

FREE REIN WITH:

# Jo-Ann Wilson

By Sara Lieser

When Jo-Ann Wilson was in her mid-30s, she turned her life upside down. The executive director of child and adolescent services at a major teaching hospital in Boston, she'd spent years working with

community-based programs, helping homeless children.

"I took kids out of dumpsters, and I recreated their lives for them," she said.

A nurse by training, Wilson had 55 people working for her at a demanding job. "I was making fairly decent money," she said. "I had an IRA and four weeks of vacation."

But Wilson was also a rider, and her horse wasn't jumping well. She took him to massage therapist Jack Meagher, and he corrected her horse's issues in one treatment.

"Things were getting really tough in human services," said Wilson. "Money was diminished, and funding for children was diminished. Insurance was difficult. Children became incidental. It was all this other stuff: turf issues, who was going to get this grant, who was going to get this insurance dollar. I started to get very stressed and discouraged. I thought, 'Hey, I'm going to do what Jack Meagher does.'"

Meagher, a sports massage pioneer who'd worked as the physiotherapist for the U.S. Equestrian Team and other professional human athletes, didn't accept Wilson as a protégé right away. But after she completed massage therapy school while continuing to do her job, Wilson started training with him. She spent the next 15 years by his side, eventually becoming his partner and helping to scientifically prove that his method increased range of motion.

Meagher died in 2005, and Wilson has continued his work as the director of Wilson Meagher Sports Therapy. Based in Camden, Maine, where she lives with her dog Chowder, she works on North America's top event

horses in her role as the Land Rover U.S. Eventing Team physiotherapist. She's attended three Olympic Games and multiple other international championships. She's also been the team physiotherapist for the Canadian eventing team and produced articles, videos and clinics in addition to her daily work with human and equine athletes.

## What does your job entail as the physiotherapist for the Land Rover U.S. Eventing Team?

In order for event horses to perform at the top of their ability and have exceptional performance, they have to be coordinated and balanced. They have to have endurance; they have to have reflexes; they have to be safe, and they have to be able to move freely. When a fraction of an inch makes a difference in a competition, I can usually give them the inch if it's of muscular nature.

My job is to watch horses move through what's called muscular kinetics. I watch them walk, and then I talk with the rider about any performance issues the horse might have. Then I talk with the team vet. I go over the whole horse. With my hands, I palpate all the muscle attachments and the muscles. Then I apply a technique—the Wilson Meagher method of sports massage—I use a process in physiology. I'm using both anatomical points in anatomy and physiology and three soft tissue techniques to create a change and a shift in the way the horse moves.

## How do you work when you're at big competitions?

When I work in Kentucky or at the Worlds, I'll work on those horses twice a day. I'll work on them first in the morning. Then they'll go off and do dressage. The rider comes back and gives me feedback. "He wasn't completely through in the left hind." "I need 12 more degrees in my right rein." Then I work on them again. They ride them again, and they tell me, "Yes, I got what I needed," or "Can you just tweak it a tad more?" It's really fun and very specific. It's motion-specific. It gets down to a fraction of an inch.



Jo-Ann Wilson helps horses like Selena O'Hanlon's Foxwood High achieve their best performance. *PHOTO COURTESY OF JO-ANN WILSON*



### How old are you?

Unknown. I am the most teased person in all of the eventing world. I have about eight different nicknames, and I'm teased constantly. I'm not giving that out.

### Tell me a little more about your mission to teach your methods.

When Jack took ill, he became quite sick. He was my mentor, and he taught me everything I know. He only had a few days to live. I'm standing there in this room at the facility he was in. He said, "I'll be gone tomorrow." I held back my tears. He asked if I could do something for him. I was thinking he wanted a glass of ginger ale, and I started wondering, "I wonder if I can break into the nurses' kitchen. Where is the nurses' kitchen?"

He said, "I want you to pass my method on to the entire world. That's what I want you to do for me." I said, "OK. I promise you I will."

That's when I started teaching more. I developed a DVD for horse owners. I developed online video training. I gave lectures. I traveled all over doing workshops. Every time I meet someone, I don't just walk in like the Lone Ranger, leave the magic bullet and get out of town. I teach the rider or the groom so they understand when to call or what the issue is. When to call a vet. When to call a chiropractor. When to call me.

The performance issues start with the rider. The rider feels it before anybody. I try to teach them all the time, educate people because that gives them power to change the way the horse moves. If they can change the way the horse moves, and they can increase performance, the horse will last longer. And the horse will be content.

### How has technology changed how you do your job?

I'm probably the lowest tech person on the planet. As a matter of fact, I think the whole human species is evolving into robots. But, that being said, I've used



Jo-Ann Wilson lives in Camden, Maine, with her dog Chowder.  
SHARI KATZ PHOTO

technology during COVID. I've been limited in my travel because of COVID precautions and restrictions, so people will Zoom or FaceTime their horses.

I watch the horse walk. I listen to what the issues are for the rider. For example, if the horse is leaning in the rider's left rein. "OK, put your hand 1 and 1/2 hands' length behind the horse's poll. Now drop down. Do you feel a thickness? Yeah. OK, Hold that for 10 seconds." I teach them what to do. I go to all the attachments and have them use physiology to create the change.

I had a woman in Canada [who] wanted me to look at her horse. She videoed it, and I helped her go to all the attachments. She called me back, and she was crying. She said, "I'm crying because I

don't even recognize the animal I'm on. He's so different. I'm crying with joy."

Without even being there, I got her to use her hands through me. She was able to apply what I told her to do, and it changed the horse. The technology has brought me into the barn in some ways because I've felt so disconnected.

### What's one thing riders can do that would make a big difference for their horses?

If the horse is unsound, I can't make any recommendation. I would defer to the vet. But let's just say the horses are sound. The one thing that makes a difference in a horse would be cantering the horse in a connected frame, not collected, but cantering back to front into the bridle or into your hand.

The canter is the most concerted exercise at lengthening all your major muscle groups. That's why the trot always feels better after the canter. I swear, we should do walk, canter, trot. You're lengthening the back. You're lengthening the neck. You're lengthening the

shoulders. You're stretching the hind end by the hind end coming underneath and then back.

Walk the horse first because stretching requires the body to be prepared. The greatest injury to muscle is in the stretch. Warming up means just bringing enough blood to the body. Walk the horse, then canter it. Now you've got enough blood and enough oxygen to let them stretch and lengthen. That really helps the animal.

### What's one of the most easily fixed physical issues you treat?

My own hunger. That's for sure!

Seriously, when you think about the horse, the movement starts from the hind leg and the hind end. The hind end is the engine. If it's of a muscular nature, working on the hind end and getting it loose—remember the body is a unit and has to function like a unit—but if I can loosen up the hamstrings and the hindquarters of the horse, the horse will have the power from behind to carry or move the body and the trunk forward, so I start with the hind end.

### One of the most difficult?

When the muscle tightness is not primary, it's secondary due to a deeper structural issue. If the horse has a GI issue—stomach or hindgut issues—or a bad hock, or an injured stifle, the muscles will always tighten around a deeper issue. It's called protective splinting. They'll tighten to splint and immobilize that body part. That's where the vet comes in and your relationship with the vet.

### What are the strangest conditions you've worked under?

I was the principle investigator of a research grant with the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University [Massachusetts]. It's the leading motion laboratory in the world; I don't know if it is now, but it was in 1999. I had to do certain things to meet their criteria as to whether or not they were willing to participate in my research. They were astounded at how they could see a horse's striding change. They said it was profound.

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They have every single animal that exists. Top athletes would go there to study their movement. They had birds, tons of birds. They had these professors coming from Russia to study birds of flight in their aviary. One of their chief birds that they'd been studying, it couldn't move its wing. They asked me to take a look because they had these professors coming, and it wasn't moving right. It was a goose! They wrapped it up in a towel so it wouldn't attack me.

Sure enough, the pectoral muscle was so tight. I don't know what it did, but I worked on the pectoral muscle, and that darned bird could fly easily. And they were all happy, and we laughed and laughed.

### **If you hadn't become an equine physiotherapist, where would you be today?**

I would've stayed in human services. I would have shifted from children. I think one of the last outposts of discrimination are the elderly. I think I would have shifted over to trying to make the elderly's lives better.

### **What do you consider your greatest achievement?**

Going to the top of my game, which is going to the Olympic Games. Sydney, London, Rio, Tokyo would have been four.

### **What's the best piece of advice you've received?**

When I asked my dad about becoming a sports therapist, he said, "Do it. Don't let fear stand in the way." And he said, "For God's sakes Jo-Ann, do not worry. Worrying is using your imagination to create what you don't want, so stop it."

### **Name a lesson you've learned from horses and applied to yourself.**

Horses are timeless beings. They live in the present. So that is what I've learned, to try to stay in the present moment. They do teach that to us when we're riding them. You can't be thinking about what I'm going to serve so-and-so for dinner tonight. They teach you to stay with them in the moment.

### **If you could take a turn on any horse alive today, which one would it be?**

[Boyd Martin's five-star mount] Tsetserleg. I love him. The runner-up would be [Lauren Nicholson's five-star horse] Vermiculus, "Bug." I've known Bug since he was 4. I love those two horses, and I'd ride both.

### **What's your best COVID purchase?**

I just bought a brand-new used car. I got a RAV-4; I always drive a RAV-4, and I got a good deal on it.

### **What's the best thing about where you live?**

The natural beauty. I live in the village of Camden. It takes me five minutes to walk to the ocean. I can walk to restaurants, pubs, the library. If I go the other way, in six minutes I can walk to a trailhead and hike the Camden Hills and oversee all of Penobscot Bay. If I want to go swimming in a beautiful, pristine, clear lake, there are about five lakes within five to 15 minutes from me. I can kayak out to different islands and have the seals follow you. Hopefully there won't be a shark following them! It's a way of life here. It's a wonderful place to live.

### **The worst?**

How far away it is from my business. It takes a long time to get to paradise.

### **What is your drink of choice?**

Water. I love good water. Not bottled water. My second drink of choice is Guinness.

### **What three things are most likely to be found in your refrigerator at all times?**

Always organic half-and-half. Organic whole milk raw yogurt. A couple bottles of Guinness.

### **Coffee or tea?**

Coffee. I go to sleep just so I can wake up in the morning and have coffee. I have to have it with organic half-and-half or better yet would be cream.

### **What was the last book you read?**

"Forged In Crisis: The Power Of Courageous Leadership In Turbulent Times," which is very apropos right now. It was written by a client and friend of mine, Nancy Koehn.

### **What's your favorite thing to do on a day off?**

Walk in the woods. I walk about three to five miles a day. Play chess. I'm a chess addict. I play chess every day. Hang out with friends. We go kayaking or hiking. My day off is basically doing things outside.

### **What changes would you like to see in eventing?**

This would never happen, but I'd love to have the long format back. I'd like to see the young horse division having the horse older than what it is, so the horse is closer to physical maturity. I'd say 6-year-olds. They're



closer to maturity, but they're still not mature. You have to remember all the training that goes in prior to competing in that division.

### What is the best feeling in the world?

On a hot summer day, diving straight down into beautiful ocean water. Not freezing Maine water though!

### What is your greatest extravagance?

I'm not an extravagant person. I live a very simple life. I live in an extravagant area of the country. There's nothing more restorative than being on the ocean with the smells and sounds and air, watching the tides, or walking in the woods or hiking a mountain or taking a boat ride to an island. That's my extravagance. I'm happy.

### Where will you be in 10 years?

Probably right here. I'm in the midst of writing a book. I want to finish that up. Then I want to continue teaching and continue working with horses. And, I talked to a woman in Belfast, and she runs a therapeutic riding program for children. I asked her if she'd be interested in running a program for elderly.

*Horses are timeless beings."*

—Jo-Ann Wilson

There are all these elderly sitting around in assisted living, and maybe we could bring them out to the barn, and they could brush horses or groom them or ride. Begin to interact with the elderly who are not thought of that much anymore.

She said, "I would love that." We're going to look into it and maybe develop something. That's what I'd like to do. In addition to what I'm doing now. And in 10 years I hope I'm a national chess champion. ♣



The advertisement features a background of a pile of horse feed. In the foreground, two bags of Cavalor feed are shown: a red bag labeled 'ACTION MIX' and a green bag labeled 'TRADITION MIX'. Both bags also feature the Cavalor logo and the text 'SPORT LEVEL 1-2-3-4-5' and 'HARMONY'. The Cavalor logo, which includes a horse head silhouette and the word 'CAVALOR', is prominently displayed in the upper right corner of the feed pile. Below the feed pile, a dark blue banner contains the text 'TWO SUPER PREMIUM FEEDS WITHOUT THE SUPER PREMIUM PRICETAG'. Below this banner, a paragraph of text describes the feed. At the bottom of the advertisement, an orange banner contains the text 'TRUSTED BY HORSE OWNERS IN 55+ COUNTRIES. FIND A DEALER NEAR YOU: WWW.CAVALOR.US'.

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