

# heelsdown

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## LIFE, MEG

and the Pursuit  
of Happiness

Megan Kepferle

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# Gold Medals Are Just the Beginning

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Caitlyn Shiels



*It took more than NAJYRC gold medals for Caitlyn Shiels to forge her career.*

Caitlyn Shiels

*By Caroline Culbertson*

Young riders take note: Caitlyn Shiels is the product of persistence. While it may seem that two show jumping gold medals at NAJYRC set her up for a sure-fire professional career, the rise to being a professional rider and trainer at an operation like Canterbury Farm in Hampshire, Ill., takes a lot more than talent to achieve.

These days, Caitlyn, 34, can be found in the ring at horse shows around the country competing client horses, developing her own string, or bringing students up through the ranks and instilling her hard-earned lessons in their development.



"I have a job that I love with amazing owners and a great team behind me. I have the luxury of showing beautiful derby horses, beautiful hunters, and have time to put into my own horses so I can do the Grand Prixs again," said Caitlyn, with an undeniable tone of gratitude in her voice.

"I think (younger riders) look at jobs like that and think, 'Well, I did great in medal finals, so I'll just be a rider.' It doesn't work like that. I know it doesn't, because I was there."

For Caitlyn, it took a firm mindset, a lot of patience, even more work ethic – and the willingness to go wherever an opportunity appeared.

## **A Crucial Beginning**

A turning point in Caitlyn's early development – and one that set her on the path to a double gold medal-winning performance at NAJYRC in 2004 – was joining Andre Dignelli's program at Heritage Farm in Katonah, N.Y.. Andre has produced riders like Kent Farrington, Reed Kessler, Lillie Keenan

and Tori Colvin. For Caitlyn, it was a steep departure from the local shows she was used to.

Caitlyn Shiers

“Every Wednesday afternoon and on the weekends, I’d travel two and a half hours to go to Heritage and have lessons while I was in high school,” said Caitlyn, who took on a working student position in order to afford Andre’s help. “Then during the summers I’d go on the road with them and ride as much as I possibly could. I’d ride *anything* I could.”



That arrangement never would have happened, Caitlyn says, if her childhood trainer Mary Meade hadn't wanted to her to reach her full potential – even at the cost of losing a student.

“When I was 15, Mary told



me, 'I see this talent in you and I feel like I can't bring you to the level you'd like to go, like medal Maclay finals.'" Caitlyn Shiers

Mary then suggested driving to Heritage to see if Andre would take a chance on Caitlyn and bring her into his program.

"We had no idea. She just walked into his office and said, 'I have this kid that has a lot of talent and I can't take her much further.' Andre was like, 'OK, let's have a lesson and see.' I was terrified. I don't think I breathed the

entire time I was there. I had grown up doing little C-rated horse shows thinking that was big time. I had no clue what I was walking into.”

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**“It was always hard for me to stay confident knowing that I could be a part of this business. I didn’t come from money...”**

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Caitlyn blossomed in Andre’s program, but didn’t have the finances that many of her peers had.

“I hadn’t been exposed to that before,” she recalled. “There were all these kids that had eight, ten horses plus. It blew my mind.”

Searching for a horse of her own, professional rider and trainer Kate Stoffel-Oliver told Caitlyn about a potential investment horse that wasn’t on the market for much money. “Memphis”, Caitlyn recalled, was a bag of bones when she bought him as a 6-year-old warmblood that had recently been imported from Europe. He took several years to develop.

“I went through four or five years of so many ups and downs, questioning why I bought this investment horse. You go through that especially when you only have the one horse,” she explained.



The payoff, however, would be worth it.

“When people started talking about NAJYRC, I never thought I’d be able to go,” she laughed. “Everything I’d ever heard about Young Riders was, ‘Its 1.50m and it’s scopey and you have to have a 1.60m horse to do it.’”

Nonetheless, she decided to give it a shot. Caitlyn, who had finished in the top ten in all of the major American equitation finals, had to shift her focus – and Memphis’s – to jumping big jumps.

“It wasn’t even on my radar that I could go and win. I just wanted to go and survive.”

In a fairytale weekend, she won double gold on a horse that she produced herself. It was the last year she would be eligible for NAJYRC, and she made her mark.

## **A Decade of Hustle**

A star was born, but the long process of making riding a sustainable career had just begun. Unsure of the next step, she balanced riding with her

in Boca Raton, Fla. A year after Young Riders, Caitlyn declared her professional status and began to consider leaving Heritage to try something new.

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In what started as a casual conversation at a horse show, then 22-year-old Caitlyn joined forces with longtime friends and show jumpers Jonathan and Christine McCrea. With

them, she expanded her skillset to training students in addition to riding. It would be four years before she happened upon her next opportunity, working as an assistant trainer for Ken and Emily Smith.

There, she focused on the hunters and brought along two young show jumping horses of her own.

When she heard that McLain Ward was looking for some summer help in managing young superstar show jumper Katie Dinan's horses, she didn't need much convincing. She was afforded the opportunity to compete a few of Katie's



horses and was entrusted with their riding when Katie and McLain went off to compete.



This temporary position lasted about seven months before she connected with her current position as trainer and rider at Greg Franklin's Canterbury

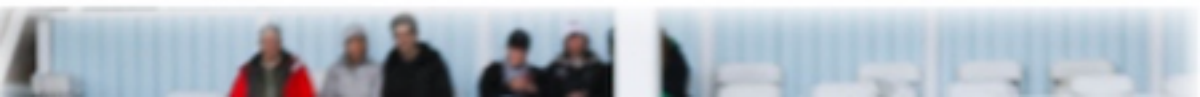
“a dream job”. She has returned to the Grand Prix arena on her own horses, has won multiple hunter derbies including the \$2,500 USHJA National Hunter Derby, and is instilling proper values in the next generation of hunter/jumpers.

## **Much to Overcome**

Keeping confidence in high-powered and high-pressure programs, especially with the expectations that follow a perfect NAJYRC performance like hers, wasn't easy. She's had her doubts, and she's not

afraid to admit it. That's part of being a pro in the industry, and those looking to make a career in horses should consider themselves warned.

"I had to learn from the people I worked for how to stand firm in your business. There's so much money in this industry and there are deals that people say are shady, so staying honest in your business is huge. You want to stand behind your brand, and be confident in the horses you're representing," Caitlyn explained.





It can be intimidating to put yourself in the same industry as those with seemingly limitless financial means, she says.

“It was always hard for me to stay confident knowing that I could be a part of this business. I didn’t come from money – my parents

were incredible and it wouldn't have happened without them, but they could only do so much financially," she said. "That's something I learned from Andre. He had nothing when he started and he built everything he has because he worked his ass off."

That never goes away. Even with all the talent and experience McLain Ward has, the Olympian still keeps his nose to the grindstone.

"McLain still watches every single round he's ever ridden, whether it's 1.20m

class, or the Olympics. You learn from that. I used to go sit at the Maclay ring and watch 70 rounds because I wanted to learn how to win.”

Those lessons, she says, she keeps with her every single day, in every single round.

“There’s always more work to be done. Everyone I’ve worked with has proven it to me.”

**CREDITS**