



# Grace **UNDER PRESSURE**

Eric Straus's involvement in the equestrian industry is extensive and his bio reads like a who's who. The man who understands grace under pressure is 100% committed to excellence and knows that horses are four-legged truth serum.

STORY & PHOTOS BY **DIANA DE ROSA**

**E**ric Straus recalled a phrase his father had echoed to him many times over the years. Walter Straus made this comment to his young son: “Remember, Eric, that while it is nice to be important, it is important to be nice.”

That phrase implanted a lasting impression on the young boy and continues to guide his life even today. When he was younger, life was about being on the horse, but today it’s about being around them.

Eric was just 7 years old when he got on his first horse. Unbeknownst to him, the first day he climbed on a horse at The Broadmoor Hotel to take a lesson from the late Col. Robbie Robertson during a Christmas vacation would be the beginning of a lifetime with horses. Throughout that vacation he and one of his sisters, Jeanie, along with their dad, would ride every day. The experience left such an impression that ultimately it led to his parents buying a piece of property in Texas that they named Three Day Farm.

His dad, Walter Ludwig Straus, was born in Germany and his mom, Lois Farquhar Smith, was born in Scotland. Both his parents have passed away. “My mother (cancer) died in 1985 and my father (complications from Parkinson’s) in 2008,” explained Eric.

At his father’s funeral Eric talked about a man who left strong impressions on him. “If you had asked him what one word summed up his essence, he would say duty,” he said. Walter Straus was a war veteran, and so Eric explained that duty to him meant “grace under pressure, actions always meaning more than words and lastly, social skills that meant living life to the fullest but not to excess.”

While all of what he said also describes what Eric has also demonstrated, it was the “grace under pressure” that many would say best describes Eric Straus. No matter what the situation, he handles everything with just that, no matter how stressful the situation.

Eric’s parents were a good complement to each other and that balance was good for him.

“My father had an immigrant’s love of America and the opportunity it gave him. He built a business, returned to horses, and gave back to his country and to horse sports in greater measure than he received. I learned from him to never be less than 100% committed to excellence in all that you do and that your word is your bond.

“My mother was a hardy Scot who was a surgical nurse. She was very focused on the family and always found a way to be supportive. My mother taught me that it is important to find what interests you, get involved and let your deeds speak for themselves.

“We were a close-knit family,” he concluded.

Growing Up In the Straus Family

“In the Straus household, early was the standard,” explained Eric. “We got up, arrived and often left early. My sister and I went to school, and the family reunited at the farm every day. The farm was the focus of our family and part of how we all interacted. Often, my mother would bring dinner from home to the farm so we could eat as a family.”

For Eric, the horses were an integral part of his daily routine, and as he got older his competitive spirit kicked into gear. “As a junior rider, I was Texas Hunter & Jumper Association Equitation Champion and Reserve Junior Hunter Champion,” noted Eric.

While riding shaped much of his younger years Eric explained, “Sadly, I am not riding now. When my family and I moved from Texas to Connecticut so I could become the Executive Director/COO of the Federation (known then as the AHSA), I stopped riding. I do not have time to be on a horse but I’m fortunate enough to spend a great deal of time with horses. Who wouldn’t want to? They give so much and ask for so little.”

That family Eric is talking about was the result of a bit of matchmaking. “I met my future mother-in-law at

*“Remember, Eric, that while it is nice to*



*be important, it is important to be nice."*



a party. She mentioned she had an attractive daughter but I did not respond. We met again at another wedding where I asked where the daughter might be. After pointing across the room, I went over and introduced myself; a year later we were married.

Eric and his wife, Adriane Swenson Straus, have two children, Jessica Beaton Straus and John (Jack) Walter Straus, both in their 20s. “We have two wonderful children,” remarked Eric, “neither of whom caught the horse bug. Our daughter works in DC as the Deputy Press Secretary for the Majority Leader in the House, and our son is a budding cabinet maker entrepreneur in Bozeman, Montana.”

#### WHERE THE HORSES HAVE TAKEN HIM

“Horses have remained a part of my life and horse sports have opened many doors for me,” remarked Eric.

I was curious to know what “doors,” and he explained that after he and his father closed Walter Straus & Son, Inc., “I wanted to go into sports management. Through horses I had gotten to know a woman named Anne Duncan at the Atlanta Sports

Commission. When she became President of the Dallas International Sport Commission and learned about my interest in a career change, she gave me the opportunity to become the Director of Programs & Operations. Dallas was a 1994 World Cup venue, considering a bid for the US Olympic Festival and did bid to be a satellite soccer site for the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games.”

For Eric some of the path he traveled came from the people he admired.

“I was lucky to have had several very excellent mentors who urged me to participate in organizational work, to become a licensed official, which led to my FEI teaching and my consulting business,” he commented.

“I attended a Modern Pentathlon Olympic Development Clinic for juniors in San Antonio, Texas. We had six intense weeks of training in five sports followed by the National Championship. Colonel Russell had us sit down as a group before the start of the championships and told us that for the next five days all of our energy and focus had to be on competing, not on our friends or other issues (girls).

*“Horses have remained a part of my life and horse sports have opened many doors for me.”*



If you want to win, the first step is to know your goal and the second was to trust what you have learned in training.”

Even a job can be a mentor.

“The trading business taught me to sense a person’s mood over the phone, a skill that I use every day.”

Sometimes those mentors can be the horses we spent many hours with and such was the case with Eric.

“I had a horse named Hickory who was a journeyman kind of horse, good but not great; however, he taught me everything I needed to know at that time in my riding career. He proved to me time and again that horses are a four-legged truth serum ... every day they know you and your feelings. When we had to put Hickory down due to soundness complications it was very emotional for me; his last lesson for me was to never take a day for granted.”

### GETTING TO KNOW THE MAN

Eric travels a lot, but when he can he gets up at 5:15, goes to the gym, has breakfast and then reads four papers. “I am a news junkie,” he admits. Once all that news has been absorbed he heads for the office “to work on whatever the world throws my way until about 6:00 p.m., when I join my wife for dinner and several levels of non-equine conversation.” At 10:00 p.m. it is more news junkie time for whatever the TV set will share with him before what Eric calls “lights out.”

He recently started a new business: Equine Sports Group provides consulting services primarily in underserved countries such as China and others. “My goal is to assist in the development of international horse sport in an orderly systemic way driven by the following criteria: respect animal welfare, promote the American style of riding, improve competition standards and look to excel in international competition.”

Eric is a man who knows who he is and what he wants out of life, and he was not afraid to share what that means when asked, “Who is Eric Straus?”

He put some thought into his response before carefully explaining that he is “a person who wants to do my best at whatever I do and to contribute in a positive, meaningful way, large or small. I am a type ‘A’ guy who sets high expectations and tries to meet them every day. I enjoy the challenge of management because you are focused on what is essential and doable, and then you get to execute the plan.”

Rarely do we get to see horse people away from the horse world, and so I asked Eric to share a little bit of that part of his life. It was hard for him to not include the horses because they are so much a part of who he is and also because some of the things he revealed about his horse career few people are aware of.

“I am lucky to be married to a wonderful woman who raised two successful, happy children much of the time on her own. I actually rode and competed



successfully in Eventing, Hunters and Jumpers. I used to be a currency and commodity trader. I've done cold calls in Mexico. I am active in our church and trade cars every three years. I love the new car smell. I am addicted to technology. I have evolved from a Blackberry maniac to an iPhone maniac; I guess that's progress of a sort.

"I also golf, ski, read spy and historical novels, go to the movies, eat Mexican food and watch TV, especially when I can get hooked on a series like *Downton Abbey*."

While Eric was hesitant to share some of the down times, but after turning the pages of his life in his mind Eric finally stopped at the sale of the second Three Day Farm as something that continues to leave an impression. "It was a huge sense of loss. Three Day Farm had been the center of our family life, a place we went to every day. I spent more time at the farm than anywhere else. It was very hard to say goodbye."

Eric also talk about the highlights, which were easier for him to reveal and it also offered an insight into the many jobs he's held over the years.

"The first high point is our children; they are very different personalities but happy and successful each in their own way. I think our approach to parenting seemed to work. From this point on my answer gets more complicated because I have had several careers each with its own high point. I would say in the family commodity business it was creating a new and

successful trading model. As the Executive Director/COO of the Federation, it was improving member services and being a member of then 'Inner Circle' with my FEI colleagues. At Clark Estates, it was being successful in multiple simultaneous roles within a complex environment such as: interim head of two museums, managing government relations in Albany and Washington and helping organizations to reinvent themselves. As CEO of the Washington International Horse Show, it was creating a new marketing plan that fit with two traditions of the horse show: the horses of the Caisson Platoon and the military."

After hearing Eric's life unfold I was curious as to who he would say had been the most influential person in his life. I wasn't surprised by the answer.

His childhood memories with a strict German dad were tough but ultimately they helped mold him into the man he is today and he is thankful to that man. "It was my father with whom I shared: a love of horses, Three Day Farm, a commodity trading business and equestrian committee and board service. My father was an intellectually driven man committed to excellence, honesty in business and who thought the best part of his day began when he walked into the barn."

As for who he turns to for advice depends on what the focus is. "Anything to do with modern culture would be my daughter and son. For social questions,



# ERIC STRAUS

## A Man of *Many Talents*

Eric Straus's bio reads like a who's who. Below are only some of his achievements.

### He currently is:

- *Trustee, Executive Committee Member and Secretary of the United States Equestrian Team Foundation*
- *Chair of the Search Committee for the Show Jumping Chef d' Equipe United States Equestrian Federation*
- *Member, of the United States Hunter & Jumper Association Stewards Committee and Zone 1 Jumper Nominating Committee*
- *Member, of The National Horse Show Board of Directors*
- *Member, USA Reining Board of Directors*
- *Trustee and Executive Committee Member of the American Horse Council*
- *China Representative for the Association Internationale Des Etudiants Cavaliers*

### He is licensed as an:

- *FEI Honorary Steward General and Course Director for Reining*
- *United States Equestrian Federation FEI Steward General for Reining*
- *FEI Chief Steward for Show Jumping and Reining*
- *Union Internationale Pentathlon Moderne Jumping*
- *United States Equestrian Federation "R" Jumper, "R" Steward, "r" Hunter, "r" Hunt Seat Equitation*

### Eric was also:

Chief Steward for Reining 2010, 2006, 2002 World Equestrian Games. Chief Judge, Show Jumping Modern Pentathlon at the 1996 Olympic Games. Judge, Show Jumping Modern Pentathlon, at the 1987 Pan American Games. CEO of the Washington International Horse Show, 2009-2011. Vice President and then Senior VP of the Clark Estates, Inc., 1997-2008. Secretary General, American Horse Shows Association, 1996-1997, Director of Programs and Operations, Dallas International Sports Commission, 1993-1994 and the list goes on!

I seek out my wife. For horses my first choice is George Morris and for equine politics Howard Simpson is a very wise man."

As we neared the end of our conversation I wanted Eric to go through those pages again and offer any advice he would give someone who would someday like to walk in his shoes. With a remembering smile he commented, "Expect every day to be different, not a lot of routine here, but that's okay because I wouldn't have it any other way."

And while Eric is very much alive and has plenty more to accomplish, I wanted to end this article as it began with a quote about his father. Near the end of the eulogy Eric described his dad.

It was all that Walter Straus did that helped him achieve much in his life, "family, financial security, and most of all horses. Once horses entered his life his sense of duty took on a new meaning. He wanted to make riders who understood the true meaning of being a horseman, he started competitions that were designed to raise standards and promote fairness, and through his organizational leadership he left a legacy that concentrated on the base of the pyramid so the top could flourish."

What Eric may not realize is that Walter Straus is the man that Eric Straus has now become: a man who demonstrates grace under pressure, who is 100% committed to excellence and knows that horses are a four-legged truth serum. ☺