

## Horsing around on Francis Peninsula

By Brian Lee

These days' people are especially distracted by what's new.

The new houses and developments. The new neighbours.

The new store moving into a small community.

It often takes a little more scrutiny to see what's old.

On Francis Peninsula, the Malcolm family farm has existed for half a century.

Its 110 acres are bordered by the houses along Warnock Rd. on the east and Francis Point Park to the west, Francis Peninsula Road to the north and the ocean to the south.

As successful fishermen, the Malcolms have resisted the pressure to subdivide their prime land and have instead maintained it as a working farm bordered on all sides by family members who still use it as such.

One of the relatives, Virginia

Antilla and her husband Earl have a house on Warnock Road that backs on to the property.

Having grown up near where she now lives, Virginia was a "horse girl".

She was taught to ride at an early age by her Aunt Rosemary and by the age of 7 she was competing on her grandma's pony.

Virginia has tried to share her love for horses with a new generation of girls growing up in Pender Harbour and operates Bayview Stables out of her backyard.

With a view any developer would offer his gallbladder for, Bayview Stables looks out Churchill Bay towards the southern tip of Texada Island.

The wide open fields are dotted with conspicuously placed logs and obstacles with connecting lines of well-trodden dirt paths.

Nearer the stables sits a huge show jumping stadium built by Virginia's uncle and a dressage corral on

a hill above that her grandpa built in the '60s.

Virginia has been operating Bayview Stables for about 10 years offering lessons, stabling, horse training and riding camps in the summer.

It's a business that developed out of love for the sport and the necessity of offsetting the costs associated with it.

What started with English riding lessons has turned into a training club for young riders bent on competing in the gruelling horse and rider competition known as "eventing."

Often called the "iron man" of equestrian disciplines, eventing is a three-day competition that involves three components intended to test a rider and horses stamina and skill.

On the first day, dressage tests the harmony between horse and rider in a complex set of movements over a pre-set pattern.

The dressage is a challenge to both the horse's obedience and the rider's ability to maintain an almost fluid communication link to the horse.

On the second day, horse and rider take to the cross-country course and jump a series of solid obstacles at speed galloping through fields and forest, up hills and leaping over water obstacles.

The cross-country phase is considered the toughest challenge to horse and rider in the horse sport world and also the most dangerous.

Fitness, endurance, strength and courage are well tested in the cross country phase but the most important component is the trust between the horse and its rider.

Only the rider is permitted to walk the course before leaving the



Looking out over the Strait of Georgia, Bayview Stables is likely one of the most scenic equestrian centres in BC.

starting box.

The final day involves the familiar show jumping where horse and rider complete a series of non-solid jumps and are evaluated on how cleanly they clear the obstacles.

Conditioning and training are crucial to a successful placing here because the horse is often tired after the difficult second day.

A single rail knocked down can mean a drastically lower placing.

Eventing was first introduced at the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, Sweden.

The competition was called “Militaire” and was patterned after the training and testing of military chargers to assess precision, elegance and obedience on the parade ground, stamina, versatility and courage on the battlefield and cross-country jumping ability and endurance to prove the horse’s fitness.

Until the Paris Olympics of 1924 when the modern format was adopted, “Militaire” was only open to army officers on military horses.

It wasn’t open to women until 1964.

Down on the Malcolm farm, a dedicated group of local riders have been honing their skills over the past 10 years, also with an eye to the Olympics.

All participate in local competitions at various barns and horse farms on the coast for training and many travel to the Lower Mainland and the U.S. for various competitions and events.

By the time Virginia’s daughter



Lauren Paton and Toffee train for the demanding equestrian sport known as 3 Day Eventing.

Ailsa was eight months old, she was sitting in the saddle by herself and by the time she was a year she’d refuse to let anyone hold the horse while she was on it.

At age four she started cross pole jumping and now, at the ripe old age of 10, she whizzes around the farm on her athletic little pony leaping over the various jumps and obstacles with a perma-smile that shows that her training is strictly a labour of love.

Ailsa recently started competing at the re-entry level — which means she’s up against much older riders and much larger horses — and placed 11th in her first competition at that level.

Riders usually move up levels when they start placing consistently high and are usually directed to the next level by their coach.

In Canada, there are seven levels from pre-entry to advanced, which is Olympic level competition.

**Horsing around(cont.)**

When asked about the possibility of ever putting one of her riders in the Olympics, Virginia is realistic.

“You have those thoughts when you see certain riders but who knows? To make it to that level it requires years of sacrifice and total dedication and hard work. So even though there’s some kids that are showing that kind of potential now, whether they have the support from the family to get them through that, the dedication to stick it out — that’s the variable you can’t control.”

Lauren Paton and her horse Toffee recently placed first at the B.C. Championships in the entry level division — Bayview regularly places in the team competition.

The horses are seldom given as much credit for a win but are every bit as important.

The horses used for competition are usually “warm-bloods,” a cross between “cold bloods” like the big draft horses and the hot-blooded thoroughbreds.

It’s the type of horse you see at Olympic events like show jumping and dressage.

Offering a simpler analogy, Antilla adds, “They’re kind of a cross between a Ferrari and an Escalade. Big, powerful, versatile and athletic.”

Bayview Stables only keep

geldings (sterile males) and mares, although the mares have to be separated from the geldings when in heat because often they can become dangerously aggressive when the geldings won’t mount them.

Keeping stallions is a different enterprise entirely and carries huge amounts of liability requiring more insurance and 10-foot fences to keep the aggressive males away from other riders and horses.

Most mating sables artificially inseminate because the stallions are so valuable they can’t take the risk of one getting kicked by a mare.

Like any top athlete, the horses require special care, training and diet.

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Courtney Herdman and Kali canter around the stadium to warm up before attempting jumps.

feed and stabling costs all add up and the expense of maintaining a horse is often the limiting factor in a rider’s development.

Add to that the travel costs and competition entry fees and the bill can be staggering.

Antilla puts it into perspective. “It’s not cheap but you know what? Having put kids through hockey, it’s comparable.”

And she should know.

With another stable of boys all coming up through the minor hockey system, Earl and Virginia have experienced first-hand the dedication required of parents with children competing at the top levels of competition.

One of her sons was drafted

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by the Kootenay Ice in the Western Hockey League and there have been many sacrifices made along the way by both parent and athlete.

“Riding is a great sport for children to mentor and be mentored,” says parent Paola Stewart.

“The surroundings are fabulous and the teacher is a great inspiration to all the youth who pass through her house.”

Equestrian sports carry a huge amount of responsibility not found in other types of activities.

Each rider must look after his or her mount and the stall needs to be mucked, the horse watered and fed each day.

Virginia’s motivation for all the hard work is clear.

“I think one of the draws for parents is that horse riders don’t have time to do drugs. They don’t have time to party. They have time to look

after their horse, to train themselves, to train their horses, do their home-work and go to bed exhausted every night. That’s the beauty of it.”

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