

The Santa Ynez Valley Equestrian Center

History 1992-2020

By
Pat Murphy & Nancy Hunsicker

For what seemed like eons, Valley people had been saying, "we really should have an Equestrian Center here that we could enjoy all together." Back in 1956, a group of horse enthusiasts formed **The Santa Ynez Valley Horse Show Association** and they held horse shows of all kinds at the **Alisal Ranch** with great success. However, by 1983, as sometimes happens with volunteer organizations, official activities had ceased.

In 1992 and 1993, a **City Slickers Cattle Drive** was held as a fundraiser for the **March of Dimes**. It was such a success that we began thinking about putting all that energy into forming a permanent Equestrian Center here in the Valley. After some research we found that we had about 14 different breeds of horses here in the valley and we felt that there was a strong possibility that we could become a gathering place for horse people between San Francisco and Los Angeles and possibly beyond. A Board was formed with **Joe Olla** as President, **Frances Riegel** as Vice President, **Pat Bennett, Alexis La Favor, Dave Hunsicker, Steve Bollinger, Bill Deputy, Dr Chris Pankau DVM, Debbie Oquist, Mike Mellon, Kristi Kees, Rhonda Quaid, and Pat Murphy**. Excited by the concept, dozens of horse enthusiasts rallied around to contribute membership fees and fundraising commenced.

Santa Barbara County gave us permission to hold events at Live Oak Campgrounds in exchange for some roadwork and maintenance. Trail rides, Endurance rides, Team Pennings, and a Cow Horse Classic helped us raise funds and enthusiasm grew.

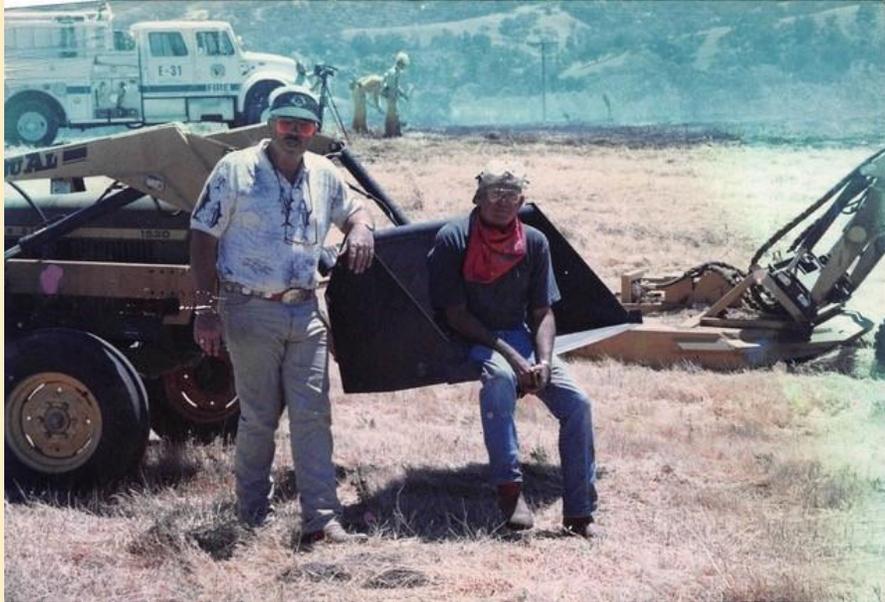
In 1995 **Ms. Jody Carsello** deeded a 23.93 acre parcel of land to the organization. The agreement specified that we could immediately have the use of all of it except the land surrounding her house and barns of 5.16 acres, which would be given to us upon her death. In 1995 the total parcel was valued at \$625,000.00. It was an amazing gift that gave us a chance to get going immediately, but there were many

improvements needed before events could take place. Electricity, waterlines, bleachers, a sound system, fencing, shade trees, a wash rack and proper footing for each ring were some of the hurdles we had to clear. **Bill Deputy** put in an *enormous* amount of time on his tractor—so much so that one of the large arenas was named in his honor.

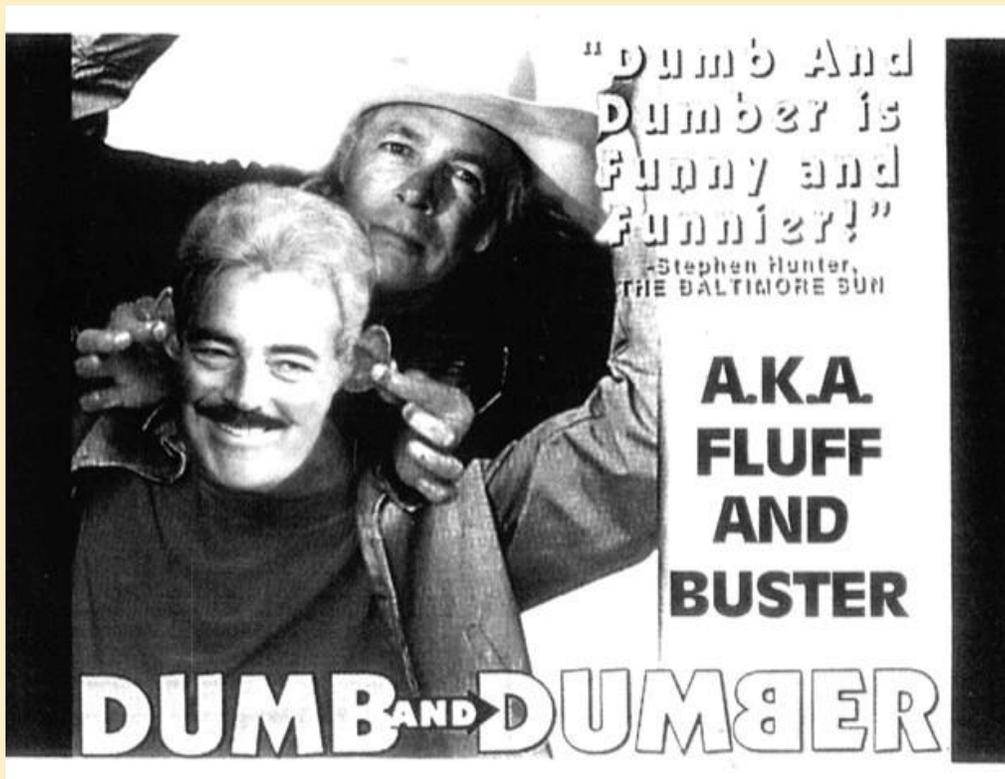


Work Day at the Old Spanish Days “OSD” Arena

Fundraising accelerated and imagination ran rampant. How about a horse clinic led by **Jean-Phillipe Giacomini** and his friend **Bo Derek**? Or one of those crazy Poker Rides? They happened! Experts stepped forward to give educational clinics- **Linda Branch** gave the first clinic at our new site, on Confidence Building. Then followed English and Western shows, Gymkhanas, Shoot Outs and the Battle of the Sexes. Trail riding clubs and breed associations contributed funds or work. Corporation presidents rolled up their sleeves and planted trees and painted fences.



David Hunsicker & Greg Simon in the early days following a slight mishap while tag team mowing dry grass...the fire department saved the day. This event led to the ladies posting the below ad in the lead-up to the following Battle of the Sexes:



Prominent equestrians like Olympic Bronze Medal winner in Dressage, **Charlotte Bredahl**, raised our clinics to an incredible level.

By the end of the first year at our own location, 1996, we were rolling along and further grounds improvements were on the horizon. By 1997, we were thrilled by the diversity of participation- everyone from The Back Country Horsemen of America to elegant Dressage events, an Arabian Horse Show and Cow Horse Classics. Grounds improvements continued to be a big challenge and our treasury was still low.

In 1998, **Mary Ann Evans** requested that we allow her to establish a **Therapeutic Riding** facility on our grounds. Suddenly, people of all ages who were physically or mentally challenged experienced the magic of becoming close friends with horses. **Greg Simon**, a Board member with development background, made a blueprint of a possible future layout for our grounds.

Activities for young people have been a special focus for the center. In 1999 the main arena was christened the "**Old Spanish Days Arena**" because of all the help and contributions given to us by the **Santa Barbara Fiesta Rodeo** organization.

The new millenium was bursting with new ideas and action. In an effort to honor the history and prominence of horses and riders in our Valley, **Pat Murphy** chaired a project for the Equestrian Center, in cooperation with Santa Barbara County: The **Historic Horseshoe Walkways** were installed at the intersection of Edison Street and Sagunto in the village of Santa Ynez. There was participation from the entire Valley horse community, as horse shoes were embedded in the cement of the crosswalks to honor both famous and favorite Valley horses. **President Reagan, Bo Derek, Rona Barrett and John Forsythe** were some of the most famous names taking part. Those individuals prominent in the equestrian world were equally impressive. Shoes from three Kentucky Derby winners closely associated with the valley, as well as world champions in many other breeds joined in. The great surprise was that we now had over 32 different breeds of horses here in Santa Ynez, and that many of them had attained the highest honors in the equine world. It follows that our riders, trainers and veterinarians were also of the highest caliber. This was a thrilling realization.

Western horse shows and junior gymkhanas took off under the leadership of **Dennis Schoonderwoerd, Pamela Turnbull, Judy Adams, Kathy Fortier, Lena Field and in more recent years, Sharon Kline**. Not to be outdone, English shows, Dressage and Hunter-Jumpers overcame hurdles and soared into

prominence with the help of **Jayne Martin, Jo Couch, Tracy Ward and Mary Rose.**

A long awaited moment of nostalgia arrived with the formation of a Carriage Club and a small show in October of 2000. Finally, by the end of 2000 our treasury showed that our bank account was actually solvent. By that date our presidents had been a succession of strong leaders. Following **Joe Olla** were **David Hunsicker, Dr. Chris Pankau, Frances Riegel and Pat Bennett.** In 2002 and 2003 **Judy Adams** presided and **Jon Harness** took over in 2004.

In 2001 the Hunter-Jumper shows really took off and in January we had over 50 participants all the way from San Luis Obispo to Ventura and they have continued to grow. We had donations of jumps and storage places, the awards were elegant and wine toasts took place at the-finales. A **Mardi Gras Parade and Party** to celebrate the installation of the **Horseshoe Walkways** and the **Kiosk** took place in February and was sponsored by **Sid and Linda Kastner** and the **Santa Ynez Feed Store.** We again started pursuing a master plan for the total property. Memberships, donations and horse shows were the primary source of our income. Over 350 newsletters were being mailed quarterly.

In 2002 **Judy Adams** took over the presidential reins. **Pat Murphy** and **Pat Dixon** made plans for a gala fundraiser at the Center and Sunstone Winery that would include the entire community. It was held on May 25th and christened "**Fine Art, Fine Horses and Fine Wine.**" Seven life-sized heavy fiberglass colt statues were purchased; six were paid for by **Sid and Linda Kastner and Dan and Jeanette Webster.** The seventh was purchased by the **Therapeutic Riding** and they received the funds from the sale. The statues were decorated by fine artists with scenes reflecting the ambiance of the Valley and auctioned off at the Wine Reception at **Sunstone Winery.** The equestrian portion of the gala was held at the Equestrian Center and included Peruvian horses with costumed riders and dancers. Two ballerinas danced with a white Andalusian stallion who performed steps of haute ecole. Guests were then transported to Sunstone Winery in decorated horse-drawn carriages. Over 200 people attended and the event was highly profitable as a fundraiser. **The Three Amigas** donated their photographic talents.

Further successful fundraising projects included **Jayne Martin's Feed Bag Fundraiser,** in addition to a sale from the estate from **Bobbie Hawkins** which was managed by **Judy Adams.**

We continued to have massive problems with the antique water truck and our old tractor, so we made plans to replace them. The year 2002 saw many improvements. We had emerged as very visible part of the entire community of the Valley and we were on a roll.



In 2003 our biggest fundraiser was the **Seabiscuit Spectacular**, chaired by **Pat Murphy and Pat Dixon**. Over three hundred people attended our special showing of the film **Seabiscuit**, held on the weekend that it was released. We worked with **Universal Studios** and the **Parks Plaza Theater**. A reception and silent auction was held just prior to the showing at the **Marriott Hotel's Jockey Room**. Noted Jockey **Jerry Lambert** was the guest of honor. Perhaps just as important, many people from the community that were not SYVEA members took part in this event.

In 2004 we really had our grounds in beautiful shape and also had opened a day camp for children and horses in cooperation with the YMCA. Both Western and English Horse Shows increased in attendance. **John Harness** became president.

One of the brightest realizations to come out of ten years of struggling was how the Valley horsemen and women had truly come together in common cause to create and build something special for our equestrian community. Regardless of the type of riding discipline—English or Western—we were all united in our love of horses.

Over the next several years, financial and logistical challenges proved to be formidable. Operating expenses and payroll outweighed income, rental receipts fell

significantly in arrears, and, most frustratingly, there was no clear path forward to develop the facility's potential. Without a cow horse arena and cattle handling facilities we were stymied in our efforts to serve a great portion of our constituency and achieve a sustainable healthy cash flow.

By March of 2006, the financial picture was bleak, and **David Hunsicker** was approached by several current SYVEA Board members who asked if he would consider returning to his previous leadership position in order to save the organization and facility from financial failure and lack of progress in building out the infrastructure. David had served two prior terms as President and on his watch much progress on the facility had been made. He agreed that he would return as President if the following was agreed upon prior to his return: He insisted on meeting with the current board of directors--at that time numbering 19—and stipulating the conditions under which he would agree to return as President. To summarize, he told them he would do what was necessary to rescue the organization from its large financial deficit and that he would simultaneously incept a plan and raise the funds to build the Upper Level Cow Horse Arena and cattle holding pens necessary to host top level cow horse events. He further committed to creating an operational business model for the organization and facility which would be financially sustainable. He stated that he would incept a policy that every board member would be required to have a specific job & area of responsibility. Further, he insisted that the number of board members be significantly reduced to a workable number; having such a large board [of 19 members] made it virtually impossible to achieve a quorum, make time sensitive decisions and move projects forward.

David began by assembling an outstanding group of local horsemen, contractors, equipment operators and volunteers to work with himself, **Howard Erenberg, & Mark Gowing. Roger Fortier, Jon Stephen, Manny Diaz, Don Woodward and Mark Coxon** all put in literally hundreds of hours building the upper level of the center as it exists today, and they did it all without compensation other than an occasional “ATTABOY ” for a job well done.

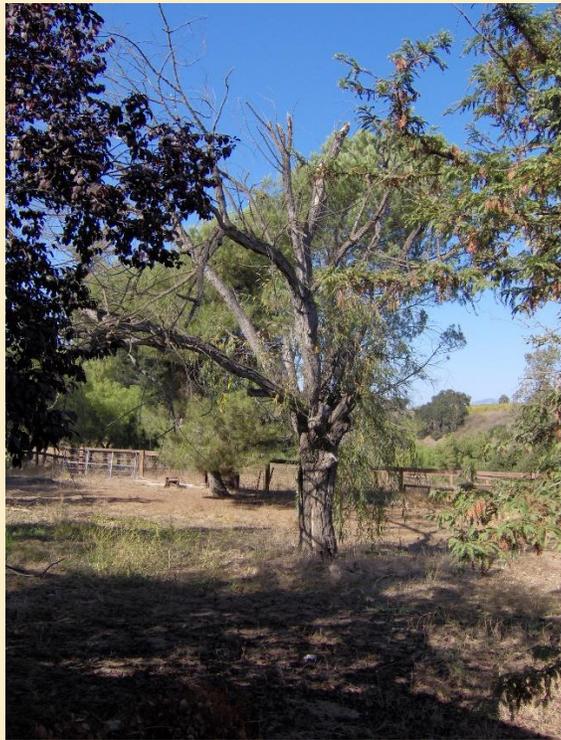


Our hard working All Volunteer Crew

Meanwhile, David worked extensively with **Forrest Riegel** to put together an application for a CUP (Conditional Use Permit) which was required by Santa Barbara County. David and Forrest made countless trips to Santa Maria & Santa Barbara to work with the County Building Department and Santa Barbara as well as speak before the County Supervisors.

During this time, work commenced on clearing the upper acreage prior to the dirt work that would be required to layout the new arena. Four old horse barns and several hundred feet of fencing needed to be cleared along with over 40 dead trees.















With all the positive activity at the center, David was approached by several of his friends asking what they could do to help. At that time our biggest need was financial because we were not able to hold shows that would generate meaningful income.

The first significant donation was \$50,000.00 with several conditions:

1. The donors insisted they remain anonymous.
2. David would commit to remaining involved to ensure that the contributed funds and resources were responsibly managed.

The two largest donors contributed over \$250,000.00 over a 3 year period to build the long awaited cow horse arena. As work on the arena progressed, it was obvious that we would require a large amount of pipe. David reached out to his friends in the community, including many of his fellow **Ranchero Visitadores**, asking for well pipe. His good friend **Ken Hunter of Vaquero Energy** was the

first to donate, sending over two loads of pipe from his operation in Bakersfield. **Tim Crist of Kenai Drilling** also sent pipe. **Greg Schrage, CEO of Western Resource Engineering Inc.** donated pipe. **Craig and Stephanie Braly** donated two loads of re- cleaned pipe. **Peter Orradre of Coast Pipe** (another Ranchero) donated pipe in addition to several hundred feet of continuous fencing, enough to build the **Rodeo Arena** and most of the Cattle holding pens. (The cost of duplicating this project today would be several hundred thousand dollars.)







Almost there.....

By May of 2007 the Equestrian Center was ready to hold its first “Super Cow Horse” show, ably chaired by **Paula Hunsicker**, with over 80 riders and thousands of dollars in prizes.



Grand Opening & Ribbon Cutting of the Cow Horse Arena



The Inaugural Super Cow Horse Show, chaired by Paula Hunsicker

David and his team then shifted their attention to the rehabilitation of what is now known as **The Big Green Barn**, which at that time was used for equipment storage only. In order to make the barn usable, much face-lifting work was required. Roof repair required extensive labor and materials to fix all the leaks. The dirt floor was replaced with concrete and tile plus new doors & windows were installed. Again his friends stepped up: past SYVEA President **Pat Bennett** donated T&G wood for wall covering, and the beautiful bar, pool table and Tiffany chandelier was donated by another Rancho friend.

Greg Simon, a former Board member, made arrangements to have a nearly new 40 foot container delivered to the center to become our primary lower level storage facility. **Oliver Dixon** donated another container which is utilized for storage at the upper level. Growth and improvements continue to be a priority in the day to day operation of the center. With the recent acquisition of a \$40,000.00 tractor, the finest arena drag system built by Kiser and a dump truck, we are able to provide the best and safest footing for each and every event regardless of discipline.

The long term relationships now in place with **SYV Therapeutic Riding**, the **SYV Penning Association** and the **Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Posse** have all proved to be positive for the facility and organization.

Our modest annual membership fees mean that fundraising activity will always be a high priority. Events organized by outside entities generate cash flow in the form of facility rental fees—the Party Barn, arenas and parking lot have all contributed to our annual revenue stream. This year we anticipate net positive income from

both the **Cow Horse** shows, managed by **Sherry Linane**, as well as the **Ranch Horse Series**, chaired by **Lisa Lyons, Karyn Stevens, Lisa Novat & Nancy Hunsicker**, in addition to the **Battle of the Sexes**--being revived by **Nancy Hunsicker, Bob Mott, Lisa Lyons & Danielle Burkitt**-- coming this fall. Both **Dressage Shows** as well as **Hunter/Jumper** competitions--chaired by **Carole Bennet & Tracy Ward**-- have returned to the center and are featured in our **2020 Calendar of Events**.

A few photos of the Equestrian Center as it exists today:



Another successful Team Sorting Event organized by the Valley Penning Association this spring











Photo credits: Jenny Coxen, Linda Blue, Al Lafferty, Nancy Hunsicker, Lauren Maeve, David Hunsicker