

# Zoie Brogdon: From Compton Jr. Posse To Endless Possibilities

The 16-year-old takes every opportunity to excel and inspire.

By **Tori Repole**

**O**n Jan. 26, 2020, Zoie Brogdon had just finished a riding lesson when her father called to break the news of Kobe Bryant's death. Though not a die-hard basketball fan, Brogdon grew up in Los Angeles, where Bryant was a household name and inspiration.

"Even if you're not from Los Angeles, everybody knows what a great basketball player Kobe was, and if you're an athlete, you want that mamba mentality," said Brogdon, 16.

"Mamba mentality is a mindset for self-improvement, and as a perfectionist, I'm always practicing that mamba mentality of trying to get better all the time," she added. "Even if I do get frustrated or I can't seem to perfect something, I have to remember that this is just a process, and the more I practice, the better I can become. From failure comes growth and comes progress."

Brogdon takes a page out of Bryant's book as she pursues her 10th-grade studies and passion for show jumping. She earned one of five West Palms Events opportunity grants in 2019, which gave her more time in the show ring atop her horse Emilon.

Like her fellow 2019 grant recipients, Brogdon's foundation in riding is thanks to the Compton Jr. Posse Youth Equestrian Program, the now-disbanded



Zoie Brogdon has gained confidence and show ring success thanks to her strong partnership with Emilon. *SARA SHIER PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO*

organization in Compton, California, that supplied inner-city kids a sanctuary amongst horses. For an only child like Brogdon, the family-oriented atmosphere quickly became her second home, and it's where she developed a long-term vision for her involvement in the sport.

Brogdon's mother Tracy Burnett grew up as a dancer and wanted her daughter to benefit from the same intangible lifelong skills her passion gave her.

"My husband Marc Brogdon and I—he had baseball as a sport—both knew what it was to have that passion in a sport, and we wanted Zoie to have that in her life," Burnett said. "When we found out that horses were her thing, we just did our best and sacrificed in whichever way we could to have her life involve horses."

## A HOME IN COMPTON

In 2012, Burnett was on her lunch break in Burbank, California, when she spotted a sign for a horseback riding camp at Silver Spur Stables. While she didn't know the first thing about horses, Burnett needed to find a program that would occupy Zoie, then 8, for the remaining two weeks of summer break.

"The next day, I dropped Zoie off before I went to work," said Burnett. "When I went to pick her up that afternoon, the woman said, 'You're in trouble,' and I'm like, 'Oh my goodness. What happened?' She said, 'This is her sport. This is truly her sport.'"

After two summers, the camp director suggested that Zoie enroll in a non-recreational riding program. Burnett's research led her to Mayisha Akbar's Compton Jr. Posse, where Zoie began taking lessons in 2014.

"There was a funny thing that Zoie did on [the] first day we took her to Compton Jr. Posse," Burnett said. "As we're walking to the backyard, she goes, 'Ah, the fresh smell of horse poop,' and I'm thinking, 'OK, she has definitely found her zen.'"

Zoie quickly progressed from group lessons to private sessions with Victoria Faerber, then assistant trainer at the Compton Jr. Posse. She advanced her skills and rode challenging horses like the Quarter Horse gelding Sunny.

"I always noticed she had a special talent for [riding], and she was also super brave and athletic, so she could ride the horses that were more difficult," said Faerber. "[Sunny]—a lot of the guys there loved to ride him because he was thrilling to ride, but he was hard in the beginner program. He was really difficult, and that was, of course, [Zoie's] favorite horse."

Riding in Compton also introduced Zoie to a more diverse equestrian industry.

"There were Black cowboys in Compton riding horses down the street with cars," said Zoie. "Some of these cowboys were from CJP, and they called themselves the Compton Cowboys, and we were in awe of them."

"Riding with CJP and being around the Compton Cowboys was a fantastic experience," she added. "It's where I found my home and my family. At Compton Jr. Posse, not only did I learn how to ride horses, but I learned about horsemanship, grooming, tacking, horse anatomy—kind of everything. It's where I got a really strong foundation in riding."

At the Compton Jr. Posse, Zoie met volunteer trainer Will Simpson, a team Olympic gold medalist. Having grown up on the south side of Chicago and dabbled in industry jobs

## MELANIN

**A**n artist at heart, Zoie Brogdon didn't consider herself a writer when she explored racial injustice in "Melanin," a poem she wrote for an English assignment in early 2020.

*"The poem was inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement that's been ongoing throughout the country," said Brogdon. "I've wanted to protest and advocate for Black lives, but because of my age and safety due to COVID, my options were a little bit limited as to what I can do and how I can help. As I became a little bit more educated on the various issues, like police brutality and systemic racism, diversity and inclusion, I wanted to do more. So, this poem was born out of my anger and desire for wanting to be more involved."*

Is it scary?

To me, the dark is beauty and acceptance.

To the world

Simply put, it's terrifying.

Why am I a threat?

Is it because my skin, my grace, my culture

Holds more power

Than the whip you crack over our backs as you tell us  
to build you the world.

Why are you kneeling on our necks?

Is it because you are afraid that if we breathe our toxic  
words

Will infect your soul and show you the truth?

I can't breathe.

My throat is closing, my body is limp, and I cry out for  
help.

But you don't care.

All because my skin is the same color as the thing you  
were afraid of as a child.

The dark.

from riding to grooming and truck driving, Simpson credits his success to the help he received along the way. He pays it forward by sharing his knowledge with rising talents like Zoie.

"[Zoie's] extremely dedicated, extremely talented, and she's got all the ingredients it takes to be a top performer in any discipline," said Simpson, who met Zoie seven years ago. "Sometimes she's a little hard on herself; that's probably going to be OK in the end anyway. She's very talented and extremely focused. As an instructor, those are the kind of things that you want to see in a student."



*Instead of looking for that representation, how about I become that representation, and I become what I want to see?"*

—Zoie Brogdon

When the Compton Jr. Posse dissolved following Akbar's retirement in 2017, Faerber started the nonprofit program Riders United, and Zoie tagged along.

"When I was growing up as a kid in Missouri," said Faerber, "a lot of times, we would have to show horses that were not the perfect show horse because we didn't have the money to buy the fabulous warmbloods imported from Europe. So, we rode off-the-track Thoroughbreds, and we had to learn to do that if we wanted to show.

"In California, that's tough," she added. "There's not a lot of that on the A circuit. I would find [Zoie] horses to lease—because that's what she could afford—that had been on the A circuit and were talented, but they had a lot of holes in them. Mostly they were difficult to ride, but Zoie could always pull it together."

### THEN CAME EMILON

While Burnett believes riding made Zoie more focused and organized, she credits the 11-year-old Holsteiner gelding Emilon, or "Ninja," with building Zoie's confidence.

A European import, Emilon competed in the jumper ring with Zazou Hoffman in 2016. When he sustained an injury, he entered the Compton Jr. Posse lesson program, catching Burnett's eye well before Zoie got the go-ahead to ride him.

"I don't know anything about riding; I just thought he looked pretty," Burnett said. "So, one day I said to Victoria, 'Hey, would you mind if Zoie rode that horse?' and she was like, 'No, I don't really think so. He's not ready to be ridden yet.' Over a couple of months, I just kept saying, 'Is he ready to be ridden yet?' and one day, she did let Zoie ride Ninja.



Zoie Brogdon was 2 when she sat on a horse for the first time at Griffith Park in Los Angeles. PHOTO COURTESY OF TRACY BURNETT



Again, not having any horse experience, I thought Ninja looked beautiful trotting. To me, he looked like a dressage horse and had that elegance about him."

While Zoie initially found Emilon's bouncy trot and tendency to charge at jumps off-putting, their partnership began to click over time.

"I got used to him, and he got used to me, so we developed a really cool bond," said Zoie. "I started to improve on my position, and I got stronger because he was so much more of a challenge. Although I can get nervous sometimes when I show, Ninja's kind of the one who saves me a lot of the time. He's definitely just as competitive as me. We've really been a winning team, and he's helped me so much with everything."

When Faerber decided to sell Ninja, Zoie's parents committed to buying him after watching Zoie compete him at a show that was meant to be their last.

"They were doing .65 and .75 jumper classes, and Zoie and Ninja won first place in every single class," said Burnett. "So, at that point, as they say, the rest is history. He basically came to us; he became our family. My husband was there to see the class and went on looking at [Ninja] like, 'Oh my God. What are we going to do? There's no way we cannot buy this horse for Zoie after his performance.'"



"I'm always practicing that mamba mentality of trying to get better all the time," says rising show jumping star Zoie Brogdon. SARA SHIER PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

## A LASTING IMPRESSION

In 2015, Zoie watched her first grand prix at the Longines Masters of Los Angeles.

"It was such an amazing experience because I'd never seen someone jump this high and look so fancy while doing it," said Zoie. "At the end of the Masters, we were able to get autographs from a lot of different riders, and I believe I still have the poster. I thought it was such a cool experience that I was able to meet with these people and realize that they're human like me."

As Zoie became more immersed in the top-level sport, she made the Olympics her goal, hoping to become the minority representation the industry is lacking.

"Now that I don't really see as many people of color within the sport, it kind of puts a damper on my motivations," said Zoie. "Like, 'Well, I don't see a lot of other people who look like me doing this. Do I really have what it takes to do it?' That's kind of something I struggle with, that motivation. But I feel as though instead of looking for that representation, how about I become that representation, and I become what I want to see?"

The West Palms Events opportunity grant gave Zoie the chance to see Lauren Kardel, a Black equestrian who owns Kardel Global Equine.

"She really opened up a whole new lens within the horse world that I never knew existed," said Zoie. "I always thought that if I was going to stay in this sport, I had to be a show jumper for as long as the path takes me. I feel as though there's so much more to it. There's more that I can do than just continue to show jump." 🐾



*Benefits you  
can see,  
ingredients  
you can trust.*

