



Modest Northern California rider is an emerging athlete, indeed.

by Kim F. Miller

There's only one problem being Michael Williamson's trainer: It's sometimes hard to keep him on the day's lesson plan.

The 15-year-old is a student of the sport. He often analyzes top show jumpers' performances online, then comes to the barn the next day seeking to emulate what they do, explains his trainer Patty Ball. "Sometimes I'll be trying to get my point across and he'll say, 'Well, I was watching (German Olympic champion) Marcus Ehning last night and I'm trying to do what he does.'"



That's a happy problem to have, says Patty, who owns Hunterville Stables in the Sacramento area's Penryn. "He really loves the horses and he is really dedicated to becoming a great horseman."

He's well on his way.

Michael has been a winner or top finisher in various medal finals and equitation championships for the last three years. At press time, he was preparing to head East to contest the USEF/Pessoa Hunt Seat Medal Finals in Harrisburg, PA and the Maclay Finals in Lexington, KY.

He won't have to worry about missing school because, after eighth grade, he opted for an online high school program. "It's great because I can really spend a lot of time at the barn."

For Michael's ambitions, the barn may be the best classroom. "I want horses to be my profession, to represent the United States Equestrian Team and to do all the Longines and Rolex show jumping circuits," he says. Online schooling may not make him the most well-rounded kid on the block, he acknowledges. "But I'm not worried about that because I get to ride."

During long days at the barn, six days a week when he's not competing, Michael welcomes any chance to ride extra mounts. "I always ask if there is a spare horse available to ride," he explains. "Any horse you ride can really teach you something." He's happy to help in any other way, too, Patty reports. From assisting the younger kids to moving sprinklers, "He's always asking what he can do to help."

Riding Well Over Ribbons

Ribbons mean little to Michael beyond their reflection of daily progress in getting to know and be effective with his horse. Asked his proudest accomplishments, he struggles to call up resume highlights, but gets genuinely animated when conveying that his biggest thrill is "just keeping it consistent, learning more and always giving my horse the best ride possible."

Patty remembers early days with Michael. “If he won a first place ribbon, the only way I would know about was if I asked him. He’s so not concerned with prizes. He feels good if he rode his horse well.”



It’s that quality, the trainer surmises, that made him a stand-out candidate for the United States Hunter Jumper Association’s Emerging Athlete Program. He was thrilled to be part of Zone 10’s EAP sessions in 2014 and this past summer, when Kip Rosenthal was the clinician for four days of riding and horsemanship intensives held at Sonoma Valley Stables. “It really reinforced the horsemanship we learn at Hunterville and everything Kip taught was great,” he says.

Michael was also one of 16 EAP regional participants selected for the National Training Session, set for Nov. 12-15 in Ohio. World Equestrian Games bronze medalist Peter Wylde and stable management expert Anne Thornbury are set to be the clinicians. Selection for the EAP finals is based on the riding and stable-management skills, written test result and potential shown during the Regional Training Sessions. In that context, Patty notes, Michael’s bottomless commitment to horsemanship shines. “The clinicians ask him a question and his answer comes from a very deep place in him.”

Diamond In The Rough

Doug and Sandrine Williamson had little idea what would come from “winning” a riding lesson at a school fundraising auction. “I had never seen that kid so happy,” recalls Sandrine of Michael’s first ride at Shambaugh Ranch in Loomis. His first instructor Vera Keith introduced him to english riding and jumping, and that was that. Michael started with a Quarter Horse, then moved onto a green pony named Crystal and to coaching from Kim Rollison at Rollison Ranch in Elverta. The young pair had solid success on the Sacramento Area Hunter Jumper Association circuit, and also participated in their first of what are now several George Morris clinics at Hunterville Stables.



That's when Michael caught Patty's attention. Seeing him in the clinic among older riders on full-size horses, she recognized him as a "diamond in the rough."

George had set a Liverpool that "turned into more of an open-water fence because he put so many obstacles behind it," she remembers. "I was a little worried about the pony making it.

"The first time, Michael and the pony chipped in and scrambled through it. But the next time, they galloped down and nailed it and they never missed it again."

Michael's position was a bit loose, she recalls, but his balance and his feel for the pony were spot-on. Even since he's become a polished rider, it's his connection with his horse that continues to strike Patty the most.

Potential and Dedication

Outgrowing Crystal was an emotionally tough moment for Michael, his mother recalls, but a necessary next step. While trying out a new horse presented by Patty at the NorCal Finals, Michael got his first glimpse of more intense competition and coaching geared for A circuit success. He moved to Patty's program three years ago, building on a solid base established under his first trainers.

Recognizing his potential and dedication, Patty chose Michael's next horse carefully. She purposely put him on one that was not super talented and required a strong ride. "He was such a weakling!" Patty laughs.

No more. Michael has grown a lot in the last two years. He's 5'11" and augments his riding with at-home strength training. He's put it to good use these last two years with his equitation horse, Long Island Ice Tea. The 14-year-old Holsteiner was imported as a jumper with 1.4m and 1.5m mileage, ample scope for the "Big Eq" medals, 3'6" to 3'9", that Michael now pursues.



"Ice" is a "straight forward ride," he reports. "Usually at the first day of a show, he has a bit of energy, but he's great. He'll do anything and he's always amazing and a blast to ride."

Michael exudes appreciation. For his horses, his family, his trainer and everyone who has helped or inspired him along the way. He describes Patty as "an amazing trainer" whose program is heavy on hands-on horsemanship and always puts the horses' best interest first.

While at the CP National Horse show for the Maclay Finals, Michael was likely to see many of his idols competing in the Longines FEI World Cup™ class. He has a soft spot for the Americans: Kent Farrington, BZ Madden, McLain Ward, etc.

As the next step in his journey, Michael will be moving into the jumper ranks aboard a new horse, the 8 year old Hanoverian mare Enniskerry, owned by Ilan Ferder. Given his trajectory so far, it seems Michael is on an excellent course to join the ranks of his idols in the not-too-distant future. For sure, he is someone whose character speaks well of the sport to which he is so happily and deeply devoted.

Resume Highlights (because you won't hear about them from Michael!)

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Written by Kim F. Miller

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2012

~ SAHJA Pony Medal, 1st

2013

~ CWD Equitation Champion

2014

~ USET Talent Search West Final, 4th

~ Cloverleaf Medal Final, 1st

2015

~ Maclay Regional Final, 4th

~ USET Talent Search West Final, 6th

~ Qualified for Maclay and USEF/Pessoa national finals

~ One of 16 invited to the EAP National in Ohio this month