



Images courtesy of the Benz family

It all started with a pony ride at a friend's birthday party. Alana Benz, now 16 years old, was six years old at the time, and instantly took a liking to riding. Benz's mother, Ramona Romero Benz, decided to sign her up for riding lessons at Koko Crater Stables—which was 15 minutes from their home in Hawaii Kai—to help encourage her interests. Benz's hobby then snowballed into a full-fledged passion for horseback riding. When her riding became a serious venture, the Benzes bought Alana a horse to help save on rental costs and equipment. The Benzes didn't realize, however, that the boarding expenditures would end up costing a mint.

"Yeah we didn't factor that part in," laughs Romero Benz as she locks eyes with Alana, who coyly smiles and nods in agreement. "But Alana loved it so much that we decided that this would be good for her."

The Benzes' investment in Alana's horse was indeed a good one, as it allowed her to refine her riding skills. By the age of 13, Benz had been riding for more than

## Going to Goal



Image by Roy Guerrero



half her life, eventually giving Benz the upper hand in learning how to play her favorite sport: polo.

When Enrique Diaz, a professional polo player and instructor who'd been traveling between the islands, paid a visit to the Koko Crater Stables to deliver a fresh batch of horses to the barn, Alana and other young riders asked him about possibly coaching them to play polo. When Diaz agreed, Alana was instantly committed, and she hasn't looked back since. "I wanted to try it out," Benz says with a smile. "It looked like a lot of fun."

Fun—and yet dangerous, as most horses run up to 30 miles per hour. Add in the fact that Benz is mostly hanging on by her clenched legs and a leather strap in her non-dominant hand, and you'll have reason to cringe.

Despite the risk, and a shoulder injury

from falling off her horse this year (and several times before that), Benz continues to get up and ride. Since there are no active polo clubs on Oahu, Benz has moved to Maui, where she's been fortunate to be a part of the Maui Polo Club. She attends King Kekaulike High School and lives with the family of one of her teammates. As a member of the Maui Polo Club, she often travels to the mainland to play in regional polo competitions, and brings home the all-star award every time she's played. Currently a junior at King Kekaulike, Benz is thinking about continuing to pursue playing polo in college. The college majors she is considering, either aeronautical science or engineering, are no surprise to her family, because she likes to "go fast."

"I love polo because I enjoy going to goal," Benz says, referring to being on the offense rather than the defense when playing polo with her teammates. Proactive measures seem to be the theme for Benz, and she hopes to inspire others to do the same. "If you can find your passion for what you love, then that's great—and then just go for it." 終

*Alana was brought to our attention by her grandmother, who is from Japan. We'd love to do more stories like this, highlighting the accomplishments of young people here in Hawaii, so if you have any story suggestions contact us at [mail@readwasabi.com](mailto:mail@readwasabi.com).*