

Being An Equestrian Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Kerry Irwin** (April 25, 2024)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

Having an industry-specific background naturally helps in any industry-specific area of law, so it's not a surprise that having a background in the horse industry provided a solid foundation for my equine law practice.

Being able to "talk horses" is key to understanding how to form thoroughbred racing partnerships, or how a lender forecloses on equine collateral. However, people do seem to be surprised that my experience as an equestrian has parallels to and even enhances my broader transactional practice.

The fact that I worked as a riding instructor at a boarding school in Virginia after college caused a lot of questions when it came time to interview for corporate associate positions.



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In one interview, a partner asked me why I thought working in the horse industry would prepare me for a high-stress law firm job — that partner obviously never had to call a vet out to see an ailing horse in the middle of the night, memorize a complex course of fences at a horse show, or ride a fresh horse on a windy January day. Believe me, those are all stressful situations!

But beyond simply getting experience thinking on my feet and tackling stressful situations, the skills I've gained from horseback riding and being a member of the equestrian community have considerable overlap with the skills I use in my M&A practice, particularly when I think about deal teams, continuing education and the need to "get outside the ring" regularly.

A reliable team is crucial.

In any transaction, we start by assembling a deal team of core transactional attorneys and subject matter specialists in areas like tax, benefits, environmental, real estate and so on.

Riding might strike some people as a solitary sport, but the horse industry is an industry of subject matter experts — we have veterinarians with equine subspecialties like lameness, podiatry or fertility. We have nutritionists, saddle fitters, chiropractors and body work specialists. We have braiders, farriers, dentists and, of course, trainers.

Even professional riders work with trainers on a regular basis, because every rider can learn from the expert insights of other horsemen. Just as a deal team strategizes over every element of a deal, the team supporting a horse and rider looks to identify and manage issues to hopefully anticipate and head off risks or problems that could arise.

Many years ago, my horse had a lameness issue that we were finally able to treat after consulting an equine podiatrist and then working with a farrier on a special orthopedic horseshoe for him to wear on his front feet. He was sound for many years with those shoes.

I'm similarly thankful for my firm's Corporate Transparency Act gurus, who recently weighed in on the still evolving issue for a fast-moving deal.

Ultimately, riding is a complex sport, and like a complex transaction, it has a lot of moving pieces that must come together to achieve success. We rely on a team to get that done, with the knowledge and trust that every team member brings a crucial skill to the table.

Learning should never stop.

As noted above, even professional riders work with trainers. I've noticed that people outside the sport don't always understand why, after riding for over 30 years, I still regularly take lessons. But I'm not alone.

Taking lessons with trainers sharpens our skills, teaches us new approaches and helps us solve problems we might not have anticipated, and every trainer brings a different insight.

For example, one might spot an issue with your balance or position that another didn't. One might be able to recommend a different way of viewing a course of fences that better leverages your unique strengths. It's important to stay current not only on your own skills and riding fitness, but also on current best practices.

While humans have been riding horses for thousands of years, our understanding of horses and riding mechanics is always evolving. In particular, we've seen technology enter the riding world in a way we probably didn't anticipate 20 years ago. You can now take virtual lessons, connect with professionals through social media, and access a whole world of new equine (and human) health and wellness technology.

As a transactional attorney it's just as important to stay current and keep my skills sharp through continuing legal education. In addition to getting relevant CLE credit, a deal attorney needs to stay current on market studies to understand the current market approach to customary deal terms, like representations and warranties or indemnification.

The corporate landscape is constantly changing — from routine changes to state business statutes, to changes in market trends, to new federal legislation like the Corporate Transparency Act, to evolving technology — and our clients rely on us to have the up-to-date information needed to answer their questions and anticipate and hopefully mitigate their potential risks.

Getting "outside the ring" is curative.

Doing the same thing day in and day out can lead to stress and frustration. That sentiment can apply to lawyers just as well as it can apply to horses and riders. There is a particular kind of stress and fatigue that horses and riders may face as a result of riding only in the ring or arena, working on the same repetitive tasks.

As someone who grew up riding on the rolling hills in Virginia, I found that one of the most effective ways to combat this was to ride outside the ring over natural terrain, and I still enjoy that in North Carolina.

Riding outside has many benefits because it exposes horses to new sights and sounds and can help them build confidence. It challenges riders to adapt to changing terrain and obstacles, which improves balance, seat and riding ability. But perhaps most importantly, it provides a refreshing change of scenery for both horse and rider, offering a break from routine work and providing mental stimulation.

Spending time in nature reduces stress levels in both humans and horses. And it allows riders to enjoy the therapeutic benefits of being outdoors, promoting relaxation and well-being for both horse and rider.

Similarly, taking breaks from our work as attorneys provides an opportunity to reset and recharge, allowing us to recover from stress and fatigue, which can not only enhance concentration and productivity when we return, but also can help prevent burnout and mental fatigue.

Moreover, physical activities like walking, running, hiking or horseback riding can help reduce the negative effects of sitting for long hours in front of the computer (we're all likely guilty of this).

While, like many attorneys, I consider myself to be a work in progress when it comes to logging off — and it certainly depends on my current workload — knowing that I can head to the barn to recharge is great motivation for setting appropriate boundaries and ensuring that I use my free time to get outside and ride.

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