

Focusing on East Coast Riders and Their Horses

TODAY'S EQUESTRIAN

September/October, 2018

Pony Issue!

Meet Area Pony Riders!

**Kip Rosenthal:
Pony Divisions Clarified**

**Ashley Holzer:
Mastering the Sitting Trot**

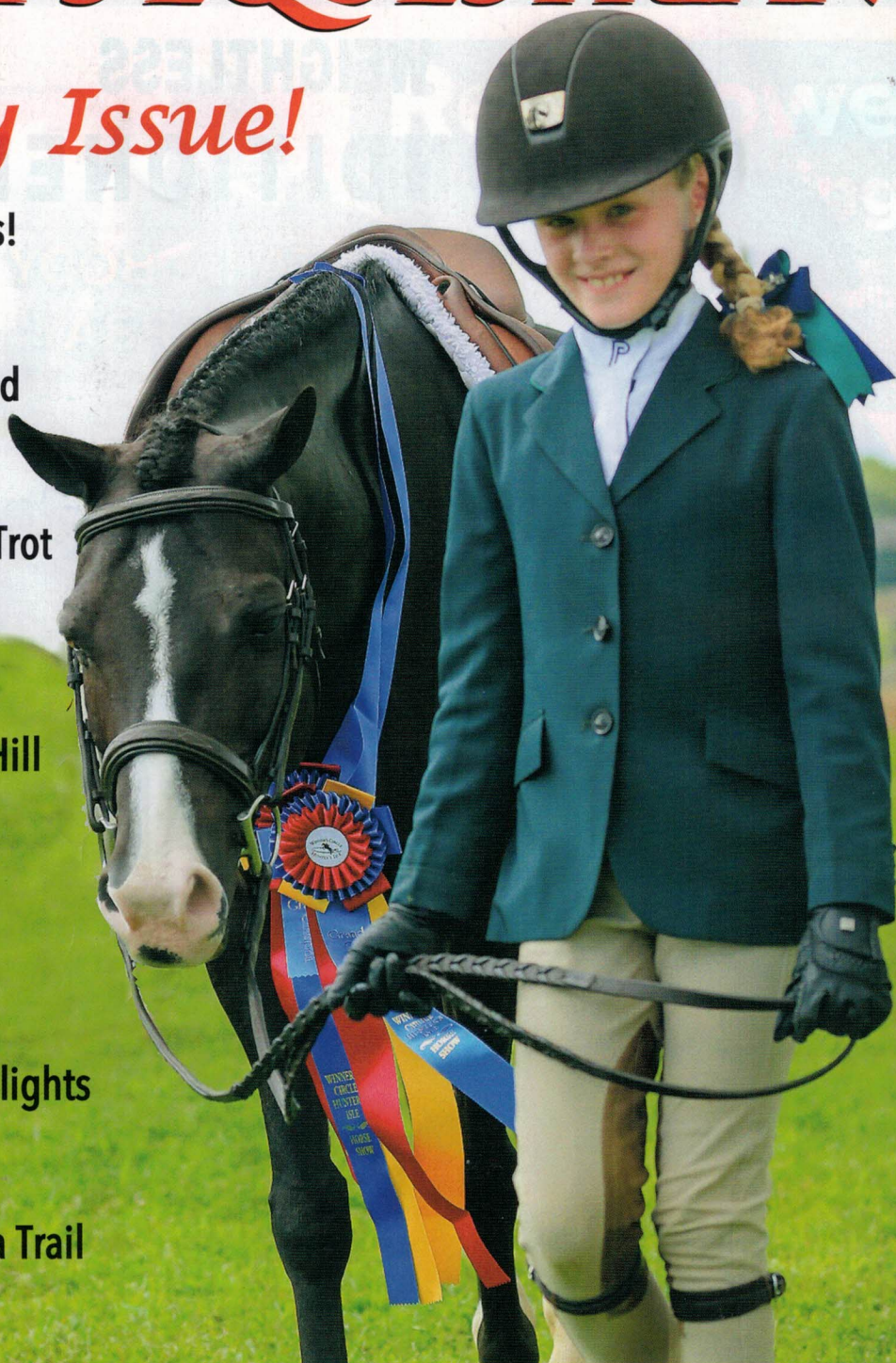
**Pony Rider
Baylee McKeever:
Growing up at Castle Hill
with McLain Ward**

**What's New Indoors
This Year**

Hampton Classic Highlights

**Ireland on Horseback:
Riding the Connemara Trail**

**Plus...
Calendar....News..
Classifieds....
and *more!***



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Publisher

Ashley Holzer

Ashley@TodaysEquestrian.com

Associate Publisher and Managing Editor

Barbara Messina

631-451-3938

Barbara@TodaysEquestrian.com

Staff Writer

Ann Jamieson

860-927-3737

Ann@TodaysEquestrian.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Ann Jamieson

860-927-3737

Ann@TodaysEquestrian.com

Patty Messina

631-431-3368 (cell)

Patty@TodaysEquestrian.com

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Mailing Address:

P.O. Box 743 • Coram, N.Y. 11727

www.TodaysEquestrian.com

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Piper Shearer and *Chapman*

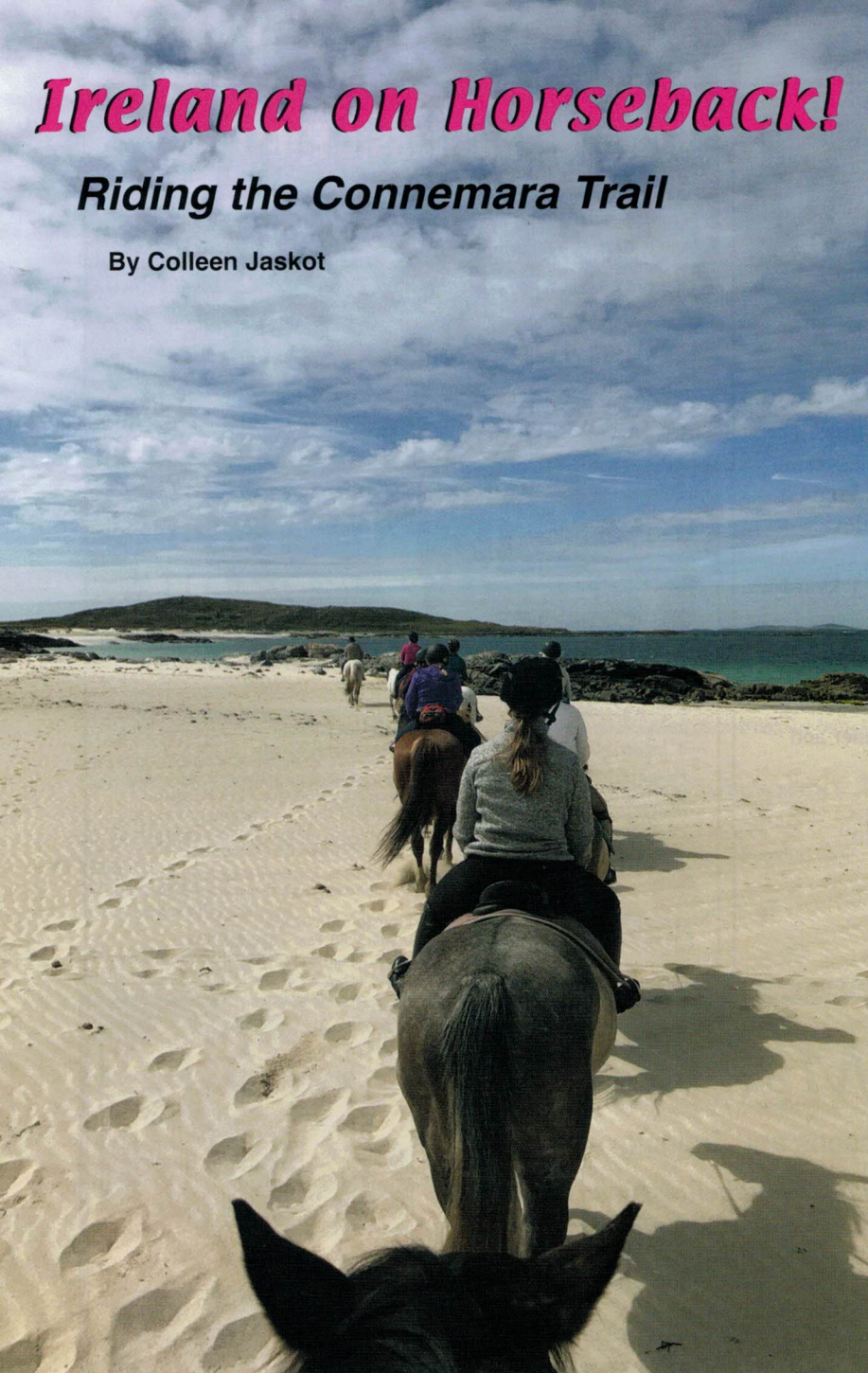
Photo by Bruce Smith/Digital Hoofprints.com

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Ireland on Horseback!

Riding the Connemara Trail

By Colleen Jaskot



I hadn't thought our trip could get any better, even when I looked at my view through Jerry's dark bay ears: Dunes spotted with yellow flowers led down to white sand, rocky coves, and clear blue water.

We had already spent three days riding through the infinite green hills, barren mountains, and abundant bogs of Connemara. We were on surefooted and trustworthy horses. Jerry was a sometimes headstrong, but sweet and steady, 8-year-old Irish Sport Horse. My mom was on Spotty, a calm and quiet flea-bitten gray Connemara pony.

Today was our day for riding on the beach and swimming with the horses, but I didn't think it could beat what we'd already done. I love the beach, but it wasn't like we were in a prime beach destination, like the Caribbean—although we could have been, with the pristine sand and transparent water. However, like every other day on the trail, this day was about to be better than I ever could have imagined.

Trail riding through western Ireland's Connemara region on Connemara ponies was a bucket list trip for me and my mother, ever since I read an article about it when I was in middle school. It had been 15 years in the making, and when we finally went in July, it more than lived up to our expectations.

We rode point to point, stopping at a different destination each of the five days, with our guide Willie Leahy. Willie, a soft-spoken and seasoned old-school Irish horseman, has run these trips since 1969, before horseback riding vacations became popular. At 80 years old, he still guides his two trips—the Connemara Trail and Connemara Coast Trail—alternating weeks May through September. According to his website, he's also one of the world's largest Connemara pony breeders. By the end of our trip, everyone was charmed by the athleticism and good nature of the ponies, and of his Irish Sport Horses, too.

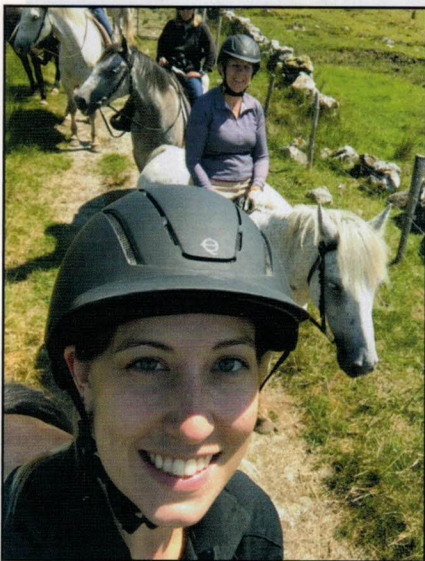
Jerry, Spotty, and the rest of our mounts walked on roads with cars passing at 100 kilometers per hour, navigated rocky footing up and down mountains, and crossed knee-deep streams and puddles—all things that made me nervous but were nothing to them. It didn't surprise us that riders have been known to buy their mounts after the trip.

Our days started around 10 a.m. when a van picked us up from the previous night's hotel and brought us to the field where we left the horses the evening before. We rode for two to three hours in the morning and again in the afternoon, stopping for an hour in between to eat a picnic lunch. We would arrive at our final destination between 5 and 6 p.m. each day.

Throughout the week, my mom and I got to know the diverse and interesting group of 15 other riders. Most people (besides a German man who bravely but successfully took on the trail with his daughter, despite only having been on a horse four times) had a solid riding background, even if they don't ride regularly. A few had done the trip before: a group of four Norwegian women rode the Coast Trail the previous summer. A 74-year-old Danish woman had been doing the trip regularly since the 1980's and was back with her daughter who had done the trail as a teenager and her 15-year-old granddaughter who was there for the first time. Our group also included a woman from Canada who had grown up riding and showing Connemara ponies, and her daughter. A solo Danish woman and three ranch women from Wyoming completed our group.

Although the horses knew what they were doing, we didn't. At least, in a logistical sense. Neither Willie nor our other guide, Abby, told us how long we'd be riding, when we'd stop, or where we were going. Once, when someone asked Abby where we were riding after lunch, her response was a cheerful "Wherever Willie takes us!" It was a little disconcerting at first, but in the end, not knowing all this made it much easier for me to let go, live in the moment, and simply enjoy the unique experiences I wouldn't have had anywhere else.

Our journey started in Oughterard, where we rode past rolling green hills,



Colleen sporting the smile that lit up her face all week long on the Connemara Trail!

which probably weren't even as green as usual, since we were riding during a rare drought and heat wave in Ireland. This meant beautiful weather all week for us! Grids of stone walls covered the hills, containing mostly sheep, but sometimes adorable donkeys that would call to and greet the horses. Beautiful purple, pink and yellow wildflowers grew along the trails.

The next day, we rode from Maam Cross through mountains and past beautiful lakes, on sometimes untamed trails. At one point, we had to get off, walk on foot across a makeshift bridge over a stream, and re-mount on the other side.

On the third day, another rider and I switched mounts, and I got to ride a Connemara pony, *Mickey*, during our first canter of the trip. I couldn't stop smiling, even as the wind and dirt made my eyes tear, while we cantered along the old railway line. We continued that day toward Clifden, with views overlooking a bay.

On day four, we rode to Mannin Bay Beach along a coastal trail, where the cute cottages with bright flowers and colorful trim had many of us dreaming of second homes.

That day our guide Abby asked me to lead a pony along the trail. (She rode a couple of different ponies throughout the week to train them, so we always had an extra tagging along without a rider.) I'd never led a pony while on horseback myself, and considered expressing my doubts, but by then I knew I should just embrace the experience.

On our last day of the trail, we rode up and over Errisbeg Mountain—a final reminder of how skilled and steady our horses and ponies were.

We spent a sixth and thrilling day riding around and jumping cross country at Willie's Dartfield Equestrian Center, a perfect end to our week.

That day, when Abby asked a group of us to help her get a horse from the field and put our herding skills to use once more "for old time's sake"—it didn't feel completely like a joke.

Because even though the "old times" she referred to started only five days earlier, we experienced a lot in a short time. We conquered the Connemara Trail, challenged ourselves to get out of

our comfort zones when riding, and learned to let go. We experienced Ireland like you could only experience it on horseback.

I thought back to the beach day, which ended up being my favorite day of the trip. After we swam with the horses and let them loose on the beach to dry off (imagine being a beachgoer and suddenly having a herd of horses surround you!), we tacked up to continue our ride.

That afternoon, all of us galloped across the sand together. Eighteen other horses and ponies thundered around me, the salty wind whipped my face, and hooves crackled against dry seaweed and shells. It was exhilarating—a moment of pure freedom and enjoyment.

After we cantered a couple of times, across different stretches of beach, Willie would say, "That's enough now," and it would seem like we were done.

But a few minutes later, he'd look back at us with a twinkle in his eye, and without much warning, canter off again, with our horses right behind him.

Throughout the trip, which we booked through Equitrekking Travel, we stayed in the towns of Oughterard, Cashel Bay, Clifden, and Loughrea. Riders had the choice of staying at guesthouses or hotels. The guesthouses were cheaper, but not by much, so my mom and I chose the hotels, as did the majority of the riders. Most of the hotels were fairly modern, and all were lovely. We also heard nothing but good things about the guesthouses. All of us, even the riders at the guesthouses, ate dinner at the hotels together. We ate well—three course meals every night with an appetizer, main dish, and dessert. I'm a vegetarian, so my options were usually something with goat cheese, but they were all delicious! I know my mom and the other guests all enjoyed their meals as well.

Clifden was a particularly cute town, overlooking a bay, with many colorful shops and cobblestone streets. It's also the home of the Connemara Pony Breeders' Society and the annual Connemara Pony Show. Unfortunately, as in all of the towns we stayed, we didn't have much time to look around or shop. By the time we got back from riding, we ate dinner and then it was time for bed. We were just too busy riding—but who could complain about that? Ω