

Ask an assistant trainer about his job, and he'll likely tell you it's a hard one. Ask a head trainer about his assistants, and he'll tell you it's hard to find a good one. Ricky Nicolazzi, 2018 NRBC Open L2 Derby Champion, has been on both sides of the coin. After starting his own training business in Italy, Nicolazzi immigrated to the U.S. in 1998 and began working for NRHA Open Futurity Champion and NRCHA Million Dollar rider Bob Avila. Several years later, he hung out his own shingle, running a successful reining and cow horse operation in California.

Paralleling that path was Nicolazzi's longtime friend and future NRHA Five Million Dollar rider, Andrea Fappani. Though the two Italians took different routes in their careers, they remained steadfast friends, even serving as best man at each other's weddings. So it's perhaps no surprise that in the fall of 2016, Nicolazzi moved to Arizona and became the head assistant trainer for Fappani. The change made him part of a growing group of reining trainers with the credentials to have their own business, but who instead decide to work for another trainer. And with Nicolazzi's experience on both sides of the equation, he's the ideal source to provide insight on becoming a successful assistant.

### Team Roles

Though Nicolazzi describes Fappani as his "best friend," he's quick to point out that there's no ambiguity in his role as assistant trainer, and he's all in when it comes to being a team player.

"To have a successful team, you have to have a leader, and if you work for another trainer, you have to follow their direction and believe in their program," he asserts. "If it gets to the point that you don't respect that trainer or don't feel like you can do a good job within his program, it's time to leave.

"Andrea is the boss," Nicolazzi continues. "He knows my strengths, my limits, and what I can get done in the show pen. He puts me on horses that I can get the best results on, including ones that might not fit in his program."

The day-to-day responsibilities of an assistant trainer are wide-ranging and often go from sun up to sun down. Or longer. Nicolazzi typically rides 10 to 15 horses a day, often starting at 4:30 in the morning to beat the Arizona heat in the summers. The roster of horses Nicolazzi rides is in constant flux, as Fappani rotates horses between the two trainers, trying to maximize each horse's performance.

"Andrea is one of the best, so it's obvious that whatever he's doing works, and I have a lot of faith in his decisions," Nicolazzi says about the underlying element of their successful ongoing working relationship. "Because I do the cow horse as well as the reining, I'm probably more flexible when it comes to getting along with a wide variety of horses. I also have a flexible personality, which is another reason we get along so well. I'm good at taking advice, and I don't take things personally. I know my part, I know my job."

Outside of riding, Nicolazzi assumes the responsibility of keeping things running smoothly when Fappani is out of town, which includes overseeing the other two assistant trainers. He also coaches several non pro riders that have horses in training with Fappani. He said finding assistant trainers willing to work the kind of hours he and Andrea do hasn't been easy.

"There are a lot of 23-year-old trainers who think they're big shots," Nicolazzi says. "This is the problem with the new generation. Back when I started out as an assistant trainer, we cleaned



PHOTO BY JOHN O'HARA

# A L L I N

WHAT DOES A POSITIVE HEAD/ASSISTANT TRAINER RELATIONSHIP LOOK LIKE? READ ON TO LEARN FROM THE ASSISTANT'S SIDE HOW TO BEST WORK TOGETHER FOR RESULTS. **BY WENDY LIND**



stalls, saddled, and did whatever else was needed. But if you ask a lot of these new guys to do all that, they won't."

### Stay Open-Minded

Working for one of the best reining trainers in the world, not mention being immersed in the talent-rich area of Scottsdale, Nicolazzi has been soaking up any learning opportunities while keeping an open mind.

"Before I moved to Arizona, a good friend of mine who's a judge came up to me and said, 'When you move to Arizona, you're going to be around a lot of really good professionals besides Andrea. Remember one thing: When you're around champions, you become a champion,'" Nicolazzi recalls. "That really has proven true, because when you're around really good riders every day, you start thinking like those guys. You just absorb all that you see and hear, and even if you're not thinking about it. A lot of it's just the little things that change how your mind works. Not just the training, but general things also that lead to success in many things. When you're around champions, you learn from them."

An open mind, he said, is vital to maximizing those learning opportunities.

"The good, younger trainers are coming up all the time, and they want to beat you," Nicolazzi says. "So I try to stay humble enough to realize that while I might have more experience, some of the younger riders are very good and I can learn from them."

In the increasingly competitive reining industry, it's becoming more common for trainers to specialize in certain areas that fit their skill sets, which makes it all the more important to find an assistant trainer with strengths that balance out a head trainer's weaknesses. That approach has proven to be very successful for those trainers with an open-minded and honest approach to appraising their own abilities in relation to the assistants they hire. Nicolazzi threw out a few examples.

"There are trainers out there who can train a futurity horse better than about anyone else, but they just struggle to show," he shares. "When you get on one of their horses, you realize that it's better trained than your own. But even though that guy can get a horse trained-up perfect, he can't get the horse shown."

Pointing out that the combination of show strategy, mental preparation, and preparing the horse is a whole other skill set to master, Nicolazzi says some train-

ers just aren't suited for the show pen, especially when it comes to the pressure of dealing with clients.

"Sometimes a head trainer needs to be smart enough to know his limitations in the show pen and humble enough to provide good horses for his assistant to show," he maintains. "If you have a kid who's a great showman, and you're not, then do whatever you have to keep him happy. Odds are, being around someone like that will make you a better show hand as well."

The inverse is also true, in which case a trainer might be very good at showing, but not as talented at training up their own horses. "That trainer also needs to recognize his limitations and find an assistant who's a really good trainer, and pay them well," Nicolazzi says. "Either way, when you find a good assistant who excels in areas of your weakness, make a place for them, and give them some horses to show. Even if you pay them double, you're going to more than get your money back."

### Earned Opportunities

Sometimes, despite the best of efforts, things just don't work out for some assistant trainers.

"If we have an assistant working for us who's trying really hard but it's just

not working out, I'll try to find another trainer for him to work for who has a program that's a better fit," Nicolazzi explains. "But if it's a matter of the assistant not working hard, or having a bad attitude, or thinks he already knows what he's doing, then we let him go. You don't want a person like that in your business because he brings the whole team down. It's about working together. Everyone needs to know their responsibilities and do them the best they can."

Nicolazzi says when an assistant trainer goes above and beyond what's asked of him, the commitment seldom goes unnoticed. Greater effort often equates to increased opportunities.

"I'm behind Andrea, but I have other guys riding behind me. I need to have people I know I can count on," he says. "I'm always looking for the person who's going to take my spot, whenever that might be. And when I'm at a show or on vacation, they're the person that Andrea and I trust to take my place. When an assistant trainer is put in that position, that's when we see he's the real deal. And it takes forever to find that person."

Nicolazzi practices what he preaches, not only working hard for Fappani, but also being grateful for the opportunities that've come his way.

"I never thought I'd get to show, but

### A GOOD CATCH

Time and again, Ricky Nicolazzi has proven his admirable skill at catch-riding mounts at major events. Prior to working full time for Fappani, he showed Gunnin For Stars (Gunner x DunIt In Starlight) for Fappani at the 2015 NRHA Derby. Despite only having two days to get to know the stallion, Nicolazzi piloted the horse to the L3 Open Derby Reserve Championship and the L2 Open Championship, garnering over \$28,000. Later that year, he catch rode another horse from Fappani's program to a finals berth in the NRHA L3 Open Futurity finals.

That success continues today, though on a less condensed timeline. At the 2018 NRBC, he piloted Spooks Show Time (Spooks Gotta Whiz x Doltle Lena)—a horse in Fappani's program that he'd only ridden two weeks prior to the show—to the Open Level 2 Championship, earning more than \$8,300 for owner Rancho Oso Rio. Showing with equal success in NRCHA competition, Nicolazzi tied for sixth in the Open finals and fourth in the Intermediate Open at the 2018 NRCHA Derby on Metallic Rays (Metallic Cat x Margaret Rey), earning \$11,809 for owner Sarah Davis.

"I love to catch-ride. With some horses, it's much better for me to just have a day or two with the horse, and then go show it. When I'm catch riding, I'm just trying to find the horse's buttons, and then just show it the best I can," he says. "It's almost all or nothing, because if I have more time to with the horse, I start thinking about how to make things better. When that happens, I need time to change things a little bit and allow enough time for the horse to understand the way I'm asking it to do things."

I'm getting to more and more often. It works really well for us, because I can show the Level 2 and 3 horses," he says. "Every once in a while, I might be able to sneak one of those into the finals of Level 4, but they're better suited for the lower divisions that Andrea isn't eligible for. And now that I'm having good results, the clients have more faith in my abilities."

That faith is well placed, as Nicolazzi has been excelling at both NRHA and NRCHA events. (See sidebar). Talented in the cow horse as well, Nicolazzi kept a small portion of that clientele after he went to work for Fappani. After he finishes each day at Fappani's, Nicolazzi heads over to a neighboring facility to work the two cow horses he has in training. In reality, his experience with the cow horse has benefited Fappani's program. Nicolazzi used one horse in particular as an example.

"We have a horse that Andrea and I switch riding each week," he explains. "This winter, I did a lot of cow work with the horse because he was burned out on the reining, and we needed to find other ways for him to rejuvenate. So I cowboy on him to move cattle, I use him as a turnback horse, and then in the middle of the week Andrea gets on and works on maneuvers. He's like a different horse and very pure out in the show pen, instead of anticipating the next maneuver. Now he goes out there and waits; he's back to enjoying his job."

### Straight On

From the position of an assistant trainer, Nicolazzi says he appreciates Fappani's directness in running his training operation. At the same time, he makes a point to not take that criticism personally. "If Andrea sees me doing something he doesn't like, he's going to tell me," Nicolazzi says. "He's very straightforward about telling me what I need to work on with each horse, and how to do it. There are times where he'll say, 'It's been a week and it doesn't seem like you got much done on this horse. What's going on?'"

In such cases, Fappani works with Nicolazzi to reassess training strategy for that horse, which might mean he'll get on the horse and show Nicolazzi what needs to happen. It's never a case of waiting to see how things pan out.

"Andrea is very black-and-white when it comes to things like that, and I think that way of working is much better," Nicolazzi notes. "I learn things from his

### QUICK FACTS

**Trainer:** Riccardo Nicolazzi  
**Location:** Rancho Oso Rio in Scottsdale, Arizona, where he's an assistant trainer to Andrea Fappani  
**NRHA LTE:** \$175,026 since 2004  
**Family:** Married to Anna Nicolazzi, with two children  
**Largest NRHA Paycheck:** \$28,056, earned for 2015 NRHA Open Derby L3 Derby Reserve Champion and Open L2 Champion on Gunnin For Stars

perspective. And I work for him, so that's the way I'm going to do it"

Part of that working relationship, Nicolazzi says, is for assistant trainers to stay working for that trainer long enough to learn their program. Similar to college, he recommends that assistant trainers work for one program four to five year—not six months.

"If you're going to only work for a trainer for a few months and then go out on your own, you better be either very talented or very lucky," he says. "Sooner or later, not working under a trainer long enough is going to catch up with you.



**Ricky Nicolazzi (top) first established his own training business before taking on the head assistant trainer job, working for Andrea Fappani.**

Not learning a whole program—all those details that go into training a reining horse—will ultimately lead to inconsistencies, and that's when you start losing clients."

At the end of the day, Nicolazzi says successful assistant trainers aren't afraid to work hard, they follow directions, and have a good attitude. And above all else, having a love of horses and a passion for reining is paramount.

"I'm working for one of the best of them, and then I go ride cow horses with friends who are also very successful. So I try to suck up all everything I can," he says. "Somedays it's really hard—when you work 15-hour days and don't get to see your family much. But then there are days that make it all worthwhile. I like the beauty of every horse from all kinds of disciplines. I can find a beauty in about all of them." ■

### GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

After being both an assistant trainer and running his own business with assistant trainers, Ricky Nicolazzi offers these tips.

- Work for a trainer that is your idol and whom you respect.
- Don't be afraid to work hard, and never look at the clock.
- Learn everything about their program—all the way. If you do what the trainer tells you to do and follow their program, you will go a long way. When you go out on your own, you can modify it the way you want.
- If you're doing the right thing, your boss will notice—even if he or she doesn't say it.
- Work ethic and coachability are just as important—or more so—than raw talent. If you have a good work ethic, one day it'll pay off.
- Never be opinionated, unless your boss asks you for your opinion.
- Show up to work a half hour early and stay a half hour late. Your boss will always appreciate that.
- Be open-minded. Even when you go to a show, watch what the other trainers are doing during the schooling sessions and when they're getting ready to show. If you pay close attention to what the other trainers are doing, you'll learn a lot.