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Ashleigh Conroy-Zugel

Trots into the Spotlight

By Mary Adelaide Brakenridge

Ashleigh Conroy-Zugel may be a relative newcomer to the sport of dressage, but she is already stamping herself as one to watch. The 16-year-old rider switched to dressage after beginning her career in the hunters and equitation. She has rapidly moved up the ranks from Training and First Level at the end of 2012 to the Juniors in 2013, achieving high scores every step of the way.

Only seven months after making the full transition to dressage in November 2012, Ashleigh represented Region 1 at the 2013 North American Junior and Young Rider Championships (NAJYRC) in Lexington, Kentucky, getting her first taste of international competition in a team-oriented environment. She and her mount Ungaro contributed to the team's fourth place finish, barely missing the podium.

"We joke that I'm on the fast track in dressage!" Ashleigh said.

Most recently, she turned in an impressive performance at the U.S. Dressage Festival of Champions in Gladstone, New Jersey, finishing in sixth place among the country's very best junior riders. She qualified for the Festival through good results against tough competition at the Adequan Global Dressage Festival in Wellington, Florida, not long after coming back from an injury in winter 2013.

Not one to rest on her laurels, Ashleigh took advantage of her time in Gladstone to collect ideas and inspiration for the future.

"I found it amazing that we could be around the top international professionals," she said. "I was able to see how they warm up before the show and how they manage the horses. I could see the techniques they used that I could use myself in the future. Each rider had a different way of preparing for the movements during their tests, and it gave me ideas of how I could reuse that for my own riding."

Ashleigh is following in the footsteps of her mother, Sonia Zugel, an amateur who competes successfully in the small tour



Ashleigh Conroy-Zugel and Ungaro at the 2014 U.S. Dressage Festival of Champions presented by The Dutta Corp in Gladstone, New Jersey. Photo by Sue Weakley/PSdressage.com

for Ireland. Mother and daughter share a passion for the sport, and Ashleigh benefits from her mother's experience.

"I really enjoy it because we're able to go to the same shows and cheer each other on," she said. "We're really close, and I think dressage makes us closer. If she sees a really good video or an article, she shows it to me. If I have a question, I can ask her, and she can explain it right away. I always have someone there to help me improve, on or off the horse."

Ashleigh trains with Sonia as well as with Ashley Perkins, who adds another perspective to the mix and focuses on the theory behind the movements. Sonia and Ashley have similar styles that give Ashleigh a consistent framework as she progresses.

Ashleigh began her dressage career on her hunter horse, Rolex, ultimately training him through the Junior level. As her interest grew, she began riding and competing her mother's small tour horse, Ungaro. Sonia helped her daughter learn to bring the best out of the 17-year-old Belgian Warmblood gelding (Weltmeyer II-M. Lady One, Wenderkreis).

"It was a learning experience bonding with my mom's horse," Ashleigh said. "We've really become close. She was able to help me figure out how to ride him sensitively and correctly. She knew little tricks that helped keep him happy. It was great that she knew him so well and could pass on her knowledge of him to me."

Ashleigh's excellent results with Ungaro thus far show that her hard work is paying off. She's a motivated student of the sport who not only turns to her mother and her trainer for advice, but also observes others at every opportunity to glean useful tidbits to

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Ashleigh and her mom Sonia Zugel
Photo courtesy of Ashleigh Conroy-Zugel



Ashleigh Conroy-Zugel and Ungaro
 Photo by SusanJStickle.com

apply to her own riding, as she did at Gladstone. While sidelined with her injury at the beginning of 2014, she watched the Junior classes in Wellington and kept an eye on the displays showing the judges' scores for each movement.

"I'm a visual learner, so it's great when I see other riders do the tests," she explained. "I found the scoreboards really helpful to see the movements and how they were scored. Then you know how you're supposed to ride and what the judges want to see."

Ashleigh is an Ambassador for JustWorld International, donating her prize money to the organization and promoting their humanitarian efforts. She also created a Junior Ambassador program for the New Jersey Chapter of The Nature Conservancy with the aim of preserving the beauty of nature for generations to come. The program has raised over \$30,000 in two years.

Ashleigh is able to manage her scholastic and extracurricular commitments while also devoting time to the sport she loves. She has her sights set on returning to the Festival of Champions and NAJYRC, and over the next couple of years she hopes to move up into the Young Rider division. She said she has found that focus and consistency are key to success in the dressage world.

"You're able to train further and faster if you're using the same methods and aids every day," she explained. "When you're in the test, you should be riding the same as at home."

She added, "Determination is a really great asset to have. When you're having a bad day, you can't just give up on something. You have to see it through. The desire to learn is also important, because that's how you can improve."

Ashleigh's dedication to bettering her skills and expanding her knowledge has propelled her rapid rise in the sport of dressage. With a winning combination of natural talent and drive to perform, balanced by a sense of humor and a genuine love for the sport, this young competitor is ready to take the dressage world by storm.



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