

EMILY MOORE
Editor in Chief

Between school, jobs, and extracurricular activities, not many students would have the time to spend 21 hours a week training a 1200 pound animal. Yet, that is exactly what senior Catherine Duncan has been doing for the last five months. Duncan bought her horse, Outlaw, from a retired racehorse trainer.

"He sold all of the horses except for Outlaw because he wanted to make sure he went to the perfect home," Duncan said. "I headed out there on September 4th to try him out and he came home to my new barn on the 11th."

Outlaw was completely untrained in the area of eventing, which is what Duncan intended on showing him in. Eventing is a combination of cross country, jumping, show jumping, and dressage. Dressage is an event in which the horse and rider perform a routine and it focuses a lot on how well the rider can control the horse and how willing the horse is to complete the routine. So Duncan has taken on the challenge of training him the art of eventing. Through working with him almost daily, Duncan has seen tremendous progress.

"When I first got him he was very feisty and didn't understand how to go slow," Duncan said. "We basically started from the bottom and he has come so far already. He's already learned his lead changes, and we've even jumped around a 3-foot course of jumps. He is still learning to accept contact on the bit with my hands but he is so willing and really a people pleaser."

Since equestrians must have direct contact with the horse's mouth in order to communicate with them, depending on the horse, you may need more or less hand in order to keep their attention. Every horse is different and has unique strengths and weaknesses, just as any athlete does. Therefore, each rider is unique as well, so the two must gain skills from each other. While training Outlaw, Duncan claims that she has also learned a lot.

"He has made me such a better rider because I've really had to learn to balance with my legs and seat otherwise I don't have as much control as I need," Duncan said. "There's no pulling his mouth to hold yourself up like I've been doing for so many years with hard mouthed horses. He's made me very aware of my emotions too, if I get nervous or frustrated he can tell and he will tense up a great deal and it makes it very hard to have a smooth ride."

However, this kind of progress and skill does not come without significant investments of both time and money. It is something that takes a lot of commitment and dedication. Many equestrians around BVWest agree that horseback riding is a significant portion of their lives.

"One thing most people don't know about riding is the huge

Photo courtesy of Catherine Duncan



time commitment," junior Emma Benson said. "I am at the barn six days a week, two to three hours each, training. Sometimes I have to miss school for out-of-town shows, or miss other events because of riding."

Even though it can be a time consuming sport, junior Layne Mays believes it is rewarding. She gets a lot of enjoyment from all the time spent at her barn.

"Riding is basically my life because I go out to the barn at least five days a week and it's just a way I get to meet people and it's really fun for me," Mays said. "It's what I feel like I can actually do. It just always makes me happy to be out at the barn."

In addition to the large time commitment, there is always the risk for injury. Duncan recently suffered a concussion and was not able to ride for 20 days.

"I got hurt at like eight on a Friday night when I was headed to put him back in stall after playing with him in the ring," Duncan said. "A little tiny girl was feeding her horse in the aisle way in front of his stall and we had to walk past her and I guess she didn't scoot her over enough because when I was almost past her she started kicking and I tried to turn and go back so I didn't get kicked and she made contact with the back of my thigh and sent me into the wall. My knees hit the wall first and then I blacked out for a few seconds and slid to the ground. I got up and walked away and it wasn't until I got home that night that I started feeling really sick with a bad headache and nausea so we went to the hospital the next day and had X-rays and a CT and they told me I had a concussion and I had to basically stop my life for 20 days."

While Duncan's injury was not sustained while riding, the dangers on the horse are just as great. Equestrians can see a variety of injuries throughout their years of riding.

"99 percent of the time, riding is safe, but there is always a possibil-

ity to be injured," Benson said. "Unlike any other sport, you are dealing with a 1200 pound animal that has a mind of its own, and whether they want to hurt you or not, it's very easy for them to hurt you. In my ten years of riding I have personally seen noses, arms, and legs being broken, concussions, and plenty of other nasty injuries. Being safe is very important, so wearing helmets and being very self-aware is important while riding."

At most barns, there is a rule that helmets are required for all riders under the age of 18 and it is precisely for safety. Even taking those safety precautions, however, Benson has also sustained a couple injuries in her many years of riding.

"I have! My horse stepped on my foot a few years ago and left a deep tissue bruise, which I still have," Benson said. "More recently, my horse accidentally spooked when standing next to me, and whacked me in the head with his head, giving me a concussion."

While many injuries can occur from riding, junior Layne Mays believes that the sport can be much more dangerous without much experience.

"It can be a dangerous sport if you don't know what you're doing, for one thing," Mays said. "Because they have a mind of their own, they can be unpredictable."

In some cases, the injury impacts more than just the rider as well. The horse can also get hurt. Or in Duncan's case, the horse can be affected by the rider's time on the bench.

"I think my injury has created some complications for me and his training but I have no intentions of letting it hold us back," Duncan said. "It feels different to get back in the saddle after 20 days of laying on the couch and it's going to take some time to rebuild the muscle that I lost but I don't think it will take long at all. We are definitely coming back stronger than ever after this."

Like Benson and Mays, Duncan also realizes that the sport can be dangerous, but it is not enough to get in the way of her passion for the animal and the sport.

"I do think riding is a very dangerous sport but at the same time it doesn't feel like it to me," Duncan said. "When I walk into the barn or put my foot in the stirrup I don't think about the fact that I'm putting my life on the line. You could die driving a car too, but you do it anyway because it's just life. Riding is my life."

There are other complications to face with training a "green" horse. A "green" horse is a horse that is untrained or has very little experience. Benson, having some experience with training horses herself, understands how difficult but fulfilling that training can be.

"I love Catherine," Benson said. "We used to ride together at OEV, she is a wonderful rider. She is extremely hard working and a great person to hang with at the barn. I bought my horse, Owen, as a four year old dressage horse who knew nothing about jumping, so I completely understand the process she is going through with Outlaw. It's frustrating training a green one at times, but extraordinarily rewarding when you and your horse finally come together."

Training an animal with a mind of its own is difficult but there are also many challenges with the rider too, in order to transition into training.

"I've been lucky that I haven't had many complications with Outlaw, the only complications I've had are with myself," Duncan said. "The saddle I have doesn't fit me properly and that makes it hard to ride at my best sometimes but I've saved all my money from cleaning stalls that I'm able to shop for a new saddle now. Mentally I've had some issues because it's hard for me to grasp the concept of riding with very soft hands and nearly loopy reigns but I think I've come a long way in getting used to it and getting better at it."

Duncan also believes that a necessary part of training and riding is creating a connection with the horse. It is important that the horse cares as much about the rider as the rider cares about the horse.

"100 percent believe in creating an emotional bond with your horse and I do think it helps, but it will not make or break you," Duncan said. "Creating a bond takes lots of time, and it's sort of black and white, either you have it or you don't. It only happened just recently for me and Outlaw. It is one of the most magical things you can experience. One day when I went out there it was just different, I could see it in his eyes that he accepted me into his heart and that he loves and trusts me unconditionally. I believe we are soul mates and we both know it. It's one of the best connections I've ever had with a horse before and I'm so lucky to have him."

Photo courtesy of Catherine Duncan



Saddling Up For Success

Photo courtesy of Emma Benson

BV West equestrians share their journeys in riding and training horses