

LIVING LEGEND: C.J. Law

As Mount Holyoke College's equestrian team coach for almost four decades, her most important lessons have nothing to do with riding.

By **Kelsey Baker**

It's not unusual to see Carol "C.J." Law, 66, driving a bus of 20 to 30 young women down the highway. Sometimes the students know where they're headed. Occasionally, they don't.

"I think it was 2019; we were up at Syracuse [New York]," Law says. "We were in a bus, and then my students were like, 'Where are we going, C.J.?' They really thought I was going to make them go milk cows or do some Amish country things. But we ended up at Beezie Madden's place. I had a tour set up for us, but it was a surprise. We just kept passing farm after farm, and [they] knew I was up to something."

In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, it's a tour at Hershey's Chocolate World. In Lexington, Kentucky, she arranges at least one of the stops on any equestrian's list: Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital, Three Chimneys Farm or the Keeneland Race Course.

"I try to do something fun with the students all the time when we're off on a trip for IHSA events," Law says. "[I] try to make it memorable. They might not remember the ribbons later on in life, but they're going to remember these memories. So I always try to make sure that we have a good time when we go on our trips."

Law knows that preparing her students to win at competitions is only part of her job. With nearly 40 years as the hunt seat coach for Mount Holyoke College, and countless Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association wins, the real secret to her coaching success is found outside the riding arena. She prepares her riders for life after college, bolstering their

confidence, improving their teamwork, and encouraging them to think outside the riding arena.

On their cross-country excursions, Law's students are accustomed to her parking the bus on the side of the road and gathering them around cotton bolls or still-green hay to show them where their clothes and horses' feed come from.

"If we have time when we go to Washington, D.C., I make sure we go see some of the monuments," says Law. "Both of my parents are buried at Arlington, so usually I put some flowers on their grave, and then we go to see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Some of the students have never been to D.C., never seen anything like that."

FINDING HER WAY TO MOUNT HOLYOKE

Because of her father's military service, Law never had a solid home base until she got to Mount Holyoke College, in South Hadley, Massachusetts.

"My father [James P. Cahill] rode; he actually was a part of a cavalry," Law says. "And then my mother was into horses. My father did two tours in Germany, and the second time around I took some lessons at a facility in Germany. When my father got stationed on Fort Knox, Kentucky, that's when it really started—one lesson a week, then two lessons a week, then three lessons a week and then, 'Can I get a horse?' But then as I got a horse, my father's next orders were to South Korea, around 1969, and I had to sell the horse."

Law says at the time she was a "kick-and-go rider." "I didn't really know what I was doing other than I would hop on and ride," she says, laughing.



In 2010 C.J. Law (center) trained Lindsay Sceats to the Cacchione Cup win at IHSA National Championships, presented by John Xanthopoulos (left). She was joined by (from second left) Mount Holyoke College assistant trainer Gilly McPhee; Sceats' mother, Deb Jalowiec, and Sceats' boyfriend Brian Refsdal. COREE REUTER PHOTO

As she approached college-age, Law attended a riding school in England. She knew she needed to improve her riding and horse knowledge if she wanted to ride professionally, and England was just the place to dive into classical horse knowledge and stable management.

"I really wanted to learn more about riding, and I didn't know if I wanted to go off to college," she says. "My brother had gone off to Notre Dame [Indiana] and became a lawyer, and my sister went off to nursing school. And here I am, I have no idea what I want to do with my life, but I really liked sports. I liked riding, but I needed to find out more about it. And after going to this riding school in England, I realized that I didn't know enough about riding. I knew that I needed to figure out my life a little bit more, but I still had this passion for sports."

The choice to return home led Law to Averett University in Danville, Virginia.

"I could major in physical education and equestrian studies," Law says. "So it was kind of like, 'Wow, that's

exactly what I want.' That's sort of the start of what I would consider my equestrian career."

After graduating from Averett in 1980, Law returned to the school for two years as an equestrian coach before heading to North Carolina to be a working student for dressage professional Cindy Sydnor. Not long after, a longtime friend and mentor told Law she'd taken a new job at Mount Holyoke, encouraging Law to join her there. Law arrived in 1984 and never left.

TRAINING VARSITY WINNERS AND FUTURE LEADERS

After 38 years, Law still loves her job. She's opted not to serve as the college's overall equestrian director because it would take her away from what she loves most: her students.

"I love being the coach of the equestrian team. And I just didn't want to give up any of those things," she says. "Sometimes you've got to know what you're good at.

Our friendship was formed because of the love we have for that team and the love the team gave to us, and C.J. is the reason it all happened.”

—Kyla Makhloghi

Where I've made my mark is my connection as a coach and the staff that's teaching at Mount Holyoke, including the director. They've all been my students. They've all been on my team, at one time in their life.”

Law's steered Mount Holyoke to three Cacchione Cup wins (1990, 2002 and 2010) and three overall IHSA National Collegiate Team Championships (1986, 2000 and 2006).

College riding has changed over the nearly four decades that Law's been involved, but she's not one to be stuck in the past. She's open to change with occasional help from her students when it comes to things like technology.

“The students keep me young and energized,” she says. “I love teaching and being so fortunate to work at a college that is so supportive of riding. I love that I am able to touch so many lives, and the students make my work so enjoyable. I'm lucky to have a career I love, and I'm able to make a difference.”

She passes her love of teaching to her students, some of whom go on to have professional careers as riders and trainers.

“Even now, years later, my closest friends are the women I met on C.J.'s team,” says former Mount Holyoke rider Kyla Makhloghi, who graduated in 2006 and now trains at her own Rosemont Farm, based in Connecticut

and Florida. “We reminisce about our years at Mount Holyoke fondly whenever we get together. Our friendship was formed because of the love we have for that team and the love the team gave to us, and C.J. is the reason it all happened.

“Riding's such an individual sport, but C.J. exemplifies the true cohesion required for a team to succeed,” she adds. “Through team meetings, lessons, practices, you



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C.J. Law (*second from right*), beside Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association founder Bob Cacchione, has steered Mount Holyoke to three overall IHSA National Collegiate Team Championships, including this one in 1986. *PHOTO COURTESY OF C.J. LAW*

name it, C.J.'s true love and devotion to the sport radiates to those of us who are lucky enough to know her."

Cassandra Orpen, class of '09, is now a professional rider and trainer based between Kentucky and Florida.

"C.J. pours everything she has into the team," says Orpen. "The structure of meetings, team workouts, and team building activities pulls the girls together in the best way. Besides her devotion to our riding, she's extremely devoted to each individual as a person. I'll always be appreciative of my relationship with the girls on my team and with C.J. herself."

While she's been shepherding other people's children through their college years, Law's also raised four children of her own, now aged 31, 29, 27 and 23. Two of her daughters are Mount Holyoke equestrian team alumni.

"I try to let [the parents and students] know that I am a coach, and I'm also a mom," she says. "I'm there to watch out for their child as much as possible while they're at

school, because I'd want someone to watch out for my child when they're in school."

She says she tries to build leadership on the team and a sense of responsibility. "I try not to have people on pedestals and instill that sense that they've got to work for their titles on the team and also work with others," she says.

COUNTING ON OTHERS

Although her students are quick to praise Law's coaching and big heart, Law's adamant that she's the one who's been inspired most by her students, including two whose sudden deaths left major impacts on her.

Michelle Cook, a member of Mount Holyoke's 1986 winning championship team, was killed by a drunk driver in 1987, while at college. Law still stays in touch with Cook's mother, Marilyn Cook, who lives in Kentucky, and who joins Law to present a trophy in memory of Michelle

“I’ve been touched by so many people who say that I’ve touched their lives, and I think they’ve touched my life in such a positive way.”

—C.J. Law

whenever the IHSA National Championships are held nearby.

Another student, Mika McKinney, died in 2018 after an 18-month battle with bone cancer.

“She’s one who touched my life. I will never forget her,” Law says. “Mika was always positive; nothing got her down, no matter how much she was dealing with, the chemo and what was going on with her health, and losing her hair, or how sick she was. She always had a smile. She just couldn’t have a bad day. Anyone who was connected with her is inspired by that.”

Over the years her students have helped raise her four children, worked as the occasional babysitter, and been there when she needed them most.

In 2010, Law’s husband of over 20 years, Ed Law, died of a heart attack. C.J. credits her school and her students with uniting around her children, including her oldest daughter, who was a Mount Holyoke student at the time, and her three younger children too. C.J. and Ed met in the mid-1980s while Law was still new to Mount Holyoke.

“[After his death], I learned that I had to reach out to people,” she says. “I mean, I had a fulltime job. I had a household to support. My three youngest children were all in public school and doing sports, and my oldest was at Mount Holyoke. I’m a strong person, but it was hard for me to learn to ask people for help. But I learned that when you lead people, those people want to help you when you’re going through something. They don’t know what to say sometimes, or how to tell you that they want to help you, and I learned that. I think that’s the lesson that I try to extend to my students—that they’ve got to count on the people around them. The horse community is really tight no matter what.”

C.J. focuses on mimicking the horse world’s sense of community at school and on her team. Riding results—like Mount Holyoke’s 30 regional championship wins during C.J.’s tenure—naturally fall into place.



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