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Riding Forward

Lawton Stables introduces new riding academy

Call it impulse or inspiration, but as she was driving by Lawton Stables to drop her son off at the Smith Stearns Tennis Academy, Didi Summers decided to make a change. "I'm usually such a cautious person, but this has been a very good thing for me to do," Summers said as we sat watching skilled horse trainer Bobby Dreyer instruct intermediate riders for a clinic in the new horse rink.

For years, Summers drove by the stables seeing unrealized potential sitting in the middle of Sea Pines Plantation. "I figured it was a bit like Central Park. We have this amazing acreage in the middle of Hilton Head surrounded by resort. I knew we could do better," she said. Sensing an opportunity, Summers bought Lawton Stables two years ago and began to transform what was a rudimentary field into a serious equestrian training ground. The grounds now have a state-of-the-art barn, rinks equipped with high quality footing, and brand new irrigated paddocks that keep the grass green in the scorching summer months. But the new facilities are just the beginning.

Academies: A Hilton Head tradition

Through her competitive sons, Summers and her husband have been immersed in the worlds of tennis and golf for years. When her husband decided to retire from asset management in London, they moved to Hilton Head for the combination of excellent education and tennis programs that were offered. An avid golf aficionado, her husband worked extensively with famed golfer Gary Gilchrist, a veteran of Hilton Head's own International Junior Golf Academy (IJGA), to help him start his own golf academy in Florida. Studying the Gary Gilchrist and Smith Stearns models, Summers realized there was a crucial gap that could be filled on Hilton Head Island: a full-time riding academy for serious college prep students.

With that in mind, a few weeks ago Summers launched the early stages of the International Riding Academy—a serious full-time riding academy that will work with Hilton Head Preparatory school for a full college preparatory experience. Observing the spotless grounds sequestered in Sea Pines Plantation, it's no stretch to see why it might work.

"It's about time we have a riding academy like the tennis and golf academies," Summers said emphatically. "We understand what Hilton Head has to offer: a safe environment, family-oriented communities, and a good combination of education and sport."

The Academy isn't your typical large-scale boarding school. The first class will have only 12 students, and it's likely to stay that way for the near future. Riding will be central to the school's mission. Summers points out that most kids who ride are either home-schooled because they have to travel so much, or they go to a boarding school where they ride a lot less. "We have found a way for kids to learn in the classroom while riding seriously at the same time," she said.



PHOTOGRAPHY
BY LISA STAFF

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A test of character

The secret to achieving that balance lies in Hilton Head Preparatory School. "The great thing about Prep is the fact that they have already worked with the tennis and golf academies. They have a top-20 female tennis player there. They've had to adapt and find ways to accommodate. You can actually miss a week at a time and teachers work it out with the students. They work on the honor system where you can actually take a test in a different place," Summers said.

The concepts of honor and character are important traits that are taking root quickly at Lawton Stables. The trunks in the girls' tack room, which is where they store all their riding equipment, have no locks whatsoever. The focus on the individual student's character and integrity is ever present in a situation like this. "We have never had any issues. We do not allow locks on our trunks. It poses a challenge when a girl borrows something out of another girl's trunk and forgets to put it back, but we've always worked that out. We're not going to lock our tack boxes against another girl," Summers said.

For student housing, the International Riding Academy will work with the well-established Junior Players Golf Academy (JPGA). The JPGA is well regarded when it comes to their housing facilities; students are in a regulated environment where they are expected to complete their studies after a long day outside. The low crime rate on Hilton Head Island

only makes it easier for parents to rest easy at night when they drop off their kids for the semester, and the extensive network of condos and houses in Sea Pines Plantation makes it easy for them to rent or buy for family visits.

Serious training for serious riders

The International Riding Academy backs up the college prep and quality housing with state-of-the-art equestrian facilities. You can notice it in the details, like the 24/7 high resolution cameras in every stable. Riders can log into the cameras online from anywhere in the world to see their horses. The horses aren't excluded from their own luxuries as well, like collapsible sprinkler heads in the paddocks so they don't get injured.

Summers knew that quality facilities and touches like these would attract a top-notch trainer, and she's found her in Sandra "Sam" McCarthy. "I wanted someone who had an impeccable reputation, and everywhere I turned people were telling me how amazing she was. She's very well connected with some of the top judges and top showing barns, so it's easier for her to get access to quality horses. If we get a rider in who rides a certain level and needs a horse, she can assess the rider, make some calls, and get some horses here on trial in short notice," Summers said.

For McCarthy, it was a fairly easy choice to join. After successfully amassing several national titles with



her collegiate team at the University of Findlay, she was ready to return to a junior riding program. "I was ready to do something a bit smaller and more intimate that focused on the younger kids. Their learning curve is better. There's more you can do with them. They're not trying to get a job, pay off a bunch of loans, or deal with college," McCarthy said as she watched Dreyer in the ring, "I have all these nice friends that I've known my whole life who would just love to come down here. When I say 'Bobby would you like to come to Hilton Head?' and it's 18 degrees in Findlay, it's not a hard sell," she said with a smile.

While every rider must have his or her own horse to compete individually, the International Riding Academy is also involved with team level competitions through the Interscholastic Equestrian Association. Here the choice of a horse is much less important, because every rider selects a horse out of a hat. "It's a really good practice to pull your horse out of the hat," Summers said. After two practice jumps with the randomly selected horse, the rider competes. There are also several categories to compete in, so stables will often partner with one another to complement each other's strengths. Lawton Stables works with the nearby Swamp Fox stables to form a balanced IEA team. "It's nice for them to have a team sport and not have so much pressure on themselves. They have to stay and watch each other. You have to learn how to operate in a group setting,

and it's not just about you—which is a life skill everyone needs to learn," McCarthy said.

Princesses need not apply

From tack trunks with no locks to camaraderie and teamwork at competitions, Summers and McCarthy are looking for a special kind of rider for their new academy. The school's five key components they consider most important are education, character, riding, mental training and motivation. But as Summers is quick to note "The one thing we cannot provide is the motivation. We have to have that rider who is motivated. You're going to be out here two-three hours a day; people are going to rely on you to help each other out."

For McCarthy, how you treat your horse is an important trait. "You have to have some empathy and compassion towards your animals. It's a really big deal to me that kids become aware of the horses. We're not really cut out for the princesses who want to ride up and get on their horse, hand it back to us, tell us it's not good enough, and leave. That's just not any fun." But for the 12 riders who have what it takes, their next year at the Academy looks like a promising pursuit.

The International Riding Academy at Lawton Stables is located at 190 Greenwood Dr. in Sea Pine Plantation. For an application or more information, visit iridingacademy.com or call (843) 671-2586.