



Matthew Metell and Donchalant, competing in their first grand prix together at the 2017 Vermont Summer Festival at Harold Beebe Farm in East Dorset, VT. Photo by Jump Media

# Matthew Metell: Climbing the Ranks of Horse Sport

By Lindsay Brock/Jump Media

**M**atthew Metell reached new heights in his professional riding career this summer. After winning the first grand prix of his career in the \$30,000 Vermont Summer Special Grand Prix during the opening week of the six-week Vermont Summer Festival in East Dorset, VT, the grand prix rookie went on to score a rare hat trick. He and his mare, Donchalant, also topped the \$30,000 Battenkill Grand Prix, presented by The Equinox Resort, and the finale \$50,000 Summer Celebration Grand Prix to win three of the six grand prix titles on offer.



Matthew Metell and Donchalant after winning the \$30,000 Battenkill Grand Prix, presented by The Equinox Resort, at the 2017 Vermont Summer Festival. Photo by Jump Media

Metell had never even entered a grand prix before making his way to the 2017 Vermont Summer Festival, but the 27-year-old is no stranger to taking chances. An athlete from a young age, Metell played soccer, hockey, and rode dirt bikes as a child, but the passion to pursue any of those sports seriously eluded him. Metell's parents were not riders or trainers, but when they stumbled into the horse industry by happenstance, they immediately recognized the spark their son had for horses. Originally from Falmouth, MA, a coastal town on Cape Cod, Metell took



Matthew Metell and Donchalant won their second grand prix in a row in the \$30,000 Battenkill Grand Prix, presented by The Equinox Resort.



Matthew Metell, aboard Donchalant, is presented as the winner of the \$50,000 Vermont Summer Celebration Grand Prix by, from left to right, Vermont Summer Festival representatives Jennifer Glass and Ruth Lacey. Photo by Andrew Ryback Photography



Matthew Metell, aboard Donchalant, led the victory gallop in the first grand prix he ever entered; the \$30,000 Vermont Summer Special Grand Prix at the 2017 Vermont Summer Festival. Photo by Jump Media

his first riding lesson at a small farm on the Cape where his cousin kept her horses. That was the beginning of what became Metell's calling.

"I was involved with so many sports as a kid, but all I kept asking for was a pony," said Metell. "My mom wasn't sure if I was a little boy who really wanted a dirt bike or a pony, so she wasn't willing to take too much of a chance on it yet. My first pony was a Mustang we pulled off a truck from Mexico and paid \$500 for.

"Her name was Magic and we gave her the show name Abracadabra," continued Metell. "I fell off her almost every day in the beginning, but she became a really competitive children's hunter pony at the local level."

Metell's experience with Magic convinced his mother, Julene, and father, Mike, that their son was hooked on horses. Training with Kathy Fletcher of Grazing Fields Farm in Buzzards Bay, MA, Metell's parents leased him a pony named Rock Steady. That pony would carry Metell to his first USEF Pony Finals, but it would not be his last championships experience.

In 2008, Metell started training as a working student with renowned equitation trainer, Andre Dignelli, at Heritage Farm in Katonah, NY. During that year, Metell placed second in the Platinum Performance/U.S. Equestrian Federation Talent Search (USET) Finals – East.

"I was feeling a little burnt out on equitation when I came to ride with Andre," admitted Metell. "He made me love it again. I would not be where I am today without Kathy, but Andre really took me to the next level."

With one more year of eligibility left in the USET ranks, Metell set a goal to again qualify for the 2009 Final. Dignelli partnered him with a horse named Pioneer, a former grand prix show jumper that was to be sold, for one last shot at equitation fame. Metell and Pioneer won the USET Finals that year, and he still considers it to be one of the most important days of his life.

Looking back on a formative two years with Dignelli, Metell recalls, "One of the most important things I learned from him is that when you're warming up for a class and standing at the ingate, you want someone perfectly calm who can give you a clear, concise sentence or two of advice. Andre is exactly that. He instills confidence that you can win any class. I have tried to use those tools myself and always go into the ring with calmness and clarity."

After concluding his junior career on the highest of notes, Metell briefly realigned his priorities from horses to education. He enrolled at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, CT, and finished four years of college with a dual degree in finance and business economics.

"My mom was a big influence on me regarding college," said Metell who, like many talented young riders, had to decide whether to pursue college or

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turn professional. "I did not want to go, but she always instilled in me that riding wasn't going anywhere and you never know when you might wake up one day and want to do something else.

"I am happy that I listened to her," continued Metell. "In our business, you need support from a lot of people who have means and they are usually smart, educated people. It's a benefit for me, and for any young rider, to have an education that can help advance your business. To me, you need more than the ability to get on the back of a horse to make it."

During college, Metell returned to Heritage Farm each summer as a working student and, upon graduation, accepted a job at Kaplow Equine Insurance. After several months, Metell returned to work full-time with Dignelli as an assistant trainer.

In 2013, Metell began looking for more opportunities with young jumpers and transitioned to ride for Theodore "Teddy" Demetriou of Wolver Hollow based in Chester, NY.

"I really wanted to ride more and Teddy was importing a lot of horses from Europe at the time," said Metell. "Together we imported Donchalant from The Netherlands in the spring of 2017."

Donchalant, a nine-year-old Dutch Warmblood mare (Larino x Amaretto I) that had previously been campaigned in the international ranks by Rodrigo Silva Morgado of Portugal, carried Metell to all three of his grand prix victories at the Vermont Summer Festival this summer. The pair had only been partnered together for a few weeks following Donchalant's release from U.S. quarantine when they started winning.

"When I first saw her, we were in a tiny indoor arena where you could barely jump a three-stride," recalled Metell of their initial meeting in Europe. "We jumped a few jumps, she seemed like the right type for my riding style, and that was that. I didn't even sit on her again after five or six jumps. She is obviously more than we could have hoped for. We bought her as a horse to do exactly what she did in Vermont, win grand prix classes, and, obviously,

we couldn't be happier with her."

Metell considers his first grand prix win to be the best moment of his riding career to date and plans to see where Donchalant can take him.

"I will never forget the feeling of winning my first grand prix," he said. "After the success we had this summer, all I want to do is jump her every Sunday, but I have waited a long time for this and I want to do right by the horse. For me, it was a long time coming to get a horse like this mare and be winning in the big ring. I'm just soaking it all in!"



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