

Trainer is a saving grace for horses  
This Valley Life  
By Jim Ott

When Lucinda Romero was little, she lived with her mother and two sisters in northern Idaho with no electricity or running water 20 miles from the nearest town. They shopped for clothing only once a year, just before the start of school. For firewood and fences, they cut down trees on their property.

But as tough as it was growing up poor, some of this rural childhood brought pleasure. "We always had horses," said Romero, 31, who trains horses and lives in Livermore. "I've loved horses, probably since before I was born, and can't remember a moment when I wouldn't think about them, even to this day."

This love Romero inherited from her mother, who trained horses and dogs to make ends meet, and then began raising Tennessee Walking Horses after she remarried when Romero was eight.

"My dad brought new bloodlines to the breeding program and a new style of training," said Romero. "We had a blend of horses. My mom's eye for the old style, strong, sure-footed, strait legs, and good overall conformation blended well with my dad's eye for what's flashy in today's show ring."

Together, Romero's parents produced several outstanding horses with natural talent, and trained them for show using legitimate methods that develop muscle strength to perform at a high level, just like a human athlete.

Such methods contrast with illegal shortcut training techniques that many horse trainers used in the 1980s and are occasionally seen today. Called "soring," trainers use chemicals such as mustard oil, diesel fuel, or kerosene to burn a horse's front legs around its hooves. This causes the horse to quickly lift its legs as it steps, creating an accentuated gait or prance.

Because soring is illegal, trainers hide the burns and scarring by using dye or kicking dirt onto the horses' legs before entering the show ring.

Growing up, Romero witnessed soring and saw its damaging effects. Even a few years ago at a show she came upon "a beautiful Palomino stallion with his mane hanging nearly to the ground," she said. The horse stood back in a stall as still as a rock. While most horses come forward to be petted, Romero said this one stood frozen, hoping he wouldn't be noticed.

"You can't understand the look until you see it," she said. "It's like an empty shell that looks like a horse from the outside, but when you look deeper, it's a lost soul."

Romero hadn't intended on becoming a horse trainer. Even with her love of horses, she watched her parents struggle financially. So when she turned 21, she bought a one-way plane ticket to California and started a new life. "I wanted to wear a suit to work, live in the big city, have a fancy car, and wear nice shoes," she said. "Remember, I only got one pair of shoes each year. Imagine cleaning horse corrals and then wearing the same shoes to school the next day."

But she missed the horses terribly, and after a couple of years she bought a black colt from her parents. Then, a few years later, she learned about a 2-year old Tennessee Walker for sale in Kentucky.

“I bought the horse for just \$1,500,” she said, explaining that the mare—who comes from a bloodline in which one stallion sold for one million dollars—had gone lame from soring. The people who owned the horse, whom Romero named Gracie, simply want to get rid of her.

“When I purchased Gracie and saw how much damage had been done to her, that’s when my crusade began,” she said.

Romero rehabilitated Gracie over the next year and began showing her. “We did well at our first show and were crowned Champion Mare at Halter and Grand Champion Halter horse,” she said.

Then one day Romero was at the stable and gave a little girl a few tips about riding. Soon, she found herself spending more time training riders and horses, and in 2005 she opened Symmetry Stables, located in north Livermore at the Cayetano Ridge Equestrian Center on Dagnino Road.

“That was three years ago,” said Romero, whose blue eyes brighten as she reflects on her life. Her training program “takes a lot of time to build muscle and strength, physically and mentally,” she said, “but the horses are happy in their jobs and competitive in the show ring.”

Romero and her clients enter their horses in shows in northern California. They still encounter sored horses, but are seeing fewer. Still, Romero hopes that one day no horse will be mistreated.

“I guess you could say I’ve gone back to my roots,” she said. “Even though I swore I wouldn’t train horses for a living, I still ended up here. My parents were believers in leading by example, and now I’m doing exactly that. I’m content to live this life and make the world a better place.”

To see pictures of Gracie and Romero, visit [www.symmetrystables.com](http://www.symmetrystables.com). Romero invites visitors to come and meet Gracie, who will come forward to be greeted, at the stables.

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