

Johnsen Weathers The Storm For First Derby Win At Old Salem

She didn't have the typical upbringing of a top show trainer, but her background with green horses is now giving her the upper hand.

BY ANN GLAVAN AND LAURA LEMON
PHOTOS BY THE BOOK LLC

It was the 8-year-old horse's first derby. It was the rider's first derby, and it was raining—and not a gentle storm. An absolute deluge drenched everyone in attendance during Week 2 of the Old Salem Spring Horse Shows in North Salem, New York, May 15-20.

And those were just the obvious obstacles. Ask professional rider Keirstin Johnsen about her backstory and how she found herself with the ride on a hunter like Aster De La Cense, and you realize she's overcome far more substantial stumbling blocks.

The journey from her junior years, when she never once owned her own horse, to a professional career showing and training top mounts across the country hasn't been easy.

"He's pretty amazing. He's so straightforward, such a Steady Eddie," Johnsen, 31, said of "Aster." "He really always gives you his very best. He's pretty perfect. We joke he's such a unicorn."

Johnsen picked up the ride on the Selle Français (Mylord Carthago—Lucinda Jo, Nabab De Reve) in April, when his junior rider and owner

Summer Witherspoon moved to Brooke Baldwin-Degrazia's Riverside Farm in North Salem, where Johnsen is based. Johnsen had only planned on prepping the horse in some performance classes for Witherspoon to show in the juniors, but Witherspoon and her mother had an idea.

"It was kind of a last-minute decision to do the derby," Johnsen said. "They called me Wednesday and were like, 'Will you show him in the derby? We've always wanted to see him do it.' And I said, 'Sure, why not?' And he was perfect."

Johnsen didn't become the rider she is by riding unicorns like Aster, though. Baldwin-Degrazia first met Johnsen more than a decade ago when she was a junior riding far greener mounts.

"I didn't grow up with the kind of money it would take to do this kind of thing," Johnsen said. "So I rode a lot of

“He’s pretty perfect. We joke he’s such a unicorn.”

—KEIRSTIN JOHNSON

\$15,000
USHJA INTERNATIONAL HUNTER DERBY
North Salem, N.Y.—May 19

Judges: Panel 1: Robin Swiderman-Mitchell, Kevin Giblin; Panel 2: Sissy Wickes, Caroline Vincent

HORSE/RIDER	1ST ROUND		2ND ROUND		TOTAL
	PANEL 1 SCORE/ HEIGHT OPTION	PANEL 2 SCORE/ HEIGHT OPTION	PANEL 1 SCORE/BONUS/ HEIGHT OPTION	PANEL 2 SCORE/BONUS/ HEIGHT OPTION	
1. Aster De La Cense/Keirstin Johnsen	80/0	84/0	85/9/0	87/8/0	353
2. Early Winter/Aubrienne Krysiwicz-Bell	79/0	81.5/0	82/8/0	86/8/0	344.5
3. Style/Amber Harte	75/4	78/4	78/8/4	80/9/4	344
4. Remington/Kristy Herrera	84/0	79/0	76.5/8/3	80.5/7/3	341
5. Aiden/McKayla Langmeier	73/2	76/2	84/9/1	83/8/1	339
6. Skorekeeper/Callie Seaman	86/0	86/0	81/7/0	74/4/0	338
7. Endeavor/Cyran Itzkovitz	78/0	85/0	75.5/7/0	85/5/0	335.5
8. Cheveaux/Emma Weiss	77/0	82/0	77/8/0	84/5/0	333
9. Nobel Prize/Emma Crate	76/0	75/0	75/6/3	81/8/3	327
10. Kori D'Oro/Daisy Farish	83/0	71/0	73/8/0	79/8/0	322
11. Continental/Abigail Lefkowitz	74/0	73/0	80/5/0	75/6/0	313
12. Cayman A.L./Abigail Kelley	71/0	74/0	76/5/0	78/6/0	310

13 horses competed.

Neither Keirstin Johnsen nor Aster De La Cense had ever done an international hunter derby before, but that didn't stop them from capturing the win in Old Salem Farm's \$15,000 USHJA International Hunter Derby.

horses off the track and kind of whatever came my way.”

Johnsen grew up in Newburgh, New York, riding at Bill and Tricia Dencker's Gardnertown Farm, but Baldwin-Degrazia noticed the young rider's dedication around the local horse show scene.

“I'm early to the show always, and Keirstin was always at the horse show at the same time,” Baldwin-Degrazia said. “Always working the same hours, always trying to get as much done and ride as much as she could.”

Johnsen hasn't owned a horse, but she has owned one pony—a medium she got as a child.

“My mom had told me I could have five riding lessons for Christmas one year, but that was it,” Johnsen said with a laugh. “Here we are 25 years later! We got this pony, and he was very, very young and barely broke, but he was affordable that way, so we bought him, and I brought him along.”

Johnsen has no exciting rags-to-riches story to tell about the pony.

“His name was Dennis The Menace, and it was unfortunately perfect. It didn't go so well,” Johnsen admitted. “I was a kid. I didn't know what I was doing, but he was mine, and that was good for me. I was lucky to have him.”

Johnsen eventually started showing horses for customers at the barn, anything someone would give her a leg up on.

“She rode as many horses as she could,” Baldwin-Degrazia said. “So you would watch her get on and off anything and always make it go as well as it could; that was a testament to



her. She has a great work ethic, easily adaptable to any animal, just always trying to get the best out of any horse she rides.”

Johnsen's parents aren't horse people—her dad is a general contractor, and before she started riding her mom was a waitress. To cover riding expenses, her mother started working as a horse show secretary, and her father helped out around the farm with

construction projects.

Johnsen managed to compete at all the major equitation finals before the close of her junior career.

“I was really fortunate because I would qualify on whatever; sometimes they were ex-race horses. We would show a lot at the local shows, and then usually we would borrow something to go to finals on,” Johnsen explained. “A sales horse, or one

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Keirstin Johnsen was all smiles collecting her first derby win aboard Aster De La Cense with owner Summer Witherspoon (right) on hand to help carry the loot.

year I got really lucky, and it was an actual equitation horse, just whatever was available to basically free lease.

"People were so supportive, which I thought was so nice," Johnsen continued. "They didn't have any reason to let me take their horse and go, and they did, so I was so fortunate that way."

After aging out of the juniors, Johnsen enrolled at Marist College in nearby Poughkeepsie, New York, and graduated with a degree in business marketing.

"I put myself through college. I did it in three years, but I had no intention of doing anything but this," Johnsen said.

After graduating Johnsen started

riding for Sarah Friedman out of Autumn Farms in North Salem. There she first got a chance to start making a name for herself.

"Sarah had a really nice horse that she gave me an opportunity to show in the first year division, and I got to take him to Devon, [Pennsylvania]," Johnsen said. "That was my first big horse show as a professional."

Baldwin-Degrazia hired Johnsen shortly thereafter, and Johnsen has worked at Riverside ever since, steadily climbing her way up the ranks in the hunter ring.

"Between Brooke and the customers I have incredible support," Johnsen said. "I got to do a horse, Hundred

Acre; his owner is really supportive of me, and she let me do him in the [USHJA] Pre-Green Incentive the first time they held it, and he finished fifth, and he was champion at [the Pennsylvania National Horse Show]. I feel like that was a big career moment for me."

Recently Johnsen has even started riding a jumper, something she never got to try as a junior.

"I would say I'm still learning about being a jumper rider a bit," Johnsen said with a laugh. "We have an owner who bought a horse and asked me if I would show him in the jumpers, and I said of course. I tried to be up front. I said, 'Just so you know, this is going to

be my first 1.20-meter class, like ever!”

“But she’s so great. She said, ‘I don’t care as long as you’re having fun,’ ” Johnsen added. “Those are the kinds of people we have as customers. They’re really amazing.”

After Aster’s derby win, the Witherspoons would like the gelding to compete in the USHJA International Hunter Derby Championship in Lexington, Kentucky, later this year, which would be another career first for Johnsen. Her rise in the sport and the dedication of the people in her corner is more than just a testament to her talent as a rider.

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—KEIRSTIN JOHNSEN

“It’s her personality, and it’s her spirit. She’s happy to try anything,” Baldwin-Degrazia said. “So people are willing to give to her because she’s such a good person and a good soul and a hard worker. Everybody is happy to give her all they can.”

“It was definitely frustrating at times,” Johnsen said. “But I’ve always felt so fortunate because I was never without horses to ride. Whether they were fancy or like what everybody

else had or not I was always riding something, and I always got to show. Someone just always had my back.

“I may not have had the top junior hunters or best eq horses, but I always got to be a part of it,” she continued. “And I think for me that was enough. It was OK with me that I wasn’t always winning at Devon; I got to go to Devon.”

Johnsen isn’t necessarily aiming for gold medals or piles of blue ribbons either. Sure, she’d like to be competitive, but as a trainer and horsewoman it’s always been much more about the process than the end results.

“I’d love to expand and be great in the jumper ring,” she said. “I like doing the young horses for the hunters, things like the incentive and the



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pre-greens. I find that interesting and fun, to see the progression. I much prefer to do that than to get on something that's made and has a record and already been there, done that. I like bringing them along and feeling like I was a part of that success.

"Whatever I'm doing, I just think it's fun," she added. "And I like to try to make the horses go the best they can go."

Sternlicht Keeps Her Eyes On The Prize

Adrienne Sternlicht had plenty of reasons to celebrate during the week leading up to the \$50,000 Old Salem Farm Grand Prix CSI**, held on May 13. She turned 25 on May 9, and then on Mother's Day, her mom Mimi

Sternlicht braved the rainy clouds to watch her daughter win her first grand prix blue ribbon.

"I was really happy to finally win a grand prix and for this to be sort of my home show," said Adrienne, Greenwich, Connecticut. "I've been showing here for the past 15 years—or more honestly. It was really special.

"And on Sunday my mom was here," added Adrienne, who was born on Mother's Day. "I've been knocking on the door for a while of winning a grand prix. A bunch of people somewhat jokingly were like, 'Is this really your first grand prix win?' And I'm really fortunate that the horses that I do, they've had a very good winter with consistent results."

With her experienced mount Toulago, Adrienne let go and took the risks that allowed her to best her friend Sydney Shulman's time on Villamoura.

"I'm a bit of a control freak," admitted Adrienne. "So I've always tended to want to do it the right way, and I've known that [winning] will come in time. I'm not a particularly aggressive rider, and I don't like to leave much to chance. But my horse is very seasoned. He's been an incredible teacher for me, not just jumping—he's the first real 1.60-meter horse I've had. But also in this sort of situation, he's so brave. The more I dare him at the fences, the better he jumps. So I feel like it's time. I'm certainly happy to get it out of the way because I've been



Adrienne Sternlicht earned her first grand prix blue with Toulago in the \$50,000 Old Salem Farm Grand Prix CSI**.

waiting for this moment for a while. I'm happy it all finally came together."

Since graduating from Brown University (Rhode Island) in 2016, Adrienne has thrown herself into becoming the best rider she could while also working for a nonprofit—and now on a 2020 presidential campaign for Democrat Andrew Yang.

With top horses like the 13-year-old Oldenburg gelding (Toulon—Grand Clou, Carthago Z) and



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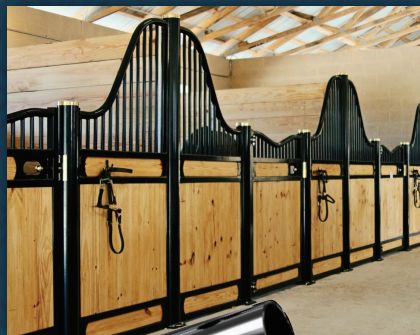
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\$50,000
OLD SALEM FARM
GRAND PRIX CSI**
North Salem, N.Y.—May 13

HORSE/RIDER	FAULTS	TIME	PURSE
1. Toulago/ Adrienne Sternlicht	0-0	39.15	\$16,500
2. Villamoura/ Sydney Shulman	0-0	39.29	10,000
3. Cassinja S/ Charlie Jacobs	0-0	40.80	7,500
4. Alma Z/Cormac Hanley	0-0	41.34	5,000
5. Bardolina 2/ Mario Deslauriers	0-0	41.39	3,000
6. Chamonix H/Kelli Cruciotti	0-0	42.28	2,250
7. Caracho 14/Lucy Davis	0-0	43.44	1,500
8. Balou 660/Vasco Flores	0-4	42.68	1,250
9. Dali De Vy/ Christine McCrea	0-4	45.29	1,000
10. Crown 5/ Georgina Bloomberg	0-4	48.45	1,000
11. Penelope Cruz/ Brian Courmane	0-E	—	500

Also competed: 12. Qui Vive Des Songes Z/H. Caristo-Williams, 1; 13. Fee Des Sequojas Z/J. Gallego, 1; 14. Iliano Van D'Abelendreef/M. Langmeier, 4; 15. Entano/D. Bluman, 4; 16. Retiro/P. Lutz, 4; 17. Great White/D. Farish, 4; 18. Upper/D. Oberkircher, 4; 19. Hester/L. Deslauriers, 4; 20. Eax Run Run LS/I. Bluman, 5; 21. Shet Du Tho/K. Tyler, 5; 22. Dsarie/B. Mandil, 5; 23. Tosca Du Feugre/L. Fischer, 8; 24. Con Taggio/B. Madden, 8; 25. Cassandra/M. Ashe, 8; 26. Win For Life/J. McCrea, 8; 27. Tizmin LS/M. McDermott, 8; 28. Catango/M. Hutchinson, 8; 29. Princess De Revel/M. Da Costa Ribeiro, 9; 30. Dubai/M. Spencer, 9; 31. Dougie Douglas/K. Dinan, 9; 32. Quinta 106/M. Tromp, 12; 33. HH Gigi's Girl/M. Ward, 12; 34. Coolmann 7/A. Baker, 13; 35. Queen Jane/T.J. O'Mara, 13; 36. Charlie/H. McNerney, 29; El Pacho/P. Villa, VW; Audi's Dimple/K. Mealfiff, VW; Loughnavatta Indigo/J. Corrigan, VW; Cicero's Electric/P. Wylde, VW.

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Switzerland's Beat Mändli guided Katie Dinan's Simba to the top of the \$131,000 Empire State Grand Prix CSI*** at the Old Salem Farm Horse Show.



**\$130,000
EMPIRE STATE GRAND PRIX CSI***
North Salem, N.Y.—May 20**

HORSE/RIDER	FAULTS	TIME	PURSE
1. Simba/Beat Mändli	0-0	34.34	\$42,900
2. Clinta/McLain Ward	0-0	35.36	26,000
3. Viva Colombia/Brianne Goutal-Marteau	0-0	35.58	19,500
4. Cafino/Amber Harte	0-4	36.09	13,000
5. Cassinja S/Charlie Jacobs	0-10	46.60	7,800

Also competed: 6. Caracho 14/L. Davis, 1; 7. Chicago HOF Eversem Z/M. Tromp, 1; 8. Toulago/A. Sternlicht, 1; 9. VDL Cartello/C. Hanley, 4; 10. Manodie II H/G. Bloomberg, 4; 11. Darry Lou/B. Madden, 4; 12. Bohemian Rhapsody/H. McNemey, 4; 13. Great White/D. Farish, 5; 14. Eax Run Run LS/I. Bluman, 5; 15. Balou 660/V. Flores, 5; 16. Win For Life/J. McCrea, 5; 17. Dubai/M. Spencer, 5; 18. Loughnavatta Indigo/J. Corrigan, 5; 19. Armik/B. Courmane, 5; 20. Columbcille De Reve/N. Dello Joio, 8; 21. Cooper/D. Ryan, 8; 22. Redmond/A. Michan, 8; 23. Giorgio Van't Hagenhof/Q. Judge, 9; 24. Dougie Douglas/K. Dinan, 9; 25. Cassandra/M. Ashe, 9; 26. Nektarina B/C. McCrea, 9; 27. Audi's Dimple/K. Mealiff, 9; 28. Queen Jane/T.J. O'Mara, 10; 29. Fee Des Sequojas Z/J. Manuel Gallego, 14; 30. Iliano Van D'Abelendreef/M. Langmeier, 16; 31. Donna Speciale/L. Howard, 20; 32. Cornwall BH/A. Derbyshire, 21; Bacara D'Archonfosse/D. Bluman, VW; Dontez/S. Scheiring, VW.

Cristalline, as well as guidance from McLain Ward, Adrienne has competed on Nations Cup teams, and she's always dreamed of Olympics and World Equestrian Games.

"If I'm going to dedicate myself to something, I'm quite competitive. I want to be as good as I can," said Adrienne. "I would say [WEG] was always on my radar. I knew that if I dedicated myself to this sport, I was hopeful that with all the amazing tools and the horses that I have, between managing and my training, and the horses that I'm fortunate to ride, I knew that I had a shot of getting to this level."

But in December, Adrienne found herself needing to hit the restart button. The self-induced pressure wasn't helping her. So she decided to take the month off to refocus and re-center.

"[I changed] my focus in the sport

“The more I dare him at the fences, the better he jumps.”

—ADRIENNE STERNLICHT

from being completely result oriented, being driven and motivated by that, to sort of a shift in perspective of where right now my commitment is not so much to necessarily achieving the best outcome," said Adrienne, "but instead to improving myself as

a rider—knowing that McLain really emphasizes with me riding the best track that I can on that day for my horse, and the results will follow. Sometimes they'll be in my favor, and sometimes they may not, but my commitment has to remain there because I think success in this sport comes in real ebbs and flows."

That mentality paid off as she was named to the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games (North Carolina) short list for the NetJets U.S. Show Jumping Team at the end of April.

"I'm very aware that having a horse like Cristalline, she makes me look better than I am," said Adrienne. "My point is improving myself every day and being as good as I can for her. I'm in it wholeheartedly. So with WEG in sight, I'm really just focused on becoming the best rider I can be and the best rider for her, so [she] is able to reach her full potential." 🍎

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