

A field of dreams

From Brush League to Herron Park, the humble beginnings of eventing in the Flathead Valley [Copyright \(c\) 2019 Daily Inter Lake, Edition 7/26/2019](#)

By KATIE BROWN

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It all started with an idea.

That idea led to the Herron Park Horse Trials in the 1980s and lives on through The Event at Rebecca Farm, now in its 19th year. The year was 1979. Pat Young had just returned to the Flathead Valley from her first threeday event in Jackson, Wyoming. She was hooked.

“It was just so wonderful,” Young said. “I got our little group excited about maybe doing an event course.” Around the same time, Young and a group of friends who were involved in the local hunter/jumper scene wanted to do more. That involved jumping outside instead of just in an arena.

That led to the creation of the Brush League, a group of about a dozen riders who would set up jumps and practice anywhere they had secured permission to ride, including some members property. One year earlier, landowner Iven Herron donated farm and timber property to Flathead County. Part of the land was purchased, totaling 120 acres.

The group of riders, known officially as the Flathead Combined Training Association (known today as the Herron Park Equestrians) approached Flathead County Parks with a very specific request. They wanted to make improvements to the park in order to build an equestrian facility that would be suitable for eventing. Eventing is essentially a triathlon on horseback, with origins in the fitness testing of French Calvary horses in the early 1900s. Riders compete in three phases: dressage, which is a series of movements called a test, cross-country (jumps and water obstacles) and show jumping.

Flathead County Parks granted permission to FCTA to fix up the park and a new era began. The Brush League was moving up in the world. “The thing that was really neat, it was always a really cohesive group,” Young said. “Sometimes when you get groups like that, you have power plays or whatever. We didn’t have any of that. Eventers pretty much say what they think, which makes things really easy.” Herron Park then looked nothing like it does today. The meadow was overrun with range cattle. It was lumpy and littered with wire and remnants of old fences. It took hundreds of hours of hard labor to clean out the hazards and level out the land. “That park was a mess,” Young said.

The park may not look like it does today without the efforts of the FCTA, “renegades” as Young said, and she herself one of them. “It was a lot of work,” Young said. “We put 10 huge garbage vehicles with wagons on them to go to the dump.”

After hosting several practice events, the FCTA again approached the Parks department, this time regarding the construction of a novice and training level cross-country course. The answer was yes. The late Pete Costello, one of the top course designers in the country at that time, was tapped to design the course at Herron Park. Costello, known as the “grandfather” of courses in the Northwest, was from Oregon and was invested in seeing the sport of eventing grow in the region.

Every aspect of this venture was expensive, but Young and her colleagues found creative ways to offset the costs. Jumps on the new cross-country course at Herron Park were available to be sponsored and for a couple hundred dollars, a company could get its sign on an obstacle. There was one sponsored by La Salle Veterinary clinic and even a jump shaped like a bed for the Outlaw Inn, for example. None of the improvements to the park were paid for through public funds. The group relied on in-kind donations, grants and the sweat equity of anyone who was willing to help.

The FCTA began holding events in the early 1980s and hosted its first recognized event in 1989 with 30 competitors that year. Back then the governing body was known as the United States Combined Training Association (USCTA) but has since been rebranded as the United States Eventing Association, or USEA.

They didn’t know it then, but when the Herron Park Horse Trials were recognized by the USEA, it would change the face of eventing in Montana and the west. “It was an exhausting thing for us because we rode in the event, we organized the event, we worked — we were out there on mowers and filling gopher holes and all kinds of things but it was really a lot of fun,” said Young. PJ Rismon, who was part of those early days, recalls those memories fondly. There was a kind of magic surrounding those times, she said.

There was a singular goal pushing the group forward but the core element was friendship. Most of the women had ridden together and remained close friends even though they were also competitors. “The glue in the beginning was Pat’s vision and our fondness for each other,” Rismon said. That was the glue.”

Rebecca Broussard joined the group of self-described renegades sometime in 1988, with daughter Sarah, who had recently fallen in love with the sport of eventing. Until the Broussards came along, the FCTA had operated in a sort of ad-hoc manner, with everyone learning as they went, something not that unusual to any kind of new venture. But Rebecca, known affectionately as “Becky” to her friends, was a natural organizer with a commanding presence. So it made sense to tap her as the FCTA’s coordinator. “They asked her to be the secretary and that was kind of the first line in the history book right there when she said yes,” Sarah said.

Rebecca had a vision for how things should go and was able to put that in to action. In the Northwest, eventers sometimes had to travel up to 24 hours just to compete at a recognized event. She wanted the Flathead Valley to have access to world-class competition. "My mother really wanted to see a world stage program in the west for those western competitors to basically showcase their talent," Sarah said. "She felt that it was a hole in the sport that needed to be filled." In the meantime, entries for the Herron Park Horse Trials were exploding. The event was rapidly outgrowing its venue. Parking was a nightmare and stabling hundreds of horses was becoming nearly impossible.

Herron Park was bursting at the seams and it was becoming a burden to work with the Parks department. Something else had to be done and Rebecca was the one who did it. The Broussard family purchased the property for what is now Rebecca Farm in 2001. "We joked the entire first year when we were building the farm," Sarah recalls. "Field of dreams, if you build it, they will come and that was our mantra." And come they did. The inaugural Event at Rebecca Farm was held in 2002 with 180 competitors. The next year, entries spiked to 380 riders and has grown every year. The Event has become a destination for everyone from novice level riders to world-class competitors and Olympic hopefuls. This year there are over 600 riders at the event.

It's become everything Rebecca Broussard dreamed it could be. "It was interesting because I don't think anybody thought this event would become what it is, except for Becky," Young said. "Becky knew it would." Rebecca passed away from cancer in 2010, but her fingerprints are still everywhere at Rebecca Farm, her namesake event and Herron Park. "Becky was a wonderful woman," Young said. "She was shy, which you wouldn't realize. She was very soft-spoken, she had really good ideas, she listened well and she loved eventing. And she just loved the gang of people that did it." Herron Park is now 440 acres and boasts hiking and mountain biking trails and a public equestrian training facility, all enjoyed by the Flathead Valley community. What began with a group of equestrians 40 years ago who wanted to share their love of the sport has become so much more. "There was no desire for pats on the back," said Rismon. "We were doing it for fun and it was. It was great fun."
