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Advancing the Future of Show Jumping

Since the early 2000s, M. Michael Meller has dedicated his life to finding, breeding and training top young horses in Europe and North America. Michael, a former rider now based in both Florida and Massachusetts, has aligned himself with talented Peter Lutz and co-owner Katherine Gallagher to bring horses like Carneyhaugh Manx and Robin de Ponthual to wins at the CSI5* level for the North America-based Gallagher/Meller Sporthorses. With the help of Dan Walsh and rider Stacey Babes, Michael and Katherine also run E2 Show Jumpers in Ireland, where they have established a successful breeding, training and sales program.

Michael frequently jet sets between the two continents to manage his thriving businesses. He enthusiastically shares how he has found success in discovering and producing top jumpers as well as his goals for the sport.

Acquiring the Right Horses

When I first set out in the business of developing young horses, my goal was to challenge myself and to question the concept that buying a “made” nine- or ten-year-old horse from Europe was the wave of show jumping’s future.

Americans have accustomed themselves to reaping the benefits of Europe’s knowledge and experience of breeding and raising Warmbloods by traveling there, selecting the best horse and simply importing it. Most American buyers do not really understand the whole concept or process behind the breeding and development of these horses.

I started out small on my mission to change this. Fifteen years ago, Ireland-based Dan Walsh and I formed a partnership that became E2 Show Jumpers with Katherine Gallagher as the driving force. We started buying nice jumper prospects in Europe that were affordable to me at the time, which were often horses that had fallen through the cracks or were owned by people who did not realize the talent they had.

My strategy involved buying well-bred horses for the best price possible and really developing them. I observed that the seven- to ten-year-olds were blasting through the roof in sales. A lot of those horses were being bought up rapidly to help develop the riding programs in countries that were not formerly involved at the top levels of our sport.

I decided that if people were buying the best seven- to ten-year-olds, I would instead buy the best three-year-old or the best five-year-old. I would then spend the time to produce that young horse and bring it up through the levels. I think that by taking the time to produce these young horses correctly, the resulting quality speaks for itself.

I start by focusing on their conformation and bloodlines, because I believe these things really do say it all as far as quality is concerned. You also have to have a gut feeling when it comes to spotting talent in an unproven horse. You can tell there are horses that want to win, and there are horses that do not. With our combined knowledge and expertise over the years, Dan, Katherine and I have grown our E2 string into twelve talented horses—mares, stallions and geldings alike.



Sporthor

Peter Lutz and Robin de Ponthual take a victory gallop at Spruce Meadows after winning the 2016 CSI5* \$375,000 CP Grand Prix.

Although we come from different backgrounds in the sport and our thought processes are different, our partnership has been successful because we are all on the same wavelength. For example, at a show we sit in the stands together and each judge which two horses we would purchase from the class. When we exchange our papers at the end, we will have chosen the same two horses.

Early on, we moved into breeding as well. We thought that the best way to create the animals we desired was to breed them ourselves. We currently have more than fifteen offspring on the ground, some of which have been sold and some of which we have kept and are developing for ourselves.

Developing a Young Prospect

Although I also own horses in North America, developing the young horses in Europe is advantageous for us. From a financial perspective, I can support ten young horses in Europe for every one I can support in America. I also think that as far as the education of the young horses is concerned, there is still a big gap. In Europe, the height of the fences at each level for each age group is considered the grand prix level for that age group. That height is what, for example, the top seven-year-old should be jumping. Over here in

America, I believe the height of the fences and the level of the competition is a little too watered down to properly prepare the young horses to eventually step up to jumping the bigger classes.

I think that the Young Jumper Championship program is, in theory, really good for our sport. But, I believe that if you are trying to bring up the nicest young jumper horses in North America, they should be able to jump the same heights that everyone else's horses are jumping throughout the world. Creating consistency across the continents is important for keeping American young horses competitive when they step up to the international stage to face their European counterparts.

I also believe it is important to give the young horses experience in the main arenas at top venues, as in Europe, because that is an integral part of developing a young horse. When you are trying to develop a five- or six-year-old in this country, you are shoved into a small ring in the back of the show, and the horse never sees the inside of the main arenas until later in his career.

Owner Recognition

Additionally, in the United States, very little is done to champion the owners of these horses. That is a huge flaw in this industry. In Europe, the owners are made known and are shown more appreciation. The horse shows here in the United States are more concerned with taking everyone's money than promoting the sport and recognizing the driving forces that are keeping it alive. If we are taking all the blood from the owners, the industry is eventually going to die. The riders become the celebrities, while the owners stand in the shadows. Of course the riders should be celebrated, but we cannot forget that the owners along with the breeders form the true backbone of our industry.

I made it part of my mission to avoid overshadowing my owners at all costs. When I partnered with my good friend Katherine Gallagher, we were able to create another branch of the business in North America in 2009. From the very beginning, Katherine has been solidly behind me and has upheld the same ideals as I do. She believes in my business plan for these horses, she supports my dream for these horses, and she allows me

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The 2016 M. Michael Meller Style of Riding Award is presented to Allison Robitaille with Peter Lutz and his family present. The author Michael stands second from the left.

to take the time that I need to produce them correctly. Finding a partner like Katherine has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and she has allowed me the freedom to do exactly what I want and need to do for the horses without harboring an agenda of her own. This mutual trust is why our partnership works.

Together, Katherine and I started compiling our Gallagher/Meller string in North America. We began by buying horses to fill the gap between our three-year-olds and seven-year-olds in Europe, and we came to own the future champions Waterloo, Adoctro and Carneyhaugh Manx.

Talent in the Stirrups

While we established our string, I took some time to select my rider. After a few failed attempts, I realized I had to find someone who could ride our then-rising star, Carneyhaugh Manx (Irish Sport Horse, Douglas x Hampton Clover). He was a sensitive horse and he needed a calm, understanding rider who could track him to the fences without muscling him there. I thought Peter Lutz undoubtedly gave that kind of ride to Manx, so I started with him and we have been working well together ever since.

I always thought the end of the line for my business was selling the horses when they made it to the CSI1* and CSI2* level. But with Peter on board, I was able to remove the restrictions on what we could accomplish. I have never found anyone as loyal as Peter, so I put my resources into him and helped establish his career at the international level, where he deserves to be. In turn, he has helped us extend our horses' capabilities to the CSI5* level.

After Manx was sold, he went on to win two CSI4* Grand Prix classes with McLain Ward. We then turned our attention to Peter's career with one of our newer North American horses, Robin de Ponthual (Selle Français, Elf d'Or x Calypso D'Herbiers). From 2014 on, the pair logged top-ten finishes in CSI3*, CSI4*-W and CSI5* classes across North America. In 2015, our first big victory came as we watched Peter and Robin win the CSI3* \$100,000 Longines FEI World Cup Jumping North American League qualifier at the Las Vegas National. Advancing to the Longines FEI World Cup Finals in Gothenburg under the American flag was one of the greatest honors of all of our careers to date.

With our hard work paying off, we pressed on by jumping some of North America's toughest tracks. Peter and Robin closed out the summer of 2016 by winning their first CSI5* class, the \$375,000 CP Grand Prix



Ashley Neuhoof



Rebecca Walton/Phelpssports.com

Top: Retiro and Peter Lutz compete at the Wellington Winter Equestrian Festival. Bottom: Robin de Ponthual jumps with great form at the FEI World Cup in Sweden.

at Spruce Meadows. It was an amazing moment that validated our philosophy of taking our time and allowing the horses to develop on their own schedules.

Breeding for the Future

As our North American jumpers Robin and Retiro (Rockefeller Z x Playboy) have moved up to winning at the highest levels of show jumping, Katherine and I have started laying the base to begin breeding horses in Florida and Massachusetts. We are using the same bloodlines that Dan and I have enjoyed working with so far in Europe. This will be our first year breeding in America,

and I am currently in the process of acquiring foundation broodmares. I am looking for mares who have the special qualities that anyone would want in a horse, but have been retired from the show ring due to an injury or wear and tear due to age.

When it comes to my breeding program, I focus on a lineage that has proven to be dominant within our sport. By combining great mares with a stallion who can add the power, the turbo engine if you will, I feel we can upgrade the offspring in that way. Starting out with really high-quality bloodlines and really solid heritage is very important. I am a big fan of the stallions Diamant de Semilly, Cassall ASK, and our stallions Cazador La Silla, Iceman De Muze and Quilimbo. In my opinion, the United States overall is less focused on breeding top horses than Europe is, and I want to change that.

We as a country have a tendency to waste valuable animals with wonderful bloodlines that could enrich

our breeding programs by retiring them to the pasture or life as a lesson horse. Unfortunately, we lack the knowledge to respect the heritage of some of these thrown-away horses. In Europe, breeding is in their blood. They know the dam, the sire, the granddam, the breeder, who doctored the horse and who delivered him or her. They just know every detail.

It is very important that we take the time to learn the history of our sport in order to effectively and responsibly shape its future. I like to think of the whole process as being a train. With all my businesses combined as a whole, we have the


train cars filled, from foals we have bred to young horses we have bought to horses that are winning at the CSI5* Grand Prix level. It is all meant to flow together between all of the fronts. Everywhere you look, at every stage of the game, Katherine and I are represented and we are challenging the status quo.

“We are essentially a bunch of wealthy carnies trying to put on a circus, so there has to be a reason we are doing this, and it is for the love of the horses.”

The Buck Stops Here

At the end of the day, there is a dream involved here, of course. The business has to be structurally and financially sound, but the reason we are doing this entire thing is for the horses. We are essentially a bunch of wealthy carnies trying to put on a circus, so there has to be a reason we are doing this, and it is for the love of the horses.

Our dream is to be well known for owning, training and showing really nice, high-quality horses who want to do their job. If Peter can go to the Olympics, that would be amazing. But Peter beginning to have a shot at it with our horses, that is even more amazing.

Like many equestrians, I'm a workaholic. Day in and day out I eat, sleep and breathe the businesses of breeding, scouting and training. I am kept abreast by FaceTime and videos from Europe at all hours of the day and night. The buck stops here. At the end of the day, I am the one who is held accountable with my investors, my riders and my grooms. I am very involved, and there is no other option for me. I love it and I live for it; the horses teach me something every day, which makes it all worthwhile. 

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