



# The Battaglia Camp



## Preparing For Nationals The Battaglia Way

*Story by Mary Kirkman • Photos by Olivia Stull*

Arizona's Valley of the Sun is well-known for its many luxury hotels and spas, with their pampering self-improvement programs. Until 2007, however, Battaglia Farms was never on that list. Then, over Labor Day weekend last year, it was the activity center for a group of its clients intent on a spa weekend—and a rigorous horsemanship course that fine-tuned their abilities for the upcoming U.S. Nationals. And self-improvement, equestrian-style, has never been so much fun, they say.

"Usually we go to a horse show over Labor Day," Russ Vento relates, "but the clients came up with the idea of an intense, four-day riding session, so we made it happen."

About 25 people attended the riding camp, where the days were divided into hard work and full-on frivolity. The morning sessions started early, as everyone gathered in the farm's big covered arena. It was hot in Scottsdale, the only point of the weekend which could stand improvement, they all laugh.

"The first day we all showed up and were so excited," Karen Stull of Scottsdale recalls. She owns the park champion Afires Vision, who competes with Bob Battaglia, but was at the camp to polish her own riding skills. "Some of us had forgotten to bring their gloves. So pretty much near the end of the morning, when we'd all ridden, we all had blisters on our hands. We took pictures of hands, showing off our blisters."

That first day was just a warm up; the second day, they got down to business, with a four-class horse show, each class featuring six riders. With the goal of improving their savvy in the ring, everyone rode show horses, either their own or someone else's. Trainer Joel Gangi of Baton Rouge, La., a longtime Battaglia friend, was there to call and judge the classes, which morphed into an innovative form of lessons.

"Joel worked them on the rail and coached them," says Vento. "And then he'd bring them all in the center, and tell them 'you need to work on this and that.' Then he'd send them back on the rail to work on those issues while the others were watching.

And then the next one would go out and work on their issues. He went back to basics: like, this is how you take a canter; if they were having a problem. He'd walk them through it. He wasn't aggressive, and they weren't intimidated."

"Bobby would go to one end and I would go to the other, or Russ would, as the class was going on, as they were working their horses," Gangi elaborates. "Someone would be having trouble with something, and I'd have her come down to the end, and we'd work on it—have her work on her legs, or her hands, or getting her horse to bend properly, whatever she needed."

The concept of the quasi-competition won rave reviews.

"It was like going in a class at a show, but you didn't have the nervousness of 'win or lose,'" says Linda Musso of Birmingham, Ala. She shows in country English pleasure AOTR with the 7-year-old mare Ingennue. "You got the feeling of competing, but not the nerves. You're going around and thinking 'do I do this or that?' and you have Joel over there, telling you what to do. The horses could sense the difference; when you have a lesson, you are the only one there. It was fun to have the others in there, so that your timing got better. You had to go fast, slow, pass—all the things an amateur needs to know."

"It emulated a competition, but it was still an opportunity to have a lesson, with feedback," agrees Susan Drescher Mulzet of Scottsdale. She was readying Infinity CSP for English pleasure AOTR, and Allusion MTA in Half-Arabian country English pleasure AOTR. "I had to negotiate other people and horses in the ring."

Both Musso and Mulzet consider themselves novice riders, while others in the classes were more experienced. Amy Williams of Fort Worth, Texas, who rides Gala Affair in English pleasure AOTR, is a veteran in competition, and she concurred with the group. "It forced you to be more independent. In a normal lesson, you are being told what to do. I have to applaud Bob and Russ for thinking outside the box."

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"It's great to have someone like Joel Gangi, who's an incredible rider and a very good observer, basically say the same things to me that Bob does, but in a different way," Mulzet adds. "It was good to get that input again, but in a different way. It gave it a fresh approach; it sunk in a little differently."

"He has a different way of explaining things," Karen Stull nods. "It strikes a different chord in your brain. When Bob says something about using my feet wrong, I might think, 'did he really see that?' But when Joel said it too, I thought it must have been so, if they both saw it."

Linda Musso compared the practice show to the real event. "When you weren't doing something right, you'd have Bob and Joel out there saying, 'do this, do that.' When you're in the ring for the real thing, you get only one comment here and there as you go by."

It might have just been a rehearsal, but the spirit was no different from a real show. "We didn't give out ribbons," Vento says, "but those girls were wanting to win the class."

After the classes, as a confidence booster, some riders got on Battaglia Farms' 3- and 4-year-olds who had not been shown before. "Bob and Russ have a really good feel for the rider's ability, and I didn't think they would put anyone on a horse that they couldn't manage," Stull says. "We have some really good riders in our barn, and some of the ones who can ride exceptionally well rode some horses that were broke, but not ready for the show arena yet. The girls did a fine job and really enjoyed the challenge. We had people begging to ride more horses!"

Then as an extra treat and to add a little excitement, Battaglia rode Afires Vision for the group.

The sessions broke for a catered lunch in the office around noon. For two of the days, it was a working lunch, in which they studied issues relating to equine health with Laura M. Harris, DVM. "She manages all the health care for the horses on the farm," Russ Vento explains, "everything from shots to worming to any soundness issue that the horses have." He smiles. "But with the program that she has us on, we don't have any, which is really working for me."

Harris was equally good with the clients at the camp. With PowerPoint® presentations, brochures and photos—and a casual,

laid-back attitude that translated medical jargon into easy-to-understand lay terms—she detailed information on equine nutrition, conformation, soundness, injuries, treatments and other issues relating to horse care.

"We do a lot of preventative stuff" Vento says. "Laura went into a lot of reasons to use Legend™, Polyglycan™, Adequan™, Conquer™—things like that—and what those things do in the horse's system, how they break down, and so on."

Harris also put together comprehensive informational packets for everyone to take home.

"She spoke at a level that I could understand," confirms Linda Musso. "You'd have the feeling that, 'oh, okay, that makes sense.' Anyone who has a horse is interested about things like that."

The clients were not the only ones to appreciate Dr. Harris. "I could have missed my flight, I was learning so much from Laura," Joel Gangi says. "She had so much information. Today, I literally was having a discussion with a client, and I was telling them what Dr. Laura had told me in Scottsdale. She's saved me thousands of dollars."

After the lecture and lunch, school was out for the day, and the group turned to more indulgent pursuits. One afternoon they adjourned to the Canyon Falls Spa for massages, manicures and facials. But by evening, they were ready to crank up the energy again. A 30-passenger luxury bus picked them up at the farm for a drive to the home of one of the local riders for dinner. One night was hosted by Battaglia and Vento, one dinner took place at Karen Stull's house, and another at the home of Susan and Mark Mulzet.

"We couldn't get enough of each other," Stull chuckles.

"I really love the people in our barn," Susan Mulzet says. "It's a real family situation. It gave my husband and me great pleasure to have 'my family' over to our house and share in a celebration.

"We have an absolutely extraordinary barn," she continues. "Everybody is so incredibly nice. We genuinely care about one another; we have relationships outside of lessons—we socialize with each other. Family is the only word I can think about it: the love and companionship and support. It's people really caring about other people and having a good time together."

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The group is so cohesive that no one can quite remember who came up with the idea of a riding camp, but they are universal in their praise of how it was executed. It was well-scheduled and very organized, they say, yet relaxed.

Joel Gangi was impressed as well, although he admits not being quite sure what he was getting into when he agreed to become a judge/instructor for the weekend. “I don’t think I’ve ever done anything like we did,” he says. “I called Bob and asked, ‘What am I doing here? How do you want to approach it?’ He said just handle it however I wanted to. It was a very, very loose atmosphere. At times, it was individual work with the riders—but it was always a group.”

He quickly came to appreciate the Battaglia riders. “The first day, they were just finding themselves,” he says, and adds candidly, “The first morning, it was like watching a bunch of amateurs. That afternoon, they had improved 100 percent. By the next day, they were ready to rock and roll. They were great. They are all very talented, and I was really surprised at the number of riders he has that haven’t been riding for a long period of time. That group is a very special group of people, a special group of Arabian horse lovers.”

“The boot camp is probably not something Bob needed to arrange,” Susan Mulzet reflects. “But he really cared about getting us all in the best possible competitive stance to prepare for Nationals, by having us in the ring at one time, with someone other than himself giving directions. Bob makes opportunities available for us to grow in—he goes out of his way to do that. Having someone else come in varies the diet. It’s exciting.”

But was it good for them at the U.S. Nationals? Across the board, they say yes, but it was not just the Nationals that counted. Most of them point to their overall skill with horses, and to the satisfaction of their involvement with Arabians.

“I feel like any time in the ring helps,” says Linda Musso. “And then when you throw in the others, and you have your trainer and a judge out there, how can it not help you?”

“I’ve discovered a great passion,” Susan Mulzet says of her Arabian interest. She became acquainted with the horses when she visited Battaglia Farms to feed carrots to friend Angela Stanley’s horses. The riding camp was one more way of deepening her commitment. “Bob Battaglia has been there every step of the way, to foster it and let it grow. I wake up every day and look forward to going for a ride.” 🐾