

# KENTUCKY

## Alumni

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Mary D. Midkiff:  
It's All About Horses

**UK**

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# Mary D. Midkiff: It's All About Horses

By Linda Perry

## '81 UK grad helps women improve their riding skills

She's an accomplished equestrian, both as a rider and trainer. She is the creator of Women and Horses, a fitness and performance program for the female rider that she has trademarked. She is a nationally and internationally recognized clinician. She is the national award-winning author of a best-selling book in Denver, Cincinnati, Louisville and Lexington. She hosted two-minute equestrian tips several times a day on RFD-TV, carried on cable, DishNetwork, and Direct TV. She appeared in the 2005 documentary film, *"Riding in Stride,"* that explored gender in a sport where both male and female athletes compete. She developed a two-volume fitness video for female riders. She has her own line of essential oils for riders and horses. She maintains a Web site presence. She is president of a marketing firm specializing in the promotion of show, sport and recreational horse activities.

Now she's about to debut her latest project, *"The Dynamic Rider System,"* a "book" that is issued in installments and shows women how to integrate the Pilates Method of physical exercise to improve their horseback riding.

Whew!

So when does she find time to actually ride her own Hanoverian, Regal Red, otherwise known as Redge?

"Almost everyday at lunch," said Mary D. Midkiff, a 1981 graduate of the UK College of Arts and Sciences.

"It requires a lot of balance in my life, but it is what I've always wanted. So I make the time for it. I usually spend about two to three hours at the barn."

### An Early Start

Today Midkiff lives in Boulder, Colo., but her roots are all Kentucky. Her father was a cattle farmer and the family lived in Versailles. Her grandfather, Daniel Boone Midkiff Sr., was a horse trainer, an owner and breeder of Thoroughbred race horses, and an entrepreneur who bought, fixed up and resold 19 farms during his lifetime.

Her close relationship with her grandfather allowed Midkiff to grow up surrounded by everything horses and an entrepreneurial spirit. Admittedly, she was horse

"crazy" and, as a youngster, she even fancied herself as the horse, "galloping" outside for hours on stick horses.

Midkiff's family eventually moved to Lexington and she later graduated from Sayre School. During those years Midkiff was never far from a horse, whether she was riding for pleasure, competing in an equestrian event, cleaning out stalls, or lollygagging on a pasture fence. She spent two years at the University of Kentucky taking agriculture classes, and then took a break from university studies to earn a Potomac Horse Center Horsemaster's certification from the Maryland State Department of Education and the British Horse Society. This qualified her to teach equitation. She spent several years working with breeding farms and veterinarians before she returned to UK to finish her degree, taking journalism and communications courses. She also took classes, she said, that would stretch her beyond the comfortable boundary of her horse world, like women's studies, theater and literature.

While at UK she continued to work with local breeders and veterinarians but still found time to be a member of the UK equitation club where she competed in dressage at Spindletop Hall against other collegiate programs, walking away with more than a ribbon or two.

Midkiff discovered she had one trait that was not typical of most students: she loved researching topics and writing term papers. "I directed myself more and more to taking classes that would offer me the opportunity to write term papers," she said. One of her favorite papers was a thesis about bluegrass that she titled "Bluegrass: The Aristocrat of Seeds."

"To me it's a treasure hunt. Give me the subject and I will go out and hunt up the treasures and pull it all together," Midkiff said. "This showed me that I really liked doing project work — gathering and creating something and getting rewarded for it."

If there was one other thing Midkiff was sure about at this age, it was that she was passionate about horses and wanted to be around them full time. "Horses have always been at the center of my life," she said.

She was determined that she would mold a career for herself that was somehow related to the horse world.



Mary D. Midkiff with her current horse, Redge

## Picking Up the Pace

For about 10 years after graduating in 1981, most of her career positions involved horses in some way and also allowed her to stretch and test her capabilities. Her resume includes organizations like International Thoroughbred Breeders, a bloodstock agency; the New York office of Fasig-Tipton, a sales-auction company; Stonegate Standardbred Breeders, a racing partnership in New Jersey; and the American Horse Council in Washington, D.C. Each of these positions challenged her in a new way, she said, making her more confident with the business world of horses.

During all these years she continued her personal involvement with riding and owned, trained, and competed with several horses. It seemed only natural that she would eventually start her own company involved with — you guessed it — horses.

## Into the Stretch

Perhaps it was because she worked full time in an environment that involved horses and also spent much of her personal time after work with horses that it was bound to happen: Midkiff wanted to pursue more research and come up with a bigger picture.

In 1991 Midkiff and her husband, Tom Aronson, who she had met at the American Horse Council, created Equestrian Resources, a marketing firm specializing in the promotion of show,



“The Dynamic Rider System” shows women how to use core-strengthening Pilates exercises to improve their riding.



Photo: © 1999 J.J. Hathaway

Midkiff rode her mare Theodora at the Jackson Hole Horse Trails of 1999.

sport and recreational activities.

She started thinking about who made up the horse industry, including who the real users were and who made purchasing decisions. “I wanted to evaluate the national market. I sent out a questionnaire to all of the breed organizations, show organizations, sanctioning organizations that have horse shows and sporting events, and all the discipline organizations like eventing and dressage.”

Most of the organizations replied, and those that didn’t got a follow up phone call from Midkiff. “It was overwhelming to me, that what I had guessed and what I had observed at the barns and the shows was indeed true: in over 85 percent of all the English-related riding disciplines, women were the buyer/user/participant/decision maker,” she said. “In the Western disciplines, it was about 60 percent female. In racing it was about 30 percent female. And in all the youth groups it was about 99 percent female.”

Midkiff said that the horse industry has typically been slow to react to new situations, is deep in traditions, and was male dominated at the upper levels in the executive board rooms until the 1950s and ’60s. Still, she was initially surprised that the industry didn’t already know about these statistics and she quickly realized that she had compiled valuable information.

“I decided to put together some workshops called Women & Horses. I gathered together several experts — a physician, a fitness expert, a physiotherapist — people who could explain information, resources, and equipment and techniques that were specific to the female rider. I realized

that most other sports had gender-specific training methods and equipment and that horseback riding did not. It's all taught from the same basis, with the same equipment and the same techniques. My point was that we are not the same at all," she said. "Our pelvic structure, leg structure, spinal column, weight distribution, joints — they're all totally different than a male's and yet women were being taught in saddles that didn't fit us and with techniques that didn't work for us. It was not a level playing field at all."

The more she listened to the experts that she surrounded herself with, the more Midkiff found answers to her own struggles with riding. "I realized that if I had the saddle that fit me, had the exercises to help me get stronger and stretch in the areas I needed to, had the proper alignment, and had an instructor that was aware of all that, then indeed I was an equal and I would be competitive on an equal basis. But without all that I was really swimming upstream."

She continued contacting experts and asked them to work with her. "I would take my saddle to my doctors' office and put it on the bench in the office and sit in it and show them where I was hurting or not feeling correct and ask what was going on," she said.

People who had similar interests contacted her to exchange information about what they were doing to resolve their problems, such as working with an engineer to create a saddle that was more oriented toward women.

Eventually Midkiff became the expert and sole presenter when she realized that attendees wanted a translation of the scientific information, not necessarily a scientific person delivering the info.

"I'm not a scientist, I'm not a physician, I'm not an exercise physiologist, but I have gleaned all this information over the years and continue to do so. I process it, run it by the experts, and then put it out there for everyone," she said.

## In the Winner's Circle

Midkiff continues to offer female equestrians information about how to improve their riding through a variety of products she has developed since 1995. For her most recent venture, she collaborated with Maggie Parker, a Pilates expert in Colorado who also is a rider, to produce "*The Dynamic Rider System*," released in February and available through Midkiff's Web site ([www.womenandhorses.com](http://www.womenandhorses.com)). It shows women how to use core-strengthening Pilates exercises to enhance their riding. The content is issued in installments every three to four months as large, fold out pages that are stored in a three-ring binder when not being used.

Midkiff said it's not enough to be basically physically fit. These are additional exercises that equestrians can practice to develop their core strength, their postural muscles and improve their overall riding experience. "When you are young, meaning 25 or less, you can probably get away with it. But over that you really need to support your riding with stretching and strengthening, if you want to ride into your

70s and 80s, which most of us do," she said.

At an absolute minimum, the most important thing a rider can do to improve the overall riding experience is to take a walk or hike every day, even if on a treadmill, she said. "Keep moving. It helps to prevent aging, stiffness and soreness. When you walk you emulate the movement of the horse with the swinging of your hips left and right. It gets your heart rate up and gets your circulation going."

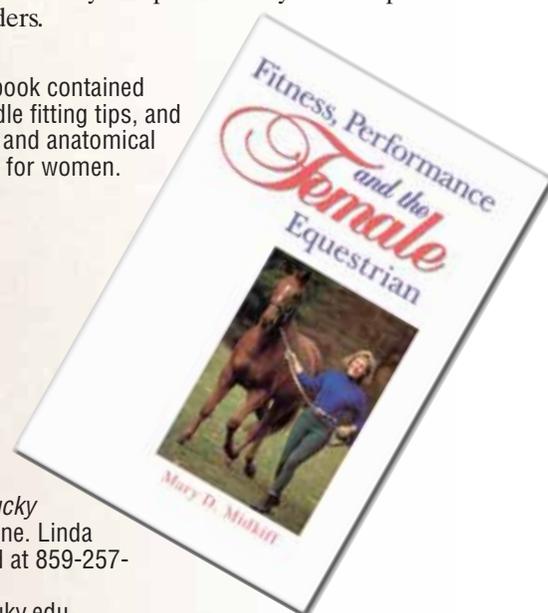
Midkiff's first book is somewhat of a classic. "*Fitness, Performance and the Female Equestrian*" provided, among other things, stretching and strengthening exercises, saddle balancing and fitting tips, information about riding as it relates to pregnancy and aging, and biomechanical and anatomical considerations for women. In her second book, "*She Flies Without Wings: How Horses Touch a Woman's Soul*," Midkiff recounts her own life story within the context of the history of the magic between women and horses, with excerpts from great literature and poetry as a backdrop.

Midkiff, who moved to Colorado due to a job offer her husband received, put together her own line of essential oils for female equestrians, as well as horses, with the help of an aromatherapy specialist. She also created a series of videos, "*Get Fit to Ride*," that is now sold out.

Midkiff's long-range goals include writing more books, at least one about training horses. She typically trains up to six horses a year for her clients, as well as works with her own horse. She's also interested in updating her fitness videos to DVD, and it's been proposed that she do another series of equestrian tips on RFD-TV.

One thing's for sure: Midkiff wants to continue to affect the horse industry in a positive way while representing female riders.

Midkiff's first book contained exercises, saddle fitting tips, and biomechanical and anatomical considerations for women.



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