

## JULIE GERONA

A challenge wagered by an “old, old cowboy” got Julie Gerona started in barrel racing back when she was a young girl. This 42-year-old barrel racer and trainer is an admitted “adrenaline junkie.” She and her husband, a competitive drag racer in his spare time, along with their nine-year-old son, Garrette (who “rides a bit, but prefers cars,”) live on the property Gerona has lived on since she was a year old.

Gerona’s parents didn’t really ride, but her dad got involved in timing events through Ralph Goldman, a mid-westerner that timed “everything of significance in the early 80s and 90s: cutting and jumping at Congress, all the barrel futurities, Josey’s Junior World.” Her father learned the system, helping Goldman in his later years and finally taking over the timing responsibilities. Gerona sometimes accompanied her dad out west to the events.

“When I was little, an old cowboy lived on our property and shod horses. He also raised and trained horses. I learned a lot from him... he was just an old, old cowboy with a lot of horse sense. Mostly he calf roped and did Western pleasure on his horses,” says Gerona. “That was the beginning for me.” So why did she start barrel racing? “I guess I just always wanted to barrel race...I just got tired of the slow pace [of Western pleasure].” She bought one of the cowboy’s fillies, Queenie, sired by his stallion Tiger’s Music, whom he had acquired when the stallion was injured on the race track. In those days, Gerona got to ride a lot of young horses sired by this stallion.

Until Gerona started riding barrels with Queenie, the stigma was “crazy barrel horses,” but as she and Queenie got better and better, the old cowboy took notice. Soon it snowballed for her, as well as for the old cowboy in terms of his breeding program. Tiger’s Music turned out to be a fine barrel racer, as were many of his off spring.

“My most memorable win was in my early 20s. I competed in the TBRA futurity, riding one of Tiger Music’s horses. This was before [the cowboy’s] horses got popular. At that competition he made a deal with me. If I ran the fastest time in that barrel race, he would give me the pick of any of his horses. But the old cowboy had a ‘but that’s never gonna happen’ attitude.” Gerona continues, her voice belying the pride and satisfaction she still feels to this day, “Well we did win. Out of 500-600 runs that weekend, my little horse ran the fastest time! It was this win that really steered my goals. My father said at that time, ‘You can choose between riding and training futurity horses or keep this one horse and we can make a bid at the NFR

[National Finals Rodeo]. I will haul you around, do whatever it takes.” Gerona chose futurity horses. “My horse ended up as a backup horse at the NFR years later, but I never made it because of the choice I had made. But I loved it [futurity] and never looked back.”

It is the speed and the adrenaline of competition, even after 25-30 years of riding, that motivate her. However, as much as she loves competing, rather than hauling to races and rodeos (though she still does it with one of her horses), Gerona prefers training young horses, taking them to a certain level, selling them, and then starting on another, something she

got from her background riding young horses as a kid. “It is so rewarding to have something you want that horse to do—and he has no idea what you are talking about—communicate it and be able to train it and have him respond. You watch them grow and learn each day,” explains Gerona.

Is her vision for each horse the same? “I start all of them out a certain way. Then when they get to a level where they understand the pattern and understand my body weight, shift and pressure,

they start to develop their own style. I don’t try to force them into my style. Most of my horses run in my style, but I have had plenty that prefer to go in and turn a different way. They know my way but we evolved into what made them more comfortable and successful.” Gerona continues, “If a horse has a weakness, I work on that, but some just aren’t going to make it. They don’t like it; they just don’t want to do it. So I let them go on to a different profession.”

What makes one horse love it and one not? “I think a lot has to do with personality. Some are more confident and aggressive; they like the adrenaline rush. Some just like to get out there and lope and trot. They don’t have that aggressiveness or grit or confidence to perform at that athletic level.” Personality, she feels, is the deciding factor.

So what about those that are suited to barrel racing but just don’t make it? “The human element is the problem,” she is quick to say. Poor training pushed too fast is the biggest downfall. People bypass the basics, the groundwork these horses need. They go too fast, failing to lay the foundation. “If you go too fast and run into a problem, there is nothing to fall back on or start from. People get to a certain point, the horse is doing well so they get excited and want to go faster. If they would just wait another six months and let the horse

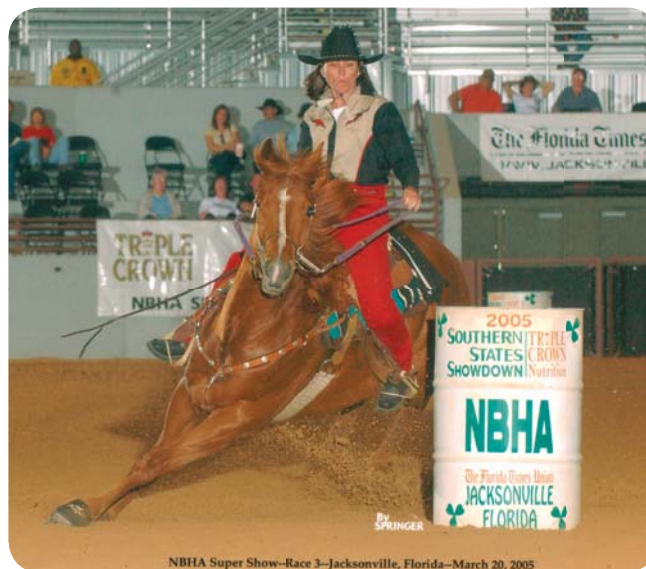


photo by: Kenneth Springer

build up confidence. You need to be patient with them if you are going to be successful."

What are some of the problems in competition? "Biggest problem is shouldering the barrel. Also, the approach into the first barrel—the 'money barrel'—hurts a lot of people. Riders are worried about that barrel, so going down the alleyway on the approach to it, they often hold back their horses and wait a bit too long. The horse is all keyed up, wanting to go, wanting to go, and then at the end of the alleyway they let him go. Now the horse and rider suffer from an adrenaline rush and take off, taking the barrel too quickly. If the rider would let the horse get into a gallop at the back of the chute, then take those two or three strides of adrenaline and then level out or even out the pace going to the first barrel, I think minds settle down better that way. It gets the first bursts of energy out down the alleyway so they can be more controlled in the approach to the first barrel."

"Another problem is that they come around the third barrel and blow out pretty wide. Some horses have too much energy...based on bloodlines... some are a bit hotter than others and fall apart a bit. It could also be that the rider gets past the first and second barrels and gets excited that they have gotten that far and lose concentration a bit, so they give the wrong cue when approaching the barrel. Or it could be a pain issue. The horse gets around the first two barrels, then something goes on with the saddle or bit or hocks, so by the time they get to the third turn, they just can't pull it together to finish the turn."

Can a barrel horse be pain free? "Yes, if the tack fits properly; if you are aware of your hands and legs; and if the horse is conditioned properly, horses can be pain free and enjoy racing."

What does proper conditioning involve? "Exercise like an athlete, like a human running a marathon. You need to condition the horse's legs and ligaments to stop and start fast many times. I do a lot of trail riding during which I do a lot of long trotting to extend the stride out and build up their wind, about one mile at medium gallop. I run circles in both directions; you want to build up those muscles. I do big circles and spiral down into smaller and smaller ones then move out again into larger circles."

What's it like in the arena? "You hear your name and your heart starts pounding. Many people once they make the run they don't remember anything when they come out. It's exciting." Are there any fears when you are out there barreling? "Sometimes the ground conditions can be scary. Or if the horse in front of you trips, that is on your mind when it's your turn to go. But it is the most fun you can have especially when you have a good partner. If your horse has a problem, you both lose your confidence. When everything is working right, it's a big adrenaline rush."

Gerona, who is thinking about going back to giving lessons again, explains that barrel racing has grown quite a bit over the last 10 years. She would advise anyone interested in starting to run barrels to find someone to train with and to buy a good video series. For beginners, Gerona recommends Martha

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Josey's video series and books. She also recommends attending a clinic or two. "Ed and Martha Wright, who come to Punta Gorda, Fla. to give clinics, came up through the futurities and are a wealth of knowledge for people that might be having problems," she adds.

"If you buy a horse," Gerona says, "find someone you can trust to guide you. If you are just learning, buy a seasoned horse that can teach you what he or she knows...Barrel horses didn't used to have their own bloodlines, but now we have bloodlines that are barrel horses. My favorite is Flit to Kill. He is the epitome of barrel horse bloodline. I like On the Money Red, too. He was a race horse from Florida, and is now a barrel horse sire."

Gerona suggests that riders interested in learning the sport go to [www.barrelhorseworld.com](http://www.barrelhorseworld.com). "They have a bulletin board community. You can go on with problems and questions...there is lots of knowledge on there. You will find beginners to NFR people that come on to chit chat and are happy to give advice. Some top names come on with question-and-answer series."

So why, with a full time job overseeing the Web department of an advertising agency and family responsibilities, does she continue? "I do it totally for the enjoyment," she muses. "And if I weren't riding barrels, I'd be sitting behind the wheel of my husband's Ford Mustang."

Julie Gerona lives in Callahan, Fla. at her Kris Kreek Ranch. Visit her online at [www.kriskreekranch.com](http://www.kriskreekranch.com)



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