better horse." Her techniques were almost diametrically opposed to current practices of the time, which included standing stalls, but they seemed to work and Cummings continued to explore them.

Later, Cummings was given a horse from her past, "King." By then, King was 18 years old and had lost his joy-filled grace he'd possessed as a five-year-old. Cummings was determined to find out why, and what she could do about it.

"I couldn't wait to ride King," Cummings recalls. "I remembered the freedom of movement he'd had, but that was gone. He was just a crotchety old grouch, and I couldn't understand why."

This, as well as other events, motivated Cummings to study the science of bio-mechanics, of how movement and energy are shifted and balanced. Her studies led her to work with two remarkable women advocating two remarkable techniques for the horse industry.

Sally Swift, with whom Cummings worked for 8 years, introduced the use of the Alexander technique to the horse world, according to Cummings. Alexander, an Australian actor, studied movement and developed methods of realigning the body to free up movement.

Another of Cummings' mentors, Linda Tellington Jones, introduced the techniques of Feldenkrais to the horse world. Originally developed by an Israeli physicist, Feldenkrais is based on changes in the nervous system resulting from stress.

"When the body experiences fear, whether it's a human body or a horse body, it stops healing and moving," explains Cummings. Both techniques, she says, have taught her to look differently at the relationship between horse and rider.

"It's all about how movement, or lack of movement, impacts the horse," says Cummings. "How it makes horse and human partners good dance partners."



Since 1990, Cummings has been criss-crossing the country teaching trainers and instructors of all equestrian disciplines how to "ride from the inside out". According to Cummings, being away from her mentors, including Swift and Tellington Jones, forced her into a place where she had to see and look on her own. This process of evolution has led to techniques to maximize movement of both horse and human on the ground as well as on the horse.

"Often people don't understand the bio-mechanics of the relationship between horse and rider," says Cummings. "I teach them to understand what they do to place stress on the horse, and how that relates to the horse's behavior." As a teacher, Cummings believes that people aren't always given enough concrete information in most settings. Her national clinics, workshops and classes are filled with examples, experiences and hands-on learning.

"I can explain and clarify bio-mechanically and physically what the horse has to do and how the rider can prompt those actions," says Cummings, "I teach people to ride with an inner understanding of their own body, and how to access the power from the horse's hind quarters to provide self carriage and free-flowing movement.

This mind body awareness will be essential for the next generation of horsemen and women, in Cummings' opinion. "The key to riding well is movement, balance, and connection," she states. "Knowing how horse and human can move and understanding what impedes it is the key to connected riding."

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To Peggy Cummings

1998 Horsewoman of Distinction

1998 Horsewoman of Distinction You are especially known for your high standards and dedication to finding new and better ways to make the horse and rider a happier, better, more comfortable and durable working team through your specialty of mind-body awareness. It is these attributes combined with your warmth, energy, caring, sense of humor and articulate presentation that makes you distinctive as a woman, teacher, and trainer in the world of horses. NAHA is proud to recognize you as our 1998 Horsewoman of Distinction for your outstanding qualities as a gifted instructor of people and horses and as a role model for the horse industry.

Lori Olson is a freelance writer located in central Minnesota. Throughout 1999, she and her two kids will be traveling across the US on a one-year educational adventure. Learn more about it at their website www.olsonadventure.homepage.nu