

AMY CENTER

The Business of Friendship and Horses

By Tori Kistler • Portraits by Becky Henderson



Amy Center at Cavallo Farms.

Riding is more than a sport—it's a way of life. This is the foundation that Cavallo Farms is built upon. For founders Amy Center and Janet Cawley, that way of life has always included something rather rare in the horse industry—a friendship that has lasted more than 40 years and formed the foundation of the business they built together.

BARN RATS WITH BIG DREAMS

Amy didn't come from a show-ring dynasty. She was 9 when she first started riding at summer camp, and like a lot of horse-loving little girls, she was hooked. "I was that normal little girl who just wanted to ride," Amy recalled with a laugh. "My

dad bought me a racetrack pony horse thinking it would be the safest thing. He was an Appaloosa and came with his own Western tack. I stuck that out for a short while, but I basically taught myself how to jump in that Western saddle because I wanted to be a show jumper."

Eventually, there were English lessons, and with them, doors began to open. Amy caught rides on anything she could swing a leg over and, thanks to a bit of luck and a lot of try, ended up with a 3-year-old who grew into an impressive Junior jumper. "I would love to say he was so good because I'm such an amazing rider, but it was pure luck and a very talented and willing horse," Amy said.

Her family moved constantly; she changed schools every year from fifth through 11th grade, riding with different trainers all over the Southeast. By her junior year of high school, they landed in Winter Park, Florida. Her dad picked a barn, moved her horse there and unknowingly set the rest of her life in motion.

"That's where I met Janet," Amy said. "She was three years younger than I was but at the barn, age doesn't really matter. We were the barn rats. If the trailer didn't get packed, it was because we hadn't done it. We lived and breathed it."

They traveled to shows up and down the East Coast together, the kind of teenagers who would rather scrub water buckets than go to the

mall. The families blended as naturally as the girls did. “Her parents were like my parents, my dad was like her dad,” Amy said. “We were just family from the start.”

Janet also recalled many moments from their early years of friendship that truly laid the foundation for what was to come in the future. “From running out of gas on the way home from the barn to cheering each other on in the bitter cold at a show, we were committed to seeing each other succeed,” Janet said.

THE FIRST BUSINESS PLAN

Somewhere between hay bales, night check and long drives home from horse shows, a shared dream began to take shape. “When I was 17 and Janet was 14, we found this little 10-acre farm with 10 stalls,” Amy said. “We dragged our parents out there and said, ‘We want to start a business if you’ll buy this place.’ To which they replied, ‘Absolutely not, you’re going to college.’”

For the moment, college won. Amy took her Junior jumper off to Florida State University (FSU) in Tallahassee, riding and showing with trainer Barry Lane and logging the kind of mileage in the ring and on the babies at the farm that would later anchor her professional career. She tried to balance heavy showing with heavy course loads and eventually hit the wall many young riders know too well.

“I would spend all day at the barn and weekends at shows. My grades suffered,” Amy said. “My dad finally told me I could do one or the other, and I realized that I was ready for a break and wanted to experience college life.”

She sold her beloved jumper to Molly Sewell and stepped away for a bit, comforted by the fact that he went back to their Orlando barn and into the hands of another young rider who would become a professional herself one day.

As a junior at FSU, Amy ran into Janet on campus. A freshman, Janet had her horses with Barry Lane. The nagging need to ride again became overpowering, and Amy started helping Barry with the babies at the farm once more. Barry encouraged Amy to become a professional and even set her up with her initial freelance clients. Upon graduating she took a job with a local breeder and helped with her youngsters while also building her freelance business. But something was nagging her again: That desire to have a barn and introduce people to the horse world was very strong.

Around the same time, Amy found a rundown little farm on Centerville Road in need of some love. “It was kind of falling



down, honestly,” Amy said. “But I remembered that dream Janet and I had when we were teenagers. So I called her and said, ‘Remember when we wanted to start a business? How about now?’” The farm needed to be stripped to the studs and with Janet still in college and Amy having only just graduated, it never looked easy.

“But she said yes,” Amy said. “We found an investor, tore that barn down to the bones, put fencing up ourselves, and started Cavallo Farms. I lived in a trailer on the property. Some of our first clients are still with us today—one of those early kids, Erin, now teaches our Saturday lesson program. It’s been quite a ride.”

GROWING UP, TOGETHER

Two years later, Amy and Janet made a move to a larger facility in Tallahassee and struck a deal to rebuild that farm and grow their business. “While Janet wrote an excellent business plan, the owner wasn’t interested in paying us salaries,” Amy laughed. “So we took on this new project and the next chapter of Cavallo Farms began.” They rebuilt that farm, too, and stayed for six years. Amy lived on the property first; later, after graduating, Janet moved in as well. Together they built a program, a reputation and contributed to a community that is still growing to this day.



The Cavallo Farms team: Professional rider Grace Dreyer, Amy, Janet Cawley and barn manager Cesar Angarita.

“We eventually realized if we were going to have anything for ourselves at the end of our journey, we better own the land,” Amy said. They found it in 50 raw acres in nearby Jefferson County. They cleared it in 2001 and began building their dream from the ground up. They’ve been there ever since.

“Our assistant trainer and professional rider, Grace Dreyer, started with us as a 4-year-old on lesson ponies; she’s 28 now,” Amy said. “Our barn manager, Cesar Angarita, started in our second year at the second farm and has been with us for more than two decades. Our own kids grew up here. Janet is my child’s godmother, and I’m the godmother of hers. It’s always been a family barn.”

From pony riders to adults rediscovering horses, from local shows to major finals, Cavallo Farms has sent students into every ring without losing sight of why they started. “We never wanted to live on the road 48 weeks out of the year,” Amy said. “We’ve had the experiences at the upper levels; we’ve taken kids there. But if someone needs a program that’s on

the road all the time, we’re happy to help them find it. We just want our riders to succeed, whatever that looks like for them.”

A RISING TIDE

In a sport where margins are thin and competition for clients can be fierce, Amy and Janet are both refreshingly open about cheering for other professionals. “There’s that saying, ‘A rising tide lifts all boats,’ and I really believe it,” Amy said. “This industry is hard. Very few are getting rich. We do it because we love it, and we’re working our butts off. When you’re younger, you get nervous when a customer leaves or someone new moves to town. But now, with a little age and perspective, I see there’s enough for everybody. If someone isn’t happy with us, I want them to be somewhere they’re happy. That’s better for them and for the horse.”

That philosophy extends beyond Cavallo’s fence lines. Both Amy and Janet have long been involved in their local association, serving on boards and volunteering at every level.

They were early adopters of interscholastic riding, launching the first IEA team north of Wellington and south of Atlanta, and hosting shows that helped the program grow in their region. “We just think it’s important that the local equestrian community be strong and supportive,” Amy said. “We want to do our part.”

Amy’s own path has expanded far past the farm. Over the years, she has served on national committees such as those that initially created and launched the USHJA Children’s and Adult Championships and the USHJA National Championships in Las Vegas. “I’ve enjoyed being involved in the National scene and getting to work with some amazing people,” Amy said. Most dear to her heart is her work with the USHJA Emerging Athletes Program (EAP). The program’s tag line is “Opens Eyes and Opens Doors” and that is just what it does through regional clinics with Olympic-caliber clinicians in the ring and the barn and a week-long experience that gives riders from all walks of life education, experience and connections.

Amy is now chair of the EAP. "I was intrigued from the start because EAP was the first program that really put equal emphasis on horsemanship and riding," Amy said. "It's application-based, not just about who can afford to show the most. We've had these Cinderella stories where kids without big bank accounts get noticed, make connections and end up riding on U.S. teams. Being a small part of that process is incredible."

Amy also worked her way through the demanding process of earning her Hunter/Hunt Seat Equitation and Jumper judging licenses from USEF and, most recently, her FEI Jumper Judge license. She enjoys judging all rings across the country as well as NCEA competitions. And most recently, Amy has added USHJA Instructor Credentialing Examiner to her credentials.

"But here's the thing," Amy said. "I couldn't have done any of that without Janet. The committees, the judging, EAP—it all means travel and time away. Our business had to be in a place where one of us could be gone, and that only works because I have a partner I trust completely. Without her, Cavallo would have had to close its doors or shrink, and I never would have been able to give back to the sport in those ways."

WHAT MAKES IT WORK

Ask Amy why she thinks their partnership has not just survived but thrived, and she doesn't hesitate. "Mutual respect," Amy said. "I really think that's the whole secret. Neither one of us has an ego over the other. Neither one of us is 'the' trainer or 'the' boss. We're equals, and we both know we couldn't do this without the other. Everything goes in that 'bank' of trust and respect."

That equality shows up in the smallest details of their program. Cavallo has three instructors—Amy, Janet and Grace—and students regularly lesson with all of them. "If you don't click with one of us, that's OK; you can ride with another," Amy said. "But 99% of our students float between all three of us. We all teach the same basic system; we just may say things a little differently or have different pet peeves. It gives riders multiple perspectives all while riding at the same barn."

Amy and Janet believe that kind of collaborative teaching can be hard in smaller programs but builds better horsemen. "I often say that when I became a trainer, I became a better rider, and when I became a judge, I became a better trainer and exhibitor," Amy said. "You're constantly learning—every lesson

“ Beginner instructors are the most important people in a barn. That’s where the foundation gets laid. ”

~Amy Center



Owning a farm with Janet has been Amy's dream since she was 17.



Amy and Janet with Wishful, owned by Cavallo Farms.

or clinic you teach, every show you judge, every EAP session you run. Having partners and mentors to share ideas with just accelerates that growth.”

For all the committees and championships, the heart of Amy’s work is still the relationship between horse and rider. “Beginner instructors are the most important people in a barn,” Amy said. “That’s where the foundation gets laid. I love teaching a beginner one hour and a more advanced kid the next. It forces you to think about how you explain things and what you’re asking of them.”

Horses have shepherded Amy through every season of her life. “I’ve spent many hours crying into a horse’s neck in a stall,” Amy said. “They’ve been my best therapists and my best friends. Teaching other people to feel even a fraction of what I feel with them—that’s the most meaningful part of this job.”

The message she hopes every student takes away is simple. “I want them to understand that the horse comes first,” Amy said. “You’re going to make mistakes—that’s OK. As long as you put the horse first, keep asking questions and don’t get afraid to look for answers, you’ll be fine. We do this because of the horse.”

Janet agreed, saying, “Family and horses come first. We want to share our passion for the sport and support those with the same passion. Our arms are always open to new riders and returning riders alike.”

MORE THAN A BUSINESS

After more than three decades, the numbers on paper tell one story: students who have gone on to ride professionally, children who grew up in the barn and returned as adults, staff who have stayed for decades, championships earned and programs built. But for Amy and Janet, those are just the byproducts of something deeper.

“There have been very few financial gains,” Amy said. “But we’ve put a lot of kids on horses. We’ve watched them fall in love with this sport, grow up, go off into the world and sometimes find their way back. We’ve built a home for families who love horses the way we do. And I’ve gotten to do all these extra amazing things in the sport I love because I have a partner who is willing to share the load.”

Janet added, “We’ve accomplished a lot over the past few decades. I would be happy to continue bringing along new riders and helping them achieve their goals no matter what they are.”

After all these years, Amy and Janet are still best friends. “We vacation together. Our families are each other’s families. We’ve been through everything—starting from nothing, rebuilding barns, raising kids, long nights and early mornings and a lot of mud. The reason it works is that we’ve always put the friendship—and the respect—first. The business grew out of that, not the other way around,” Amy said.

For every young rider dreaming of a life with horses, and every professional wondering how to make it all work without losing themselves, Amy and Janet hope their story offers a little encouragement. “It’s absolutely possible to build a career in this sport and not do it alone,” Amy said. “Find the people who share your values. Be loyal. Be generous. Remember there’s room for everyone. And never forget that at the center of all of it are the horses and the friendships they give us.” **S**

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Amy with wishful, aka Nero.