HORSE SHOW HEROES

by Karen Briggs

If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes a small army to run a horse show! Next time you fill in an entry, or wait your turn at the in-gate, spare a thought for the dozens of people who helped to make your show a reality. When you were up in the wee hours of the morning, hooking up your trailer, they were already at the showgrounds, setting courses, laying down microphone cables, sorting competitor numbers, dragging the footing, and doing everything in their power to make sure you and your horse enjoyed the day.

Let's take a peek behind the scenes and meet just three of the unsung heroes who help make LAHJA shows happen.

SHOW SECRETARY: BRENDA OUTWATER

Twenty-eight years of practice have allowed Brenda Outwater's job to run "like a well-oiled machine". But without her dedication and organizational skills, it could just as easily be chaos.

A show secretary's job, Brenda says, is difficult to define. "I think it's different for every secretary. In some ways I'm more of an event organizer. I take entries and process them, but I also order ribbons, make sure the show has the right insurance in place, make arrangements with the vendors, keep the accounting in order, order the porta-potties, and hire the officials and make sure all their travel arrangements are taken care of."

With 14 major horse shows a year to produce for LAHJA, Brenda works full-time, year-round, though she says, "Some weeks I work 20 hours, and others I work 90!" One of the down-sides of her job is that "Weekends don't really exist, though occasionally I get a Tuesday or Wednesday off, depending on the size and length of the next show coming up. It's all-consuming."

She is an independent contractor, who gets paid by the show. To help keep things running smoothly, she recruits between three and six additional people to assist her in the show office – "sometimes they're mothers whose kids are showing".

Though she rode as a child, Brenda never imagined herself being a show secretary when she came out of school… but her contacts in the industry stood her in good stead as she learned the ropes, beginning at the age of 19. "There's really nowhere you can go to school to do this," she says. "It's on-the-job training. You have to be extremely organized, get along well with people, and know the rules. Over the years it has become much more computer-oriented. And there is also more association paperwork to take care of now. We track and submit results to the Los Angeles Hunter Jumper Association, the United States Equestrian Federation, and the Pacific Coast Horse Shows Association, for year-end awards.

"I think the total number of horses (at the average show) has increased a lot over the years as well."

An average horse show day begins at 7 a.m. for Brenda, and can go till 6 p.m. or longer. "If it's a really long show, we do shift work," she says. And although there must be days – and competitors – who test her patience and endurance, she says there's nothing she would change about the job. "I'll keep doing it for the foreseeable future. I like the job's flexibility, I like the people, and I like that I'm good at it!"

RING CREW: BRETT STARNES

At first glance, one might think the only requirement for being a member of the ring crew is a strong back. But there's much more to setting a course of jumps than just lugging standards and poles. Orange Country's Brett Starnes should know – he has worked his way up the ranks from 'grunt' to now managing up to 15 other people, and along the way has acquired skills ranging from course design to landscaping!

"My cousin, Scott Starnes, who's a high-profile hunter course designer, got me into this originally," says Brett. "I started straight out of high school, in 2001. Now my job description includes assisting the course designer, making sure all the safety equipment, like breakaway cups, are in place, doing all the course decoration – with flower pots and shrubs and things – making sure the footing is suitable, checking that course changes are set according to the specs, and helping with trainer conflicts.

"During a show, I'm cruising around between up to seven different show rings, helping to keep everything running smoothly. Fifteen-hour days are pretty standard. Not everyone lasts at this job. You have to be mentally tough. It's outside work, and you need patience as well as strength. Plus you need to be able to communicate well with the other people in the ring crew, and with the judge and the show management, and at the same time be polite and respectful to the competitors. After all, they're paying our salaries."

Most importantly, says Brett, "you need to know the rule book inside out. The specs for the courses must be correct."

If you can fulfill all these requirements, you'll never lack for work, Brett says. "I have work every weekend if I want it. I do 15 or 16 shows in LA, five in Del Mar, and some of my other dates get filled in with dressage shows. I get lots more offers than I can take. There's all kinds of potential for travel and work if you're experienced."

At an average show, Brett recruits a minimum of six other people (to handle course building for two hunter rings and a jumper ring). "You really need eight on the weekends." There are some significant differences between building hunter courses and those for the jumpers, he adds. "If you know the hunters, then the jumpers can be a foreign world. But on the whole jumper course design is easier – the hunters have more hidden details and I think it's trickier to learn."

If Brett has a pet peeve about his job, it's that long after everyone else has left the showgrounds at the end of a show, he and his crew usually still have several hours' worth of putting equipment away ahead of them. "We're sometimes there till 10 or 11 p.m. on a Sunday night, packing up seven rings' worth of jumps.

"We're the first ones (on the grounds) and the last ones to leave," he adds. "And sometimes, yeah, we're the scapegoats. It's always the ring crew's fault! We're all working hard here, and I do think some riders and trainers need to take responsibility instead of blaming someone else. Most are great, but a few like to pick a fight."

On the whole, though Brett says he enjoys the interaction with horse-show people, and sees the job as a stepping-stone to greater things. "It might look like a dead-end job, but it's really not," he says. There's so much to learn. I think of it as a trade or skill – there is always going to be a demand for people who know what they're doing and can take initiative. And I'm going to college while I do this, studying business management, and hope to manage horse shows in the

future. I'm taking course design clinics, too, and I'd also like to get my judge's card for the jumpers at some point."

GATE STEWARD: CHRIS KING

Stand at the in-gate of a horse show ring with a clipboard and a walkie-talkie. Sounds easy, right? Well, the reality is you have to be part ring-leader, part juggler, part communications professional, and part conflict resolution specialist, as Chris King well knows.

At 44 shows a year, each of them five to six days long, Chris is there, making sure there's a steady flow of the right competitors to each of several rings. "I herd people. That's basically what I do," says the 20-year veteran of the hunter/jumper ring. "I see a couple of thousand horses go in and out of these rings every weekend. It's my job to call the competitors and keep everyone informed. It makes for a long day, and sometimes I think the only skill you need is the will to keep going." Clearly, however, what makes him so effective is the fact that he knows all the personalities who appear at his in-gate, knows their preferences, their quirks, and their foibles. "It's so much easier when you know the people," Chris says. "I see the same riders every week, so I know how to keep them happy."

On the whole, people-herding is simpler in the jumper ring, says Chris. "The jumper gate is a lot easier to run, because they're hungry to get in the ring. I have to work a little harder with the hunter folks."

For variety's sake, Chris also works as a course designer and as an announcer, finding these jobs less stressful than moving standards and poles, which is how he started out.

Though he admits to "getting stomped on a bit", Chris finds the experience far more positive than negative. "Mostly it's really good," he says. "I try not to give bad information. The regulars are pretty aware of how difficult this job can be, and they respect that. And I like being outside; I like being busy. I had nothing to do with horses as a kid, so the fact that I'm in this 20 years later is kind of strange. It's something I just fell into – I was recruited by a friend who'd worked the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics – and I've been doing it now since 1988."