



MICHELLE DURPETTI & CAITLYN SHIELS;
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Ask anyone what they think it takes to make it in the equestrian industry, and, while you may get a myriad of answers, there is likely to be a resoundingly common one: money. In today's hunter/jumper sport there is the perception that it is only with vast financial means that one can achieve success.

While there is a kernel of truth in this opinion, there are several qualities that carry greater weight when it comes to succeeding and fulfilling dreams in equestrian sport than simply the ability to sign large checks. Those traits include a clear vision of one's goals, the determination, discipline, and often dogged stubbornness to go after those goals, and, if you are lucky, a strong support system around you of people who believe in your ability to achieve them.

For professional rider and trainer Caitlyn Shiels and amateur equestrian and businesswoman Michelle Durpetti, those traits are present in spades, and together – Shiels, as the founder and owner of True Stables, and Durpetti, as one of True North Stables' very first clients – are putting those traits to use to fuel their dreams and their pursuit of their greatest goals in the sport.

"I really believe that voracious tenacity, steady faith, good, old-fashioned discipline, and a great team of people around you are the secret to life," said Durpetti. "Anyone deserves a shot at their dream, and it's with those ingredients that dreams can become reality."

Driven From the Start

Whether individuals come by these traits through "nature or nurture" can always be up for debate, but for Shiels and Durpetti, they seem to have been exhibited from the start – and only further fostered over time. The two led parallel paths following their dreams in their youth they before they joined forces.

Growing up in Massachusetts, Shiels started taking recreational riding lessons alongside her mom, who had begun pursuing the hobby for fun. Then, when Shiels was eight, a family friend gave Shiels and her

Determination, Discipline, and Teamwork Make the Dream Work for Caitlyn Shiels and Michelle Durpetti

“He just donated it to us so that I, a horse-crazy kid, could have one of my own right in the backyard!” said Shiels. “I started going out there every day to clean the stall and take care of my horse. I learned that horses were a lot of work, but also incredibly rewarding.”

Just a few years earlier in Chicago, a young Durpetti was learning similar lessons and enjoying a comparable introduction to the sport. She began riding lessons at the age of nine and leased a 15-hand Appaloosa, quickly learning a lot about the time, care, and commitment that goes into having horses.

Into their junior and amateur years, Shiels and Durpetti both began to go after their competitive equestrian goals with tenacity. At 15, Shiels became a working student for Andre Dignelli at Heritage Farm, ultimately placing in the top 10 of all of the country’s major equitation finals. Durpetti spent her junior years competing successfully under the tutelage of Katie Kappler and then began to see the same success in the amateur rings under trainer Lynn Jayne.

After winning both individual and team gold medals at the 2004 North American Junior and Young Rider Championships (NAJYRC) on her first project investment horse, Memphis, Shiels launched her professional riding career.

At the same time, Durpetti was launching her own professional business career. Ultimately, she founded her own event planning business, Michelle Durpetti Events, and began working as a managing partner of her family’s Turnkey Hospitality Group in Chicago, which presently includes Gene & Georgetti Steakhouses, The Estate wedding venue, and a new restaurant, Bar Ida, opening soon.

It was not until 2012 that Shiels and Durpetti’s paths converged.

The Tenacity to Get to the Top

Shiels was the assistant trainer at Canterbury Farm in Illinois, where Durpetti was riding, when the two quickly realized that they shared the same drive, determination, and goal-setting mentality. They also recognized that many of their goals closely aligned, and they had a way of bringing out the best in each other as both student and trainer and as friends.

“I can tell you that Caitlyn’s ability and attitude is beyond compare. I absolutely adore her, and I respect her as well. She has a knack for understanding the horses she rides and bringing out the best in them, and she does the exact same thing with the people she teaches. She gets such satisfaction out of seeing her students excel that it is both motivating and really confidence building,” said Durpetti. “She is goal-oriented, so motivated, and she genuinely loves what she does.”

For Shiels, one of her goals had long been running her own business, and so, in January 2018 – after more than a decade working with leading riders and trainers including Jonathan and Christine McCrea, Ken and Emily Smith, and McLain Ward – Shiels took a leap of faith and went for her biggest goal yet: launching her own business, True North Stables.

By mid-summer, Shiels had established a barn full of horses and riders of all ages who are passionate about the sport and tenacious in achieving their goals – whether that goal is to jump 3’ or a grand prix – and she and Durpetti alike had both checked numerous other goals off of their lists.

In January, Durpetti competed her nine-year-old Warmblood gelding, Cassius, in the Amateur-Owner Hunters for the first time – and earned wins and a reserve championship at the Winter Equestrian Festival (WEF).

In May, Shiels rode her project horse of five years, Cavalier II, to his very first grand prix win, topping the \$25,000 Maffitt Lake Grand Prix after bringing him along on her own since the gelding was six years old.

PHOTOS, TOP TO BOTTOM: MICHELLE DURPETTI & CAITLYN SHIELS WITH CASSIUS; CAITLYN SHIELS & CAVALIER II; TRUE NORTH STABLES RIDERS INCLUDING, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, EMILY BRITTON, MARISA MALEVITIS, MICHELLE DURPETTI, CAITLYN SHIELS, & KATIE HAWKINS; MICHELLE DURPETTI & SERAFINA.

And in August, they together traveled to the United States Hunter Jumper Association (USHJA) International Hunter Derby Championships, where Cassius and Shiels finished 17th out of 85 horses.

“Taking the step of going out on my own has felt like such an immense accomplishment; being at Derby Finals this year with True North Stables and being able to walk in there and be in the top 20 is pretty kick-ass,” said Shiels. “Everyone keeps asking, ‘Well, how did it feel?’ and I’m so happy with the way things are that it almost hasn’t sunk in yet. So much of this year hasn’t really settled in yet. It has been full of so many emotions!”

“With [Cavalier II] too, to see all of the pieces of the puzzle and the five years of sweat, tears, hard work, time and money come together in the grand prix ring is an absolutely incredible feeling,” said Shiels.

It’s that feeling and the love of the sport that keeps both Shiels and Durpetti going doggedly after their goals, and it is having the support of one another that has made it all possible.

“Michelle and I have been on this journey together from the start, and I wouldn’t want to do it with anybody else,” said Shiels. “This year, I started a new business, and we took this leap together, and that’s been huge. Without her, I don’t know where I’d be. She’s such a role model for me, a sister, and a mentor. The really amazing thing is how she believes in me. Knowing someone cares for you and trusts you that much makes me feel so much better.”

With any triumph and successes come losses and disappointments, but Shiels and Durpetti know that with clear goals, determination, dedication, and the support of each other, the hardest days are surmountable.

“Sometimes you have those brief moments where you think, ‘Maybe do I hang this goal up? Do I really just not have the pocketbook? Do I not have the ability? Am I overshooting for my horses? Should I maybe downsize my dreams a little bit?’” concluded Durpetti. “But I quickly realize that’s not me, and that’s not Caitlyn. So you shake off that sting, you find that determination and dedication, and you go back out the next day and keep trying!” ■ BY EMILY RIDEN/JUMP MEDIA;

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