

The Road to the Olympics-Part II: Four Equestrians Compete for Placement on Olympic Teams

BY ROBIN STANBACK

The quadrennial quest for berths on Olympic teams is in full swing throughout every sporting arena as athletes prepare for their shot at a gold medal in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. The competition is stiff in every field for the limited opportunity athletes have to represent their countries at the Games. Some competitors have one shot to make the team as the physical demands of several sports preclude older athletes from returning four years later. Others can compete for years in a given event so long as they can stay at the top of it because only the very best will be considered. A sprained ankle, a torn ligament, or a broken bone at this point in the season when so much depends upon exceptional performance to garner that position on an Olympic team can end a lifetime dream. Nowhere is this as obvious as it is in the equestrian events where two athletes - horse and rider - must peak together to share the opportunity of a lifetime.

Every effort seems doubled for the equestrian team from practice, training, conditioning and planning to even the financing required for a successful run for a gold. David O'Connor and his wife Karen are well aware of the difficulties involved in preparing themselves and their horses for this journey. Members of the 1996 silver medal winning three-day event team from the United States at the Atlanta Games, they are each preparing a number of horses for a chance to compete in Sydney. Ms. O'Connor stated, "There is so much involved in getting these horses to this point and so many people whose efforts go into helping us prepare. We have really coined the phrase 'Team O'Connor' because of that. We have the same blacksmith we've had for 20 years whose skill is essential to our success. Dr. Kent Allen is a neighbor and a friend upon whom we rely heavily. Dr. Kathleen Crandell with Kentucky Equine Research (KER) is vital to our pro-

gram as she provides expert advice on nutrition. Kathleen is also a neighbor and if we notice anything, she comes over immediately to look at the horse and discuss a program specifically designed for him. We are very fortunate to have Pennfield Corporation supplying our feeds wherever we compete and, here at home, Pennfield's supplier Tri County makes certain we have everything we need. David and I are really the lucky ones. We get to ride these incredible horses, but it is thanks to the efforts of a great many people."

To qualify for the United States 2000 Olympic Team the O'Connors must travel with their horses to competitions throughout the United States. So far this year they have competed in the Carolinas and Florida at Red Hills and Sharpton. David is preparing Custom Made, his mount from the 1996 Olympic Games owned by Joseph Zada; Rattle and Hum, owned by David Lenaburg; Giltedge, owned by Jacqueline Mars; and The Native, owned by the O'Connors and Ms. Mars. Giltedge won the combined

test at Red Hills and Mr. O'Connor's other mounts have also performed well in both competitions. Ms. O'Connor is readying Prince Panache, a 15-year-old Thoroughbred owned by Ms. Mars; Regal Scott, owned by Ms. Mars and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Thompson; and Grand Slam, owned by Lourdes Peralta. All three of her horses have placed well in their competitions and Ms. O'Connor reports being pleased with their level of conditioning.

For the horses, a "team" effort works well to keep muscles toned and ready for strenuous exercise. For the human component, it takes time and effort as well. "David and I are riding all the time, which keeps us in good riding tone, but, the older we get, the harder it is to maintain our weight and keep in top shape. Our physical therapist has designed an exercise program that we try to do every day. We also try to work out at a gym when



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we are at home, but we've been so busy lately that has not been possible."

The O'Connors' schedule will not be slowing down to give them any extra time. They are scheduled to compete at Morven Park and each have two horses lined up for the Rolex and one in the wings ready to go should an injury sideline one of their main entries.

Philip Dutton, a member of the 1996 gold medal winning Australian three-day event team is also busy preparing a schedule that includes a stop at the Rolex Kentucky. His horses have also had a busy spring. True Blue Girdwood (Jughead), owned by Mr. Dutton and Ann L. Jones, spent time fine tuning his jumping skills in Florida and House Doctor and Show of Heart, both owned by Nina Gardner, won first and second at the Pine Top Advanced Horse Trials in early March.

Mr. Dutton also relies upon the combined efforts of KER and Pennfield Corporation for support at home and when travelling. He said, "Pennfield could not have been better to us making arrangements with the people at Hay Exchange to be certain that wherever we traveled, we had the feed we needed to keep our horses on exactly what they are accustomed to having at home. So much changes for them - the environment, the climate, their work schedule - it is very important to keep their feed as constant as possible. Our feeding program has stayed the same as what we were doing in the winter months, except that we are providing more volume to the horses. They are in heavy work now and need more food to maintain their weight. We have split up their feeding to four times per day rather than the three times per day they were getting earlier in the year to keep them interested in their food. Trying to feed them a lot in three feedings sometimes sees them losing interest in their food. They're grazers after all."

Mr. Dutton feels his horses are coming along as scheduled. He added, "I really couldn't be happier with the way they are performing. Jughead is doing very well but will get his start on the competition scene a little later due to his age and wear and tear. With him I worry more about the physical limitations, but he is in very good form right now. We did a bit of jumping with him down in Florida earlier this spring. Touch wood he's doing very well right now. House Doctor was a little green last year but I think he has matured a great deal in the last few months. He is responding to training and jumping well. Show of Heart is also doing a good job. I'm very happy with where the horses are in their training right now."


Show of Heart and the fourth of Mr. Dutton's Olympic hopefuls, Agent Cooper, a 10-year-old Thoroughbred owned by Karen Burchianti, will be competing at the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event at the end of April. Foxhall is also on the agenda for some of the horses and, only if necessary, the Badminton Three-Day Event in England. Mr. Dutton explained, "I don't want to push that much travel

on the horses but if somebody should get a bruise or be unable to compete in one of the other events we might have to change their plans and include England."

Beezie Madden of Cazenovia, New York is another equestrian preparing horses for a shot at the United States Olympic Team with the help of KER and Pennfield Corporation. Cockney II, an 11-year-old Holsteiner stallion owned by the Cockney II Group, and Innocence, an 11-year-old gelding owned by Allen Shore, Jr., are show jumpers with a good start on their season. Ms. Madden said, "We had a really good show in Palm Beach. Both Innocence and Cockney II placed in their divisions. We were unable to go to Europe to compete as we had hoped because of the quarantine situation coming out of Mexico. We couldn't enter Europe for 40 days after having been in Mexico and we would have missed the shows we wanted to attend. I think we have a better schedule now though with the Palm Beach show and the one in Tampa."

Her horses are training as she had hoped they would come into late spring. She explained, "Innocence started out this year much better than he did last year. He was kind of rusty last year and this spring he came out very fresh and jumped very well. He had four faults in each competition but we still placed. Cockney II and I have really come together. He got a 3rd and a 6th in his competitions. We added a tongue depressor to keep him from pulling his tongue back or trying to get it over the bit, and it seems to have really helped him. Both horses are home now where they will stay for the next few weeks while I'm in Tampa competing with another horse. While they are in New York they will continue to stay at work. Innocence will get turned out when he's not working, but Cockney II will have to stay inside as he is still a stallion and we don't want to risk him running around in the mud and hurting himself. They will start over small jumps the week before I return and then we will build them back up in time to be ready for the next round of shows in California."

The ability to continue to provide the same feeds for her horses whether they are at home in New York or at competitions in Florida or California is equally as important to Ms. Madden as it is to the combined training riders. She said, "Pennfield has been very supportive and makes certain our horses have exactly what they need wherever they are."

According to Ms. Madden, the competitive level in show jumping is slightly different than that of combined training in that the horses and riders are competing against the course more than they are against other riders unless there is a jump off. However, there is one factor that is very similar. Ms. Madden said, "Everyone really wants the best four people to make the Olympic Team. Of course, in show jumping, I want to be one of those four people!" 

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