

When it comes to show jumping, legendary leading man Tab Hunter is the real deal—and yes, he performed his own equestrian stunts on the big screen.

Interview by Michael Giltz
Story produced by Diedre Johnson

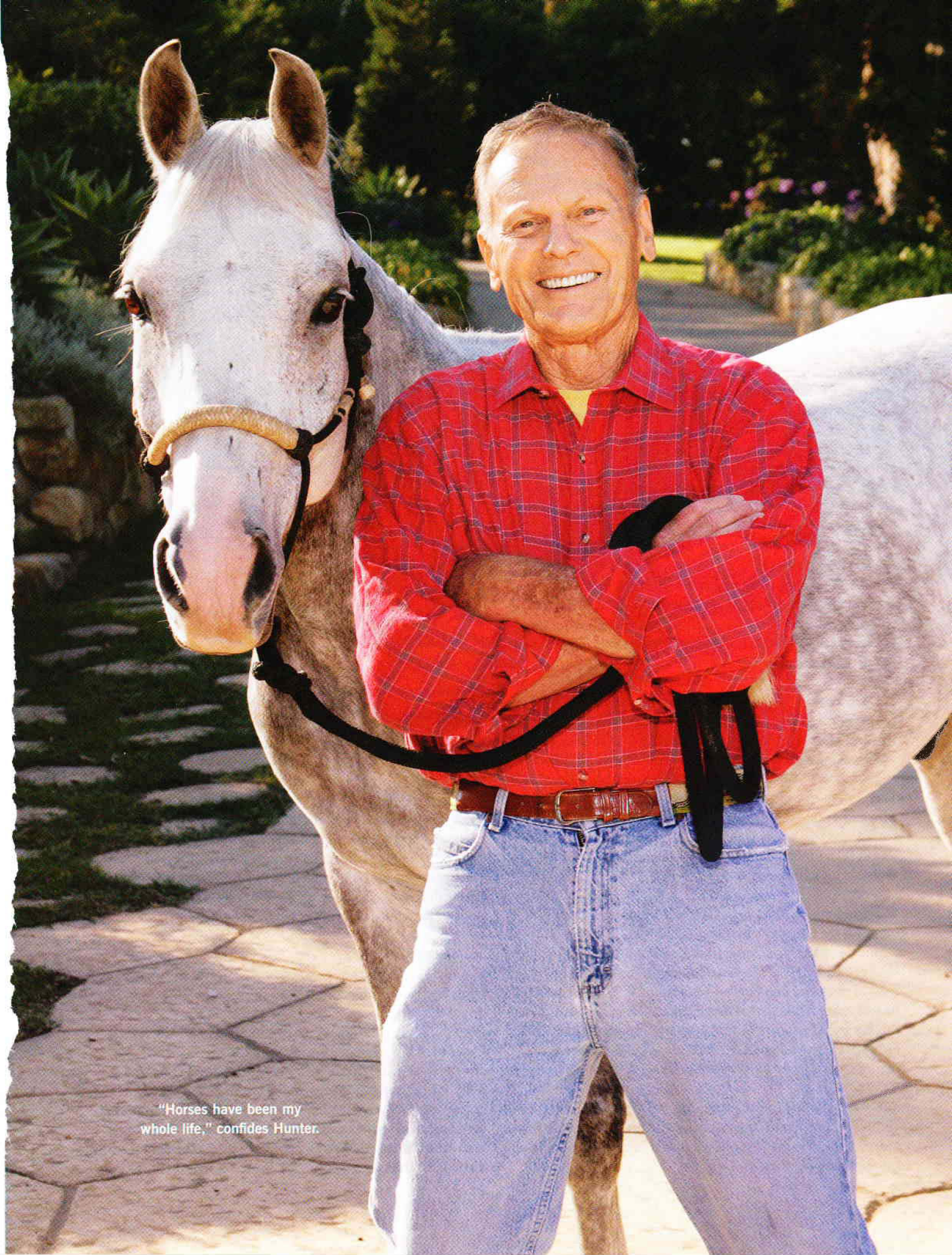
Photographs by Harry Langdon
for *Show Circuit*

Hollywood Horseman

BORN ARTHUR GELIEN IN NEW York, Tab Hunter has been a teen idol, pop star, an acclaimed actor, and now—with the publication of *Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star*—he can probably add best-selling author to his resume. In his book, Hunter talks about his storied career, including the film version of *Damn Yankees*, being a gay actor in private, and his renown as “The Sigh Guy” who was swooned over by girls in public. What this 74-year-old icon wants to talk about most, however, is the true love of his life: horses. He recently did just that with *Show Circuit*’s Michael Giltz.



Hunter aboard Sign Painter, 1970



"Horses have been my whole life," confides Hunter.

Show Circuit: You have said that you prefer horses to people.

Hunter: Horses have been my whole life. They've been my touch of reality in an unrealistic world.

SC: Horses also tie into your Hollywood mythology. Is it true you were discovered in a stable?

Hunter: I was shoveling you-know-what. I was a stable boy at the Dubrock's Riding Academy in California when I was about 12 [when he met Dick Clayton, James Dean's agent]. It was across the street from the Horse Palace, where I went to my first horse shows and I fell in love with hunters and jumpers. I'd hitch out there on the weekends as a kid with my girlfriend Mary Lou. I worked as a stable boy just so I could get extra money to ride.

SC: How did you fall in love with horses in the first place?

Hunter: My brother got me started. I had a brother who was eleven months older, and he opened that world to me. I was kind of frightened of everything. I was just an idiot kid, and he really exposed me to the love of my life—horses.

SC: Did he just ride for fun?

Hunter: Oh yeah, he was into all sports. My mother was always encouraging us to do things like that. She said, "You've got to expose yourself to so many different things throughout our lives. Just don't live in a shell." And of course it was difficult because I was living in a shell.

SC: Why do you think you were good with the horses? What was your talent?

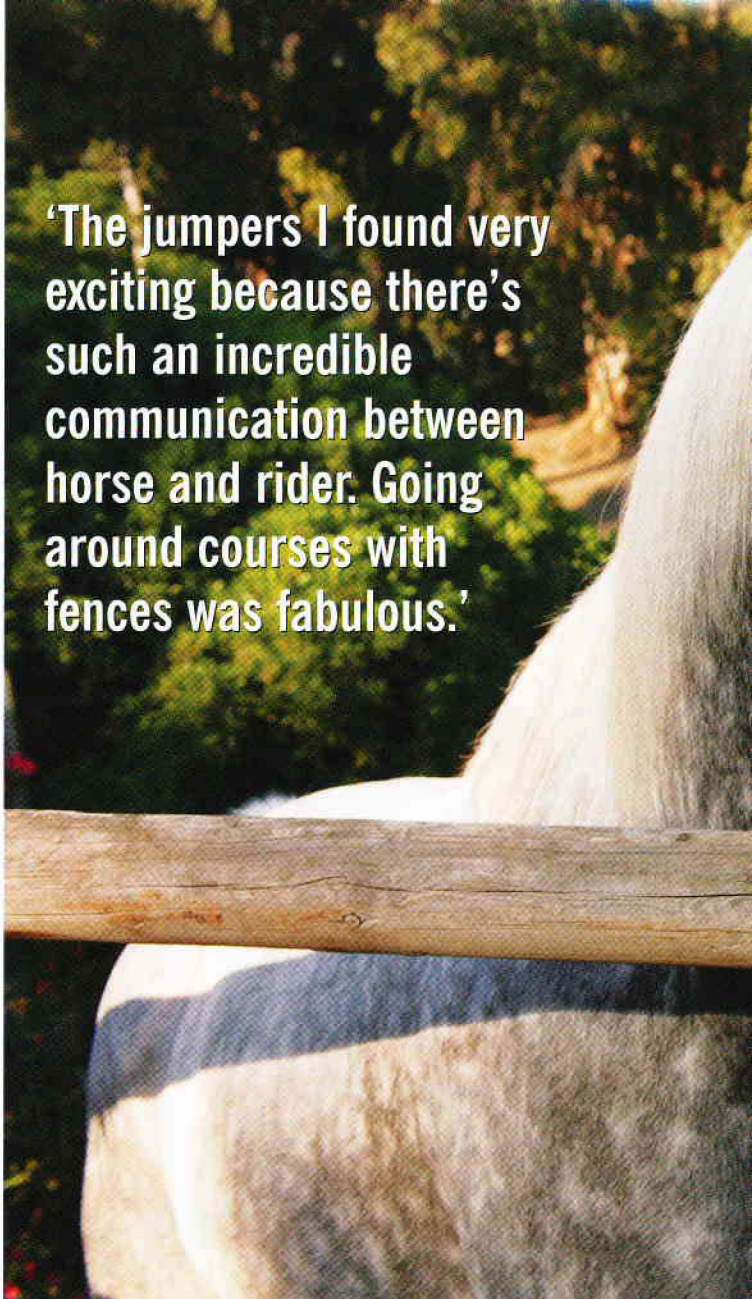
Hunter: The communication was terrific. And then when I was sneaking across the street to the Horse Palace, the hunters and jumpers became my favorite. Of course, I loved them all. Then I went to work for a man by the name of Rudy Smithers who had a one-eyed paint horse called Rex. I used to ditch school, and that's how I got to see all the people like Barbara Worth [Oakford], Clyde Kennedy—all the big guns of the show circuit in those days.

SC: How long have you known George Morris, the new chef d'equipe for the U.S. Show Jumping Team?

Hunter: I've known George since he was a junior rider. In fact, George and I used to ride together whenever I would be back East. I remember one time we were riding in Long Island and he was riding a little bay horse. He said, "Tab, they want to put this horse on the team, but I don't know." I said, "I don't know, Georgie. He's awful good. He's terrific." And it was the horse that Billy Steinkraus won the gold on called Sinjon.

SC: Do you know Frank Chapot?

Hunter: I know Frank, but not real well. But of course his wife Mary Mairs—I knew Mary in California because we used to all show horses [together].



'The jumpers I found very exciting because there's such an incredible communication between horse and rider. Going around courses with fences was fabulous.'

SC: What did you love about hunters and jumpers?

Hunter: The jumpers I found very exciting because there's such an incredible communication between horse and rider. Going around courses with fences was fabulous. Of course, it's totally different today with all the FEI rules. Then it was just touches and out, and knockdowns and faults.

SC: The showmanship?

Hunter: Not so much the showmanship; it was the marriage of horse and rider. Some horses were spectacular.

SC: I think the first film where you rode was probably 1953's *Gun Belt*, which was about your third film.

Hunter: Yeah, I did ride in that. And that's when I met Jack Connors, one of the top stuntmen in the business who also used to go on the horse show circuit. His wife Kay and I have become very, very close. I had horses with Jack and Kay for years. He was the first one to tell me, "Look kid, they've got a double out here to do a lot of that stuff you want [to do]. Let the double do the job and



you can go in for the close-ups, and then you're not cheating that guy of a paycheck!" I'd never even thought about that.

SC: You were always gung-ho to do your own stunts?

Hunter: Oh yeah! It was like playing cowboys and Indians. The next film I rode in was *The Burning Hills* with Natalie Wood. I had a chestnut mare I'd bought. She'd been green jumper champion at Del Mar. The mare was interesting. Her name was Swizzlestick. She was a bit of a bitch. She had a cyst on her ovaries that didn't make her very pleasant.

SC: That would make anyone cranky.

Hunter: [laughs] Finally, when *The Burning Hills* came along, I told Jack Warner I wanted to use her. I was told the studio didn't use mares. But I used her and she was fantastic. In fact, she was so good, I used her next in a film called *Gunman's Walk*, which is really a good film that's totally slipped through the cracks. And then I used her again in *They Came To Cordura* with [Gary] Cooper and Rita Hayworth. Swizz turned

out to be a damn good movie horse.

SC: Why didn't studios use mares?

Hunter: I guess they could get a little mare-ish. They mostly used geldings.

SC: There's no end to the people in Hollywood who are serious about horses. William Shatner, Betty Buckley, and so many others.

Hunter: We used Bill [Shatner] in our TV special *Hollywood on Horses*. Probably the most knowledgeable about horses was [director] John Huston, who had been Master of the Hounds for the Galway Blazers. So we spoke about horses a lot. And Fred Astaire had race horses.

SC: Was being a serious horseman helpful in keeping rumors at bay in Hollywood about being gay?

Hunter: I hated the press because they were always so unkind. Geraldine Page grabbed my arm once and said, "If people

don't like you, that's their bad taste." I said, "Gerry, I will never forget that." And I think that's something that everyone can apply to their lives. I believe that very strongly.

SC: Did you ever help a fellow actor learn how to ride?

Hunter: I helped Natalie a little bit before *The Burning Hills*. She had a little fear of horses; she wasn't crazy about them. I took her to Clyde Kennedy's, and we rode a few times.

SC: You just found her the right gentle horse to get her started on.

Hunter: Exactly. It's all about the ABCs and getting a person comfortable. You're so right about that.

SC: We've got some shots of you jumping in a show without a helmet. Were helmets optional when you started competing?

Hunter: No, they weren't...no, they weren't. Helmets are *very* important. Of course, in those days we did a lot of things differently [laughing]. We also didn't have perfect distances going down to our fences. It wasn't five strides down to so-and-so and six across to here. It was more by-the-seat-of-your-pants.

SC: How was the horse Coach that you showed?

Hunter: Coach was a good horse; he was a tough horse...very difficult; he was either on or he was off. He didn't belong to me. I showed him for some people that owned him. He had done a lot in Canada and done quite well. When he was on, he was very good. But he was very inconsistent.

SC: In your memoir, you talk about some of the people in Hollywood you were very close to, like Anthony Perkins. What horses were you particularly fond of?

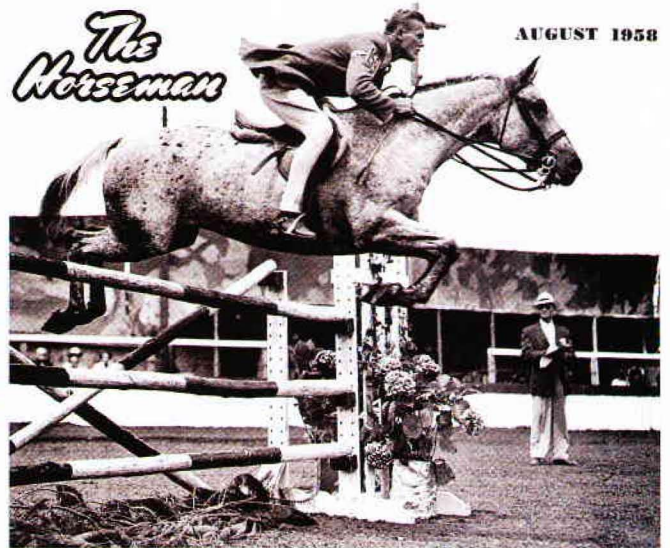
Hunter: There were a number of horses. I had a horse called Collector's Item that I showed in California that I bought out of Chicago, where my friend Katie Lindsay is a steward. She called me on this horse. I flew there in the middle of the night, jumped him, was very impressed, and bought him on the spot. He won the first class he was in, and everyone wanted to buy him. I sold him to my friend Joan on the condition that I have first right of refusal. That was a very, very good horse. As far as hunters, I had a horse called Sign Painter that was nice—very attractive.

SC: I'm sure you remember the first horse you were able to buy from your earnings as an actor.

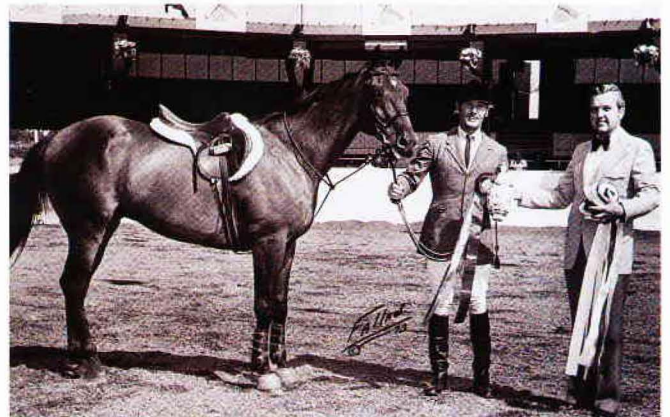
Hunter: I do. I was down at Del Mar with our group from the barn, and I was grooming and riding but not showing. Clyde found this one bay horse. Earlier, my friend Maggie got drunk at a beach party and wound up in jail. I saw her and said, "Maggie, what are you doing here?" She said, "I'm out on bail." And I said, "I'm going to call my next horse 'Out On Bail,'" and I did!

SC: Of the actors you worked with or knew, who was the best rider?

Hunter: Without a doubt, Linda Blair.



Jumping on Indian Giver at the Monterey County Fair



Winning with Collector's Item, Santa Barbara, 1973



Collector's Item's first show in California



Hunting in Middleburg, Virginia, in the 1970s



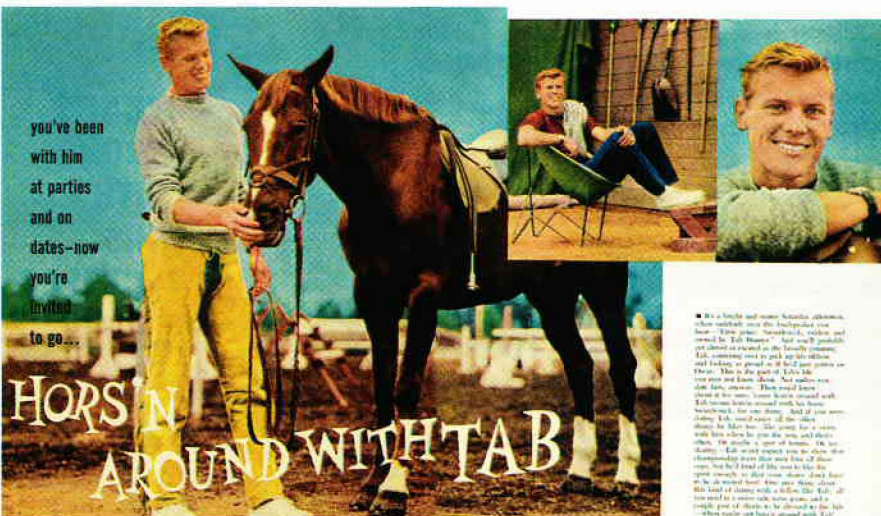
Showing Coach at the L.A. Forum in Puissance Class, 1971



At the Santa Barbara Horse Show (l.-r.): Diane Grad, George Morris, Tiffany Traurig, Hunter, and J. J. Smith.



Hunter (l.) doing his own stunts in *Gunman's Walk*, 1958



A spread in a 1950s fan magazine



With Indian Giver at the Riverside County Fair

Courtesy of Tab Hunter (6)

HOLLYWOOD HORSEMAN

SC: We know some of the highlights of your movie career—1955's *Battle Cry*, 1958's *Damn Yankees*. What are your personal highlights of your riding career?

Hunter: Gosh, I don't know. Having a horse that went on to the Olympics was nice. I had a horse Nob Hill—I didn't show him; I wish I had—but Max Bonham showed him back East and won the Cleveland Grand Prix. Nobby was a good horse. Winning at the Cow Palace was quite nice. I was also a judge with the AHSA in the 1970s and also did some riding clinics at that time. Today, I go to the shows, and it's fabulous that we have such quality horses and the horsemanship has gotten so much better. But we're still not up to where Europe is. When I lived in Europe, I used to go out [to ride] all the time. When I was in Egypt, I would ride in the Egyptian cavalry, and I'd ride in Rome. It was fabulous to see how they were doing and what they were doing. You learn a lot seeing the way they work their horses. I'm so pleased now that George [Morris] is the chef d'équipe of our team. He's like me—we're very dramatic and have very hard heads.

SC: So he'll be able to inspire the team.

Hunter: Oh, no question about that. It's always a pleasure to run into George.

SC: Your current horse Harlow, what breed is she?

Hunter: I wasn't riding for a while. I had a horse Mark My Word that I sold. He did very well with my godchild; he shows a lot in the Grand Prix. But now, Harlow... I came to Santa Barbara and my friend Ann had horses. They were nice horses, but they were not my kind of horses. But this paint mare named Spot just took a liking to me. She was so funny, she made me laugh. I started to ride her and she broke me up. She'd see me and start nickering and come running to me. I'd say, "Sweetheart, you're not the kind of horse I really like." But she loved me, and I started taking a liking to her. But when my friend Ann was still alive, I thought maybe we could breed this mare and give Ann something to look forward to. We tried to get the horse bred, and it didn't work. Ann passed away and left me Spot, and the next stud I liked, I bred the mare to him and got a fabulous baby by him that I named Harlow, and it looks just like the mare. Spot was just one of those happy horses that made you feel good. Unfortunately, she colicked, and we operated on her. The next day she was fine, and I was happy to see her. But then she took a turn for the worse, and we had to put her down. Broke my heart. She really won me over. Who is to know what will or will not work for you. You've got to try them and play with them and have fun with them.

SC: In Hollywood, you have people trying to win you over constantly, and you can never know who you can trust.

Hunter: I was pretty fearful.

SC: It must have been a relief to know when a horse was trying to win you over that you didn't have to worry about their agenda.

Hunter: That's very true...very true. No matter how hard you want to make it work with a horse, if it isn't meant to be, it isn't going to happen.

SC: How often do you ride these days?

Hunter: I don't ride that much at all. I rode a couple of weeks ago. I ride once in a blue moon.

SC: Did you ever feel you could ride as much as you wanted?

Hunter: I never could. When I was in England, I used to ride a great deal. When I was on a film, I would hunt. Anneli Drummond-Hay was a dear friend of mine. She'd won at Badminton [Horse Trials] in 1963, and then she turned into a show jumping rider. Anneli was fabulous. In fact, it was her aunt that raised whippets, and that's when I first fell in love with whippets. [Hunter owns two whippets, Olivia and Katie.]

SC: Did the agent Henry Willson pick Hunter or did you suggest that?

Hunter: Actually, there would be no Tab Hunter if it weren't for Dick Clayton, my closest friend. I met him when I was a stable boy. He's 90 years old now and was an agent for Jimmy Dean, Jane Fonda, Burt Reynolds, Angie Dickinson—the list goes on and on and on. He's like my brother, my father, my mentor. When he was still an actor, he took me to my first Broadway show. Dick introduced me to Henry Willson because he wasn't an agent at the time. "We've got to tab you something," is what Henry said. And Dick said, "Well, he rides hunters and jumpers." So I always say it could have been Tab Jumper instead of Tab Hunter!

SC: If you could go back and do anything differently, what would it be? Devoting your life completely to horses?

Hunter: At one point, I was ready to give up Hollywood and go back to Virginia and horses.

SC: This was in the '70s?

Hunter: This was in the '60s. Horses were so important to me. I learned a lot about people from being around my horses. I wasn't comfortable around people. I was comfortable around the animals.

Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star (Algonquin; \$24.95), by Tab Hunter with Eddie Muller, was published October 14 and is available in bookstores nationwide. ♦

