

Christian Coyle Makes His Way in North America

By Lindsay Brock

Some may glance over a show jumping order of go with Christian Coyle's name listed and choose to root for better-known Grand Prix stars. But if an asterisk appeared next to his name, it would surely read "one to watch."

Hailing from Ireland, 35-year-old Christian is in the second year of making a name for himself on the U.S. show jumping scene. Currently working as trainer for Kevin Walker and his family at Red Barn Farm based just outside of Boston in Milton, Massachusetts, Christian began his summer by competing at the first three weeks of the Vermont Summer Festival with a string of Irish-bred horses.

While he now winters in Wellington, Florida, with the occasional trip back home to Ireland, Christian's career hasn't always been about jet-setting and riding quality horses in the show ring. His path to success had a modest beginning laden with hard work.

Starting Young

Christian was 4 when he threw a leg over his first pony. "My father's brother was into horses and that's how I got my start," recalled Christian. "He taught me so much from the beginning."

As a child, Christian rode a lot of ponies and produced them to be sold, but never jumped up through the pony ranks. He rode with his uncle while moonlighting as a machinery driver and working in "a little bit of everything."

When he was 18, Christian got his first break from Geraldine Graham of Lenamore Stables. During the two years he rode and trained for her, Christian competed on a Young Rider team and had a taste of what international competition feels like.

After two years with Lenamore Stables, Christian transitioned to work for the Smith family in Omagh while holding down a full-time job as a crane operator at the harbor in his hometown of Derry, Ireland. That's when he found himself at a



Christian and Kayla Walker with her horse KBS Rocky in Vermont

crossroads.

"I was doing horses in the morning, going to the harbor all day, then returning to finish the horses at night," said Christian. "It was getting to be too much and something had to give. So, I gave up the job and went out on my own."

After leaving his work at the harbor

behind, Christian went all in on his horse sport dreams. At 22, he bought a 20-stall farm on 40 acres and started riding and training for a small group of owners.

First Trip to America

"That was when I made my first trip to



Christian and KEC Kris Kringle competing at the Vermont Summer Festival in East Dorset, Vermont

the U.S.," he said. "I spent three months in Wellington for the Winter Equestrian Festival and until you see it with your own eyes, it's hard to believe. Shows at home, at their longest, are one week, and we see a lot of one-day and two-day shows. Here, it's one week, six weeks or three months. I was shocked, but I loved that first trip and realized this is a fantastic place to be."

Christian's pilgrimage over the Atlantic led him to sell his farm in Ireland and focus on his work across the pond. Beginning with Alan Griffin of Ox Ridge Hunt, he bounced from barn to barn, soaking up all the experience he could. From piloting his first-ever hunter during a six-month stint at Cormac and Catherine Kennedy's Mor Linn Farm in Walpole, Massachusetts, to joining the team of Grand Prix rider and fellow Irishman Darragh Kerins for another six months, Christian was yet again climbing his way to success.

Christian first met Kevin Walker, his current owner and business partner at Red Barn Farm, as a student while at Mor Linn Farm.

"I would teach him there and one day he approached me about partnering on a new barn," said Christian. "That's how this all started. We settled outside Boston in September of 2014 and are working on developing a 10-stall barn in Wellington for the winter."

Summers in Vermont

Coming full circle, while staying true to his Irish roots, the Vermont Summer Festival was one of the first shows that Christian attended after deciding to base himself in the U.S. This summer, he and Kevin again settled in Vermont for the first half of the circuit with a string of Irish-bred horses.

Christian has been piloting KEC Kris Kringle, an 8-year-old gelding (Aldatus Z x Lisselton Cruise Two), that he describes as his best horse at the moment.

"Our goal right now is to place consistently at the Grand Prix level," said Christian. "Kris Kringle is 8, but has the experience of a 6-year-old, so it's a big ask for him.

"I think a lot of the horse," continued Christian with a smile. "I don't want to rush him — he's going to be a real, proper 1.60m horse one day."

In December, just after Kris Kringle was imported from Ireland, Christian first guided him in the show ring, jumping over a 1.20m track. By the sixth time he had shown him, Kris Kringle had moved up to the 1.40m level and, by May, had finished third in the \$25,000 Grand Prix in Saratoga.

Young Horses

Most of Christian's current efforts are focused on producing young horses, with 6-year-old KEC City Limits qualified for the Hampton Classic and 6-year-old KBS Rocky carrying Kevin's daughter, Kayla, in lower-level jumper competition.

While Christian notices the significant differences between his show-ring experiences in Ireland and the U.S., he maintains that North America — most currently the Vermont Summer Festival — suits him just fine at the moment.

"It's hard to get a ribbon here — you earn every placing you get," he said. "The money is great each week, but the horses are quality and you still need a good double clear to get any of it."

As a young professional bringing some international flare to shows, Christian is learning what it takes to make it in horse sport. Much has happened for him since he left the Derry Harbor and the comforts of Ireland behind. But, with a little bit of hard work and a few good horses, he's confident that he's on his way.

Thinking back to the time when he chose horses as his career, Christian confirmed with a smile, "I think I made the right decision." **S**

Photos by Lindsay Brock for Jump Media