

# Jay Duke, A True Horseman

Growing up, not every child dreams of one day being just like their parents. They may find inspiration in the accomplishments of their mother and father, or strive to overcome the challenges they faced. For Jay Duke, following the path of his parents was never a question or a conscious choice. That path was one that led to a lifetime as a true horseman. For Jay, there was never any doubt that it was exactly where he belonged.

Horses are in Jay's blood and an uncanny ability to communicate with the horse seems woven into his family's DNA. Born into a lineage of horsemen and women in Calgary, Alberta, Jay is a former member of the Canadian Equestrian Team in show jumping, renowned clinician throughout North America, and senior course designer with Equestrian Canada.

"It was a natural progression and there was never any consideration that I would do anything else with my life," says Duke, 49, who started riding soon after he could walk and began competing on the A-rated show jumping circuit at eight years old. "The goal for me, and for many of my peers, was to ride on the Canadian Team and then go to the Olympics. That was the whole reason we rode. Unfortunately for me, only part of that dream worked out, but there was never any doubt in my mind that this sport was where I belonged."

Starting his show career on the hallowed ground of Spruce Meadows in Calgary, success came quickly for Jay. In 1986, he was a member of Alberta's bronze medal show jumping team at the Continental Young Riders' Championships, as it was then known. Before attending the University of Alberta in Edmonton to study business marketing, Duke capped a successful junior career in 1987 by winning the Junior Jumper Championship at the Spruce Meadows National tournament and the Junior Grand Prix at the Masters. Additionally, Jay was a four-time Canadian Junior Champion in both the hunter and jumper rings.

Jay's dreams and accomplishments were big, but he was also equipped with support from his parents, two accomplished equestrians in their own right. He drew from the influences of his mother, Cheryl Anderson, who coached several notable Canadian riders, including the likes of Mark Laskin, former Canadian Show Jumping Team member and now its Chef d'Equipe, as well as his father, Fred Duke, who established a name for himself in rodeo circles competing and teaching all disciplines from barrel racing to cutting. Recently, Fred was

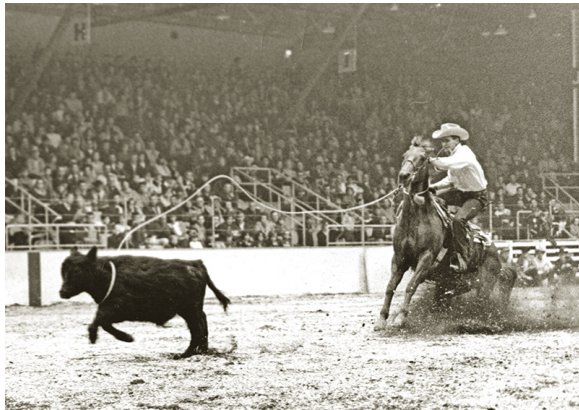


selected as a 2018 inductee into the Canadian Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame, further solidifying the family's respected reputation within the equine industry.

Jay competing at Spruce Meadows with Grappa, now known as Mindful. The horse went on to become one of the winningest High Performance Hunter and Derby horses in North America.

"Those influences shaped me as a rider," says Jay, whose daughters, Karter and Halle, have also followed in the family's footsteps with show careers. "Both my parents were integral to my riding and now to my coaching. Learning to be an all-around horseman is such a skill and it takes so many years of real life experience. Horses at the base level, no matter what discipline you're in, are the same.

"It's an exceptional skill in the horse world to have the basic knowledge about the horse as an animal and how to communicate with that animal by reading body language," continues Jay. "I always know where my horses are emotionally and physically, and I feel lucky that I had the opportunity to learn that from my parents." Being a true horseman at his roots was a pillar that Jay based his entire career around. The skills guided him to the top of show jumping sport in North America and gifted him with the ability to find the best in every horse he worked with. According to Jay, that skill is one that comes by way of versatility and confidence, both tools that he learned from his father.



Fred Duke grew up in an era with no specialities – if you were a cowboy you did all the disciplines. Fred is pictured roping in Edmonton in 1966. Photo courtesy of Jay Duke

Fred started and still sits at the helm of Duke Ranches in Edmonton, Alberta. A lifelong cowboy, Fred got his start training horses as a teenager when neighboring ranchers and farmers began sending him young horses to start. He competed at

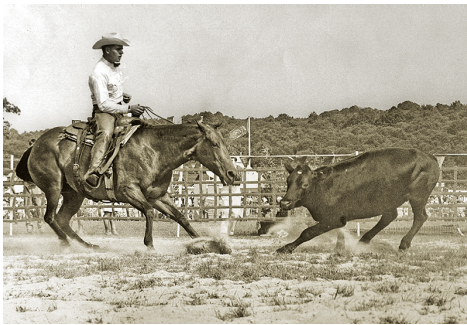
rodeos from a young age and was named Canadian Tie-Down Roper Champion in 1966, inspiring him to continue climbing his way to success in the horse world. A former president of the Canadian Cutting Horse Association, Fred was inducted into its Hall of Fame in 1991.

Fred's involvement with the Canadian Cutting Horse Association even allowed him to cross oceans with his horses. In the 1960s, he traveled to England on several occasions to showcase the sport of cutting before Queen Elizabeth II.

When asked what valuable lessons he learned from his father, Jay says, "To ride horses with your body and your leg as opposed to with your hand. In Western riding that's very key. There are pictures of my father competing in front of the Queen of England and there's no bridle on the horse, so obviously you're not using your hands too much to make that horse perform.



*On several occasions in the 1960s, Fred Duke travelled to England to demonstrate the sport of cutting before Queen Elizabeth II. He is pictured performing bridless cutting in England in 1964. Photos courtesy of Jay Duke*



*“The biggest downfall of show jumping is riders riding primarily with hand,” continues Jay. “That goes for all aspects of interacting with horses as well. Whether it’s lunging, grooming, loading on and off trailer, body position is important to creating a situation that is as safe and comfortable as possible.”*

Fred also found success training show jumping mounts for Jay, and produced several horses that he competed into the international ranks. Together, Fred and Jay proved that good horsemanship is universal and constantly crosses the boundaries set by discipline categories.

“My father grew up in an era when you did everything; there were no specialties,” says Jay. “If you were a cowboy, you did all the disciplines, and that is exactly what he did.”

Jay utilized the principles that his father taught him while developing an uncanny talent for producing young horses in the jumper ring. Throughout his career, he purchased or found horses in unusual circumstances, whether in a field or on the racetrack, and transitioned them into successful competition mounts. Such horses include Mister Brown, who Jay competed internationally for Canada, and Grappa, now known as Mindful, one of the winningest High Performance Hunter and Derby horses in North America.



Jay credits both his parents for supporting his dreams and for their positive influences, which shaped him as a horseman.

“Bringing horses along from such a young age is a process that requires a lot of patience, but is very rewarding to see them develop,” says Jay. “When you see horses have long careers at whatever level, it is a testament to your program because if you didn’t do it right in the first six months, you will end up with nothing.”

Adaptability and a supreme dedication to the horse not only helped the Duke family to be successful in the competition ring, but also in the overall care of the horses under their supervision. According to Jay, there has not been a single case of colic at Duke Ranches since 1972.



“He’s doing something right!” says Jay about his father’s track record of healthy and happy horses. “He’s very good about working through a horse’s problems and helping it be the best it can be. He has confidence in his knowledge and his ability, and horses recognize that confidence. From cutting horses to show jumpers and even heavy horses, he can get a horse to do pretty much anything you want it to do.”

Jay has channeled his father’s drive into the work he now focuses on. In 2014, he hung up his show coat for good and retired from competition to shift his focus toward other endeavours. It was then that he began sharing his, and his father’s, knowledge of training, riding, and competing across all levels at clinics throughout North America. “Anybody that has a positive attitude and wants to learn can be successful, and that is what I find most enjoyable about clinics,” says Jay, who regularly travels to conduct clinics in the United States and Canada from his home base in Whistler, BC. “Often the lessons are not so different from the lower level to the higher level; it’s the expectations and technicalities that vary. When I teach a clinic, I ask every rider two questions: ‘What’s your biggest struggle?’ and ‘What’s your biggest strength?’ From there, I try to get the most from that horse and rider and produce a positive result where both did something they didn’t think they were capable of doing.”

Earlier this year, Jay’s familial legacy within the horse sport industry grew even more storied when Fred received the unexpected phone call from the Board of Directors at the Canadian Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame notifying him of his selection as a 2018 inductee. In another feather in the cap of a decorated career, Fred’s name will be added to the list of historic riders in a ceremony taking place on Saturday, October 20, in Calgary.

In recognition of his achievements and reputation within the equine industry, Fred Duke was inducted into the Canadian Cutting Horse Hall of Fame in 1991, and on October 20, 2018, he will be inducted into the Canadian Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame. Photo courtesy of Jay Duke



“He was shocked – it was not a call he was expecting!” says Jay of his father’s reaction. “This selection is the ultimate honor, and as far as achievements go there is nothing better than that. I have a great amount of pride and happiness for him because it’s really a special thing to have that level of recognition from your peers.”

Fred is a man who lives his life by two mottos. One is: “The best thing for the inside of a man is the outside of a horse,” and the other is, “An hour in the saddle is an hour well spent.” His philosophy regarding horses and life has been passed down to Jay and will live on in the horses and riders they continue to mold. While some say Fred is a legend, if you ask him, he responds, “I’m a simple cowboy with passion and a dream.” This article was originally published in the Autumn 2018 issue of Canadian Horse Journal.

Main Photo: Jay Duke with Grappa after winning the Five-Year-Old Division of the Western Canadian Young Horse Championships at the Rocky Mountain Classic II in Calgary, Alberta. Photo: John Anderson, courtesy of Starting Gate Communications

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