

Planting **Strong** Roots in Young Event Riders

*A profile of Tawn Edwards and
her Willow South Riding School*

By Leslie Mintz



The top four competitors on the 2009 Beginner Novice Junior Rider Leaderboard in June are all students at Tawn Edwards's Willow South Riding School. Sarah C. Murphy, Stephanie Sapp, Lindsey Graulich, and Kelsey Neely are all trained by Tawn and ride and compete horses owned by her. The top rider on the Novice Junior Rider Leaderboard, Sarah Ginsberg, is also one of Tawn's students.

Over the past nine years, Tawn has developed a program at her Willow South Riding School in Alpharetta, Georgia that has successfully brought a multitude of riders from walk/trot lessons to winning at events all over Area III. She had a vision that came from her childhood experience growing up on a farm in a family of eventers. "We went out together to events and Pony Club rallies, worked together, practiced together, and enjoyed the sport together," Tawn said.

Tawn grew up in the Adirondack Mountains of New York surrounded by a very horse-oriented family. Her mother, Julie Edwards, ran the local Pony Club



ABOVE: Tawn Edwards competes her homebred mare, Luna, at the Training level at Poplar Place Farm in Hamilton, Georgia.

and founded Willow Hill Farm, a summer equestrian camp. The farm was only 15 minutes down the road from Jessica Ransenhousen's farm. Tawn said that Ransenhousen, a legendary dressage rider and trainer, was a huge influence on her own dressage foundation. When Tawn was

old enough, she began teaching riding lessons at Willow Hill Farm. Tawn says that she counts the days she spent teaching at camp as "some of her fondest memories. Sharing the sport of eventing with young riders is probably the most fun one can have in life."

In 2000, at age 33, after a break from horses for college, travel, and marriage, Tawn started Willow South. Her plan was to teach children how to ride and introduce them to eventing. Tawn travelled 1100 miles from Georgia to her family's farm in New York to borrow some safe, elderly school horses from the summer camp program. Tawn said, "I soon realized how incredibly rare good, seasoned event ponies really are. Furthermore, how difficult it is to convince parents that "tall, fast, and young" aren't primary characteristics of a good child's horse." After regretfully selling the perfect event pony for her mother, Tawn realized that she would just be better off keeping the good ponies for her students rather than selling them.

Almost nine years later, Tawn has 27 horses and ponies in her program. She





Martha Murphy Photo.

ABOVE: The Willow South girls celebrate their success in the Junior Beginner Novice divisions at FENCE Horse Trials in Tryon, North Carolina. From left to right: Betsy Kaywood, Stephanie Sapp, Sarah Murphy, Allison Kennedy, Lindsay Graulich, and Kelsey Neely.

owns all of them except for one which is in a free lease situation. Half of the Willow South horses currently competing were bred by the Edwards family. Zula, Dublin, and Pharaoh are all on the USEA Beginner Novice Horse Leaderboard and are half-siblings, sharing Rainsong as their sire. Rainsong who is sired by Couspar is an imported Polish Trakhener. Rainsong's dam, Windsong, is an event and show jumping mare ridden to the Preliminary level by Tara Edwards, Tawn's sister and two-time Rolex competitor. Windsong was also competed in Grand Prix show jumping with Tawn's brother, Ken Edwards.

Many of the Rainsong offspring have great movement and suspension for dressage, and they tend to be honest to the fences. They are also "push rides" which Tawn prefers for her students. "Children gain more confidence and ability from horses that accept a lot of leg and gallop in a snaffle," she says. "A child who is asked to be very definite and assertive to the fences becomes a more confident rider than one who is dragged forward at a rapid clip to a fence that worries her. Safety is the primary concern in choosing Willow South horses."

The horses that the Willow South students compete are truly a product of the entire family's hard work. They are all started by Julie and Tara and some are sent

to Tawn to begin their eventing careers. A few of the homebreds are sold, while the rest stay at Willow Hill to be ridden by the Edwards family or their students. Tawn says owning her program's horses gives her students a different experience than the other kids that she meets in the eventing world. She believes that this is a positive difference because the ponies get better every year, and Tawn can match the right pony to the right rider since she knows each of the ponies so well. Tawn also does not have the usual obstacle of the parent who refuses to buy her pick—the "slow, plain looking, small horse for their child." When Tawn first opened her barn in Georgia, she said that she did a ton of advertising and heard back from many different types of people—some good and some not so. After a few years, the Willow South program began to grow based on word of mouth alone. Although it is the success of the students in the eventing world that may bring all the glory, Tawn says it is the 70 walk/trot lesson kids that are the backbone of the program, and feed the funding for

the more advanced students.

As Tawn's students progress up the ranks, they share a common set of rules. For example, no one gets to wear a watch on cross-country until the rider has repeatedly demonstrated his or her ability to accurately ride the posted meter-per-minute on course. Riders that want to compete must also take two lessons per week with Tawn and complete assigned work taking care of their horses. Tawn knows that there are dozens of rules that do not have to be made for her students because they respect their horses, their fellow riders, their parents, and their sport. As a reward for her students' dedication and hard work, Tawn plans recreational activities to build the team's bond with fun things like quadrille dressage, horse soccer, and summer camp at Willow Hill in New York.

Tawn has many obstacles to overcome with her training program. All of her students are still in school, and Tawn has multiple lessons to teach every day so there is no time during the week to trailer out to a cross-country course for schooling. Her

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barn is also set in metro-Atlanta on small acreage. "I come up with exercises and problems to solve to find ways to combat the fact that we are in the suburbs and have no solid jumps, no cross-country course, no water, no ditches, and no banks," Tawn explains. "On a daily basis, I have to come up with ways to make confident, independent-thinking, resourceful event riders and horses inside a flat arena—without the benefit of natural elements of terrain or jumps. We are able to school local courses on some weekends and I use this time as wisely as possible—keeping in mind the strengths and weaknesses of these horses and riders I know so well."

Last year was a culmination of success for Willow South when, after three years in Tawn's program, Kelsey Neely won the Junior Beginner Novice division at the American Eventing Championships and was the 2008 Junior Beginner Novice Rider of the Year on Zula, a third generation product of the family breeding program. According to Tawn, Kelsey is the consummate professional. "Looking across a warm-up ring you would think that Kelsey is one of the professionals, not a 13-year-old girl because of the fantastic movement she elicits from the horses she rides," Tawn says. "Kelsey's accomplishments were a double victory for me to have my formula proven successful and my family's breeding program shine through."

This year is shaping up nicely with the exiting arrival of new horses and students and the maturity of the current ones. Sarah C. Murphy, who goes by 'Murphy' at the farm because of the multitude of Sarahs, topped the Junior Beginner Novice Leaderboard in June. She also has taken over the ride on Zula as Kelsey moved on to a new challenge. Tawn says that Sarah has a great character with a great spirit. "She works incredibly hard and is an amazing sport if she has suffered a disappointment." Sarah's mom, Martha Murphy, said that when Sarah was in the fourth grade, she took her to the pediatrician for her annual physical. Martha asked if there was anything she could do to help fix Sarah's sway back because it had become very pronounced. "My husband and I thought that she would have to wear some type of brace," Martha said. "The doctor asked if I had ever considered letting Sarah ride horses. I guess as they say, the rest is history. I am happy to tell you that Sarah now has great posture!"

Martha says that Tawn's program is

the best thing that ever happened to Sarah. "She has become a hard-working, happy child, Martha explains. "Sarah has become a better student at school since riding with Tawn. The deal is that she must finish homework and maintain good grades in order to be able to ride. Sarah has become a straight-A student. The eventing has also been a great thing for Sarah. It has taught her that she has to work hard for something she really wants...like going from just not getting eliminated all the way to

winning an event."

According to Martha, being part of Tawn's program gives Sarah an experience different from other riders. "Tawn posts a calendar of events on the Willow South web site that she will be taking the trailer, and the girls get to choose which events they want to/can do, Martha says. "(There is at least one per month.) Then, the girls are responsible for entering the event, but don't have to worry about getting the horse to the event. I have a good friend whose daughter



Martha Murphy Photo.



Red Horse Images

ABOVE: Kelsey Neely with Pharaoh, Lindsay Graulich with Adanac, and Sarah Murphy with Zula took the top three placing of the Junior Beginner Novice division at the Poplar Place Farm June Horse Trials.

CENTER: Karaoke has become a Willow South tradition for Tawn's students at many of the events.

BELOW: Allison Kennedy and Formal Attire successfully navigate a coop at the Surefire Horse Trials in Purcellville, Virginia.



Martha Murphy Photo.

quit riding because she was bored. I really believe that if this girl had been in Tawn's program she would have never quit." Tawn has only the highest compliments for her riders, praising each in turn. She says that she elicits so much pleasure from teaching, and her favorite moments are watching the lightbulb turn on when a rider learns to use the outside rein or jump a ditch confidently. "The 'a-ha' moments and friendships that I see develop among my riders make everyday worth it," says Tawn.

Fifteen-year-old, Rachel Wilks has been in Tawn's program the longest out of her current riders. "Rachel has a rare sensitiv-

ity to each horse she rides," according to Tawn. "She looks to herself for improvement instead of blaming her mount. Rachel is the sharpest knife in the tool box with the memory of an elephant and the work ethic of the average three people—she is the Willow South organizer. Willow South enjoys her packing and organizational talents on every trip."

In her six years as Tawn's student, Rachel says that she has never regretted her decision to start riding at Willow South. "I feel that we make eventing more of a team sport than other barns," Rachel says. "We are always cheering each other

on and helping each other out, and Tawn is so dedicated to her students." Rachel's most memorable experiences riding with Tawn are getting to spend a month every summer in New York at Willow Hill Farm and competing at the 2008 American Eventing Championships.

"I wanted my school to be like my family." Tawn said, "So I kept every horse that wanted to event, and I created a team out of my students. They work as a unit—packing for events as a team, cheering one another on, and comforting one another in disappointment. They learn from the triumphs and mistakes of their fellow riders and to put their horses first."

When Tawn began her program in Georgia she said it was "like pushing water uphill." She had no contacts, owned no land, and was starting completely from scratch. In less than ten years, however, Tawn has turned Willow South into a very successful and safe program and accomplished her goal of laying the right foundation for her students to have long-term success in eventing.



FAR LEFT: Lindsey Graulich and Adanac compete at Surefire Horse Trials.

LEFT: Rachel Wilks, and Tuck Everlasting strut their stuff in the Novice division at Surefire.

Growing Up With Horses: A Look at Tawn's Childhood

Petulant is a good word to describe Tawn. Passionate in all that she does. All three of my children rode throughout their childhood and Tawn is the youngest. She must have been riding before she was born. She arrived with horses a part of her skin.

Humorously, the family had Shetland ponies which we drove and rode. At six, Tawn could ride Stormy a quarter mile to the house next door, tie the pony and play with her cousin then ride home. I was out in the yard and heard the cantering hoofbeats up the hill. Tawn appeared eyes wide, "I can't stop him!" In her hand was a paper bag of cookie cutters rattling with every stride. The pony's eyes were wider than hers. "Drop the bag" I called. Sure enough, the usually placid Stormy came to a walk.

When my husband and I purchased the farm in 1970, the children were ages three, six, and nine, and it had been my lifelong dream to own a farm and ride since my childhood was deprived of good opportunities to ride. Both daughters, Tara and Tawn, wanted to ride from birth. Our son, Kenneth became interested when he was 11 and saw jumping. It was easy since all three children wanted to ride. We all evented together. It was difficult also to find and afford horses for the four of us. My boarding, training, lesson, and sales business grew with the children. All of them learned to be good instructors and horse trainers. By the time



ABOVE: Tawn poses with her daughter, Capella, nine, and son, Solomon, five. They are riding two of Willow South's ponies, Zeus and Tonka.

they were teenagers, we started our equestrian summer camp and they were the heart of the program.

Tawn had a wonderful half Arab pony named Clem when she outgrew her Shetland. He was 12 hands and just flew over fences. I know better now to find flat jumpers for little riders. She just stayed on by sheer determination and balance.

Written by Tawn's mother, Julie Edwards.