



Two riders explain how they made the most of the COVID-19 induced three-month show suspension.

by Kim F. Miller

Show jumper Simon McCarthy and eventer Shannon Lilley appreciated extra time for training fundamentals. They're also ready to see how it will pay off as many competitions get back underway this month.

Simon McCarthy & Eames M Z

Young Irish show jumper Simon McCarthy and Eames M Z knew their mission: to make a splash on the West Coast circuit on behalf of Oakland Stables' new location in California. The high-performance competition, training and sales program is owned by international show jumpers, Darragh Kenny of Ireland and American Hardin Towell. Its new base at the Buckingham family's Q of E Stables in the Moorpark area's Santa Rosa Valley adds to locations in Florida and Holland.

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Eames was purchased in Europe last fall. He and Simon started their partnership with one Grand Prix class in Spain before coming to America. The Christmas holidays gave them time to refine things before debuting at the Desert International Horse Park early this year. Eames' flashy good looks, including a striking diamond within his white blaze, drew attention even before they set foot in a \$15,000 1.4M Grand Prix the first week of the circuit. Finishing fifth was the beginning of a mission accomplished.



Eames M Z

Simon was not immediately impressed with the 11-year-old KWPN by Van Gogh. "He didn't really know how to jump a 2' vertical or cavaletti," Simon says of the horse he now considers a World Cup prospect. "I jumped four or five fences and I hated him!" That changed to "I could not walk away without buying him once the fence heights rose.

"Jumping a Grand Prix fence is just easier for him," Simon continues. "He has a massive heart, he's very intelligent and he loves his job."

Combined with natural fitness and lots of blood, those qualities make relaxation a priority in Simon's fitness plans for Eames. The COVID-19 quarantine provided ample time for Simon's preferred training pace: slow. "It lets me stretch out his learning. My theory is that you teach them something one day and they learn it the next, rather than expecting them to know everything I'm asking right away." That requires relaxation.

“Small fences on a circle and a figure-eight, getting Eames to land on whatever lead I wanted, and to work in a nice frame and in a soft bit,” were the priorities. Getting him to really listen to the rider is the training goal, while the small cross-rails and verticals on a turn help build hindquarter strength and push without too much wear and tear. Working on a circle prevents the horse from stiffening through the body and encourages using their back and hindquarters, Simon explains.

An advanced version of this exercise places four small fences on a clockface at 12, 3, 6, and 9. Simon typically sets the distance between the centers of each jump at a normal five-stride, then varies that up and down to fine-tune Eames’ position between his land and leg aids.

The relaxation quest is aided by Q of E’s turn-out paddocks and easily accessed trails weaving through the nearby hills. A few hours daily turn-out enables this sensitive horse to “let his mind switch off” and the trails suit his brave nature. “He loves it, going forward with his ears pricked and handling the ups and downs of ditches and drains.”

Nutrition-wise, Eames is an easy keeper. Equine Omega Complete’s beneficial fatty acids boost overall health and add dazzle the handsome bay’s coat. “I’ve really noticed a difference in his coat since we bought him: he has a massive shine and kind of a glitter in his eye.”

Simon

A yoga practice begun early this year has been “fantastic,” Simon asserts. “Even though I’m a young guy, these early mornings and riding a lot of horses does tire your muscles.” Yoga’s impact on his mindset has been even more striking. “The breathing is a fantastic help to my nerves and anxiety before going into the ring, and what I do passes onto my horse.”

Otherwise, “There’s really no substitute for riding and jumping as much as you can.” As a professional rider and coach, Simon does that daily on Oakland West’s horses and on his clients’. “I typically ride our clients’ horses once or twice a week. I love teaching almost as much as riding. It’s nice for students to see what I do with their horses and for me to feel what they do.”

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Nutrition wise, Simon admits to swinging between being “fantastically healthy and going for burgers and pizza.” Having turned 25 in mid-June, he says, “I know I’ll have to go less for the pizzas as I get older!”



Shannon Lilley and Ideal HX

Shannon Lilley walks her talk.

“As riders it’s our responsibility to be fit,” says the professional eventer and coach whose Team Lilley Eventing is located in Santa Cruz. Course “walks” are usually “course runs” for Shannon on cross-country day at competitions. In between shows, she supplements regular saddle time with Peloton workouts, running, weight training and a little kickboxing.

“The course runs are part of my game plan, of getting into my zone,” she explains. The rest of her fitness agenda is designed to prevent repetitive wear and tear and to keep things fresh and fun. The gym she created in her garage has had more use than usual through the COVID show closures and having more time for work-outs is an upside. Even if the couch is calling after a long day at the stable during normal times, the positive physical and mental effects get Shannon into the gym. “I’m always so happy when I do it and it puts me in a better frame of mind.”

Body awareness and control are the emphasis on Shannon’s fitness routines, for herself and those she suggests to her students when asked for advice. “When you’re riding, you need to be able to activate certain muscles, and fitness training teaches you how to do that. When I’m saying ‘Do this or do that,’ the student needs to understand what is going on in their body and what needs to happen.”

Although her resume includes a Pan Am Team gold medal, Shannon says “Riding never came naturally to me. So, I want to give myself every opportunity to be better. The stronger, the more flexible, the more coordinated I can be -- that can only make me better.”

Fitness is part of Shannon’s annual goals review with clients. As with riding instructions, she wants students to understand the whys behind the requests. If a rider says, “I do abs,” she elaborates on the larger picture of core muscles, their function and interaction.

Size is never the priority. “It’s not just about being able to flex really strong muscles. It’s about being able to release them, too.” Poor posture and tight arms are among the position weaknesses that can be addressed through specific exercises and Shannon enjoys sharing ideas and encouragement. Clients are invited to work out with her and the effort always circles back to horsemanship. “If someone is struggling halfway through a cross-country course, that’s not fair to the horse.”

Strict adherence to a paleo diet enables Shannon to effectively manage severe allergies. She started it five years ago and says, “It changed my life!” Lean meats, fish, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds are the paleo plan: no wheat or dairy. When friends say they’re sorry she can’t enjoy other foods, “I say ‘I’m not!’ I feel great and my energy levels are good.”

Shannon brings her own food to competitions and reports happily that more events have workable food options when desired. Acknowledging that everybody is different, Shannon doesn’t push her own nutrition system on others. She’s happy to offer advice when asked.

Ideal HX

The pandemic has provided extra time to work on Ideal HX’s training fundamentals while maintaining a relatively light workload. Her partnership with the 7-year-old Dutch Warmblood began last October, with a Preliminary win at Woodside.

Fingers crossed, they’ll be competing at Twin Rivers in Paso Robles this month, so he is ramping up to resume competition. Building aerobic capacity with up to 40-minute trot sessions

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up and down the hills at Bonny Doon Equestrian Park have been his main work recently. Gallops sets were planned to begin as soon as summer shows are a sure thing.

He has added healthy weight since he arrived last fall. Like Shannon's other horses, he's added a few pounds to that -- "in full figure" -- due to the relatively light work-outs these last few months. His diet is mostly meadow grass hay, one flake of alfalfa and twice daily grain. Like most of the horses in her program, he gets Manna Pro's Renew Gold. This is a low starch formula of high fat stabilized rice bran, CoolStance coconut meal and flax.