

# Classical horsemanship thrives at Colorado horse farm

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By Rebecca Colnar, freelance writer for The Fence Post



Megan Sorentino doing the passage on Fancy her pony she has had over 20 years. Photo by True Colors Photography

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Horse training methods has presented challenges and opportunities since the first human chose to clamber onto the back of an equine. Through the centuries, different riding styles and training methods developed, with one being classical horsemanship.

What is classical horsemanship? According to Megan Sorentino, owner of Falcon's Landing in Fort Collins, Colo., classical riding and the classical approach to horse training is based on a partnership between the rider and the horse. In good classical riding, a dance is formed between horse and rider, much like ballroom dancing. Classical horsemanship is a very old way of working with horses, using a combination of different lineages, some which date back to antiquity.

Sorentino, who is 31, starting riding at age 5, although she says she “came out of the womb saying horse, so my parents say. My mom wasn't a horse person, but my dad, who grew up in an Air Force family and rode overseas, signed me up for a riding lesson when I was 5 years old.”





**Megan Sorentino on Aquina, a warm-blood-mare said to be untrainable due to soundness issues. Photo by Nina Griffith Photography**

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She acquired her first pony, named Fancy (who is still doing well at age 27) and realized the animal could use additional training, so she investigated natural horsemanship training, which although she found it worked well, wanted more of a bond between herself and her horse. She always felt like something was missing, but could never really get to the level she wanted. Then she met Craig Stevens, an internationally renowned classical horsemanship trainer and rider in Washington. Stevens is the former director and founder of the Snohomish, Washington based National School of Academic Equitation. He has now retired to Sorentino's farm, and serves as a consultant.

Sorentino graduated from Colorado State University in December 2015 with a degree in equine science.

The horse enthusiast took clinics with Stevens, and in 2016 Sorentino completed NSAE's Professional's Course. This year-long program included intensive daily study of classical equitation, teaching riders from around the world, riding high level horses for clients and working regularly with school horses to help them develop freedom in motion.

#### STARTING A BUSINESS

After completing the course, she moved back to Colorado in 2017 where she started her business in her parents' backyard. In January 2020, she and her husband bought an existing horse boarding facility with beautiful scenery in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. They inherited boarders on the property, and the business began to grow online and via word-of-mouth. The facility is now semi-private and all of the horses on the property are student horses. This keeps the barn a community of like-minded riders.





**Morning sunrise at Falcon's Landing in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains north of Fort Collins, Colo. Photo by True Colors Photography**

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Sorentino has been joined instructor Maddie Weiss, who was training horses in Sterling, Colo., when she discovered the “old way” of training.” “The philosophy Classical Horsemanship, opens up a new world of horsemanship; to me it seems logical. Not only am I learning about the horses and listening to them. I also am learning about myself in the process. I support the beauty of the realness behind it, as well as sharing it as an instructor.”

Sorentino shared her thoughts on classical horsemanship and why it's so beneficial. She first explained in classical riding it takes 10 years to train the rider, training a horse typically takes about two years. (Although it is hard to put a time line on the horses). In what's called military riding – that most equestrians use today, was three months, as in the military, horses and riders needed to be trained enough to go the battlefield in a short amount of time.





The Classical Horsemanship team of instructors, left to right, are Madisson Weiss, Craig Stevens and Megan Sorentino. Photo by Nina Griffith Photography  
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Her business varies from her training a horse to her working with a horse and its rider. She also teaches on school horses and works with all levels of riders from all backgrounds. “You have to go with the horse’s timeline. Sometimes training a horse in 30 to 60 days is not authentic,” said Sorentino. “What I always say is when you’re working with a horse, you are creating tactile language with that horse. Training doesn’t do any good if the horse speaks a language and the rider doesn’t.”

She explained that classical horsemanship centers around the way a horse moves and being able to place the horse’s weight on any of its four feet and control the thrust (the speed). With these skills you can do anything.

“The way most people work, they use their hands and legs to fix mistakes, but when you work that way, it breaks down the horse physically and mentally. That means a rider holding them into a position; imagine trying to dance while someone jabs you in the side and grabs you by the shoulder. The way we work the horse, there is no opposition. It’s all about controlling the weight. If you can control the weight on our horse’s four feet, you can get the horse to do anything. You become very precise in your steering.”

Horses at Falcon’s Landing use classical horsemanship for different disciplines, ranging from cow work and hunters to working equitation and dressage and trail riding.





Performing the classical horsemanship "Airs Above the Ground." Nina Griffith Photography

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"The breed really doesn't matter, although gaited horses can be tricky because of their gaits. The classical work is based on the diagonalization of the gait, which gaited horses don't do as well. I always find gaited horse as a unique challenge though," Sorentino said. "I have a lot of horses with supposed physical problems, but there is no force the way we work with them, so they get stronger over time. My pony is 27, and I've had her for 20 years, but using classical horsemanship, she's getting better every day and is as healthy as she can be."

"We start riders out on a single rein so they learn to have good tact on the reins. It shows the rider their mistakes so they can learn the skill of lightness and good touch," Sorentino said. "If the rider's aids are too much, it's a problem for the horses; too little it's a problem for the rider because it doesn't work, riders need to learn what just right is. Most people try to overpower the horses to get control versus trying to find a soft connection that's not too much and not too little. It's about training the horses mind, not alligator wrestling with them." If you train the horses mind, they will do anything for you.

#### HAPPIER, HEALTHIER HORSES

The 31-year-old said she finds horses are happier and healthier with this type of training, this is the opposite of fear and bullying. "When I met Craig, I realized I could be friends with my horses. I changed the way I was working a horse. When a horse feels they are listened to, they respond. Obviously, there are firm boundaries, such as no biting or kicking. Think of it as do people work better for a boss who listens to their opinions, or one who does the bullying?"





Megan Sorentino doing the passage on Fancy her pony she has had over 20 years. True Colors Photography

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How quickly a horse improves depends on the animal and the level of trauma; some might take one week; others might be two years. However, Sorentino said even though classical horsemanship can take years to develop the horse, clinics can be helpful. It may take more time to train the horse's mind than to train the horse cosmetically but once the horse is trained you have a solid horse for the rest of that animal's life. The horse will likely live longer too because their body is worked in a healthy way.

"You can learn a lot at a clinic. We have a work-in-hand clinic which is basic horse handling and how to prepare a horse to carry a rider from the ground," she said. With work-in-hand they train the horse to be square and the center of gravity closer to the withers, this is the most efficient way for a horse to carry weight. With a rider up, steps should be even and equal, and the rider's weight comfortable for the horse.

"Every time riders interfere with the horse's balance, it's threatening to the horse," Sorentino noted. "We strive to create a fun, well-educated riding community where kindness and gentleness are used in the work with horses. We believe we can help every horse and rider find success." For more information on Classical Horsemanship visit <http://www.classhorsemanship.com>.

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