

Kevin McCarthy

CHARTS A NEW PATH IN THE HORSE WORLD

By Lindsay Brock

Kevin McCarthy and Catch A Star HSS
Photo by Jump Media

When you catch the bug, it's hard to get rid of it. That's what Kevin McCarthy's father used to tell him about horses. Those wise words, however, did little to dissuade the scrappy young rider from falling head over heels in love with ponies as soon as he was old enough to swing his leg over one.

Now 43, Kevin's obsession with horses continues. He enjoyed a banner year in 2019 at both the Vermont Summer Festival in East Dorset, Vermont, and the World Equestrian Center in Wilmington, Ohio. His boyhood passion has shaped his life and eventually set him on a path back to his Irish roots.

TEN PONIES, ONE SADDLE

Growing up in County Tipperary, Ireland, Kevin's upbringing resembled the idyllic, and likely stereotypical, way most Americans think of childhood in the Irish countryside. His parents, John and Margaret, ran a dairy and sheep farm while dabbling in Connemara pony breeding.

"It's easier to round up the sheep on a pony than it is on foot, so that's how I learned to ride," recalled Kevin who, before long, was lured into the show ring. "Horse showing in Ireland was very affordable, so someone like myself coming from a farming background was able to do it. Every Sunday, within an hour's drive there was a little horse show somewhere in a field."

Between convenience, affordability and a thirst for competition, Kevin was soon racing around the pony jumper ring, and his string of feisty ponies grew to 10 mounts.

"I had 10 ponies, one saddle and one bridle, and I was headed off to a gymkhana every weekend," laughed Kevin.

The youngest of eight, Kevin was the only McCarthy child to follow his equestrian pursuits beyond the age of 16 when his pony jockey days came to an end.

"My start taught me a lot, you definitely know how to fall off after riding that many ponies," he said. "But, you have to keep getting back on. Believe it or not, pony jumping in Ireland is very

competitive, and I think it gave me an edge. To this day, I go in every time and try to win."

With his pony days behind him, Kevin worked and catch rode at barns in England, Switzerland and with fellow Irishmen and childhood friend, Denis Lynch, in Germany. According to Kevin, he spent time "learning his trade" by also riding Thoroughbreds on the track and helping to build Maryville Stables Riding School in County Cork, Ireland, with his nephew.

GO WEST

In 2008, the North American show scene came calling, and Kevin decided to venture to the United States for the first time.

"At first, I was mucking out for Margie Engle, but I loved what I saw," he said of working with the U.S. Olympian. "One night, she beat me in a game of poker and remembered me from then on. She gave me a few schooling rides and was responsible for my real start in this country.

"With Margie is where so many Irish riders



Kevin and Catch A Star HSS at the Vermont Summer Festival.
Photo by Jump Media

begin their careers in America,” continued Kevin. “She has been very good to us. If you were looking for a job and willing to work hard, Margie’s was the place to be.”

Kevin also spent time riding for Darren Graziano, who helped him achieve his first-ever grand prix victory atop a horse called Vernal.

“Other than the horses I have now, he’s probably the biggest horse of my career. We won the Sunday grand prix at Ox Ridge Hunt Club in 2013. He was challenging, but special,” said Kevin of the horse that helped him realize how much he appreciated the rewards of a complicated ride. “Darren and I flipped a coin the night before that class to see if we would even jump. We went last and won it!”

Of his preferences in an equine partner, Kevin said, “I like the fiery ones. Nowadays, they have to be careful and fast to win. With those talents sometimes comes a bit of trickiness. I love really getting to know a horse

and figuring out how to manage them so they’re happy and competitive.”

With a knack — and passion — for producing young horses, Kevin also helped bring along Evening Star while riding for Ralph Caristo. The horse went on to compete with Ralph’s daughter, Heather Caristo-Williams, for six

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seasons at the FEI level.

Any good catch rider has a long list of memorable horses, but Kevin didn’t meet his true match until a feisty mare named Catch A Star HSS joined his string. Imported by yet another Irishman, Shane Sweetnam, Kevin learned of

the mare’s style and there was something about her that he liked. With a proven record as a young horse in Sweden, Catch A Star HSS — or Casey, as she’s known to Kevin — joined his barn two years ago as an 8-year-old.

Kevin describes the now-10-year-old Swedish Warmblood mare (Sheraton x Amulet) as tricky, but notes that her will to win is what drew him in. “She wants it as much as I do!” he said.

Casey’s spirit helped propel Kevin to four grand prix victories in 2019, which included two at the Vermont Summer Festival, but the mare also helped him to chart a new path for his riding career.

BACK TO IRISH ROOTS

In 2017, Kevin made an unlikely change. After decades of working professionally with horses, he transitioned to amateur status. The reason behind the shift was a historic Irish pub in the center of Cazenovia, a sleepy but friendly town in the rolling hills of central New York that is perhaps most famous for being the base of American show jumping icons John and Beezie Madden.

“It’s been a secret dream of mine to one day be in the pub business,” said Kevin, who was inspired by the quintessential businesses of his homeland, and opened McCarthy’s Pub in November of 2017. “I stepped away from horses for a time to get the business up and running, and when I came back, it made sense for me to split my focus and drop down to being an amateur.”

The week McCarthy’s Pub opened, Cazenovia was hit with a snowstorm typical of the area. Locals quickly filled every booth and barstool looking for a warm meal and a stiff drink.

“If you asked me how the new business was going that week, I might have said, ‘Be careful what you wish for!’” Kevin mused.

Kevin and his girlfriend, Keely O’Hara, survived their first week-long rush and have found a happy balance between pub life and their horse show travels.

“America is a big country, and I wanted to ground myself and make a home. I’ve done that in Cazenovia now,” said Kevin, who lives above McCarthy’s Pub with Keely and their two dogs — Remi, a yellow lab, and Earlsie, a German Shepherd named after Irish rugby player Keith Earls.

As for his move to amateur status, Kevin maintains that there is nothing easy about the amateur jumper divisions. “I think I have to go faster in the amateur classes than I ever do in a grand prix, but I love that competitive edge,” he joked.

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Kevin made his first big splash as an amateur at the 2019 Vermont Summer Festival where he was nearly unbeatable. Competing at the base of the picturesque mountains of Southern Vermont, he racked up four Manchester Designer Outlets Welcome Stake wins in addition to two grand prix victories, allowing him to handily win a \$5,000 bonus in the \$10,000 World Equestrian Center Leading Open Jumper Rider Awards.

"We didn't plan to stay in Vermont the whole season, but one week just kept rolling into the next," said Kevin of the six-week annual circuit. "Winning or not, Manchester is the perfect place to spend a summer."

Between Kevin and Keely, their horses are gearing up for another summer season. While his first year as an amateur was clearly a success, proven by his impressive blue ribbon count, his horses are the real prize.

"I've been looking for horses like these my entire life, and apparently it took turning amateur to find them!" he concluded. **SI**



Kevin with Remi and Earlsie at home in Cazenovia, New York.
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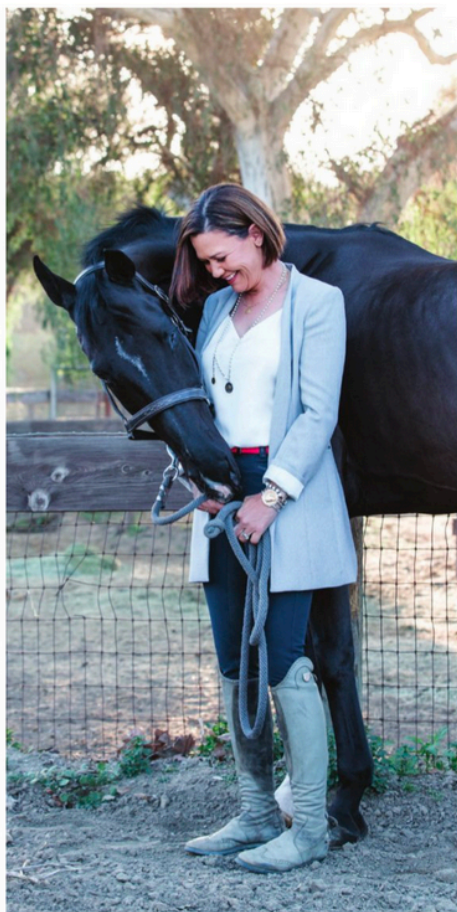
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and Danito. "They're all completely different from each other so it can be challenging for me to focus on each ride, but I've learned that mental focus is the primary ingredient to success," Tamie shared. "Without it, it's likely not going to happen."

For Tamie, "success" isn't limited to horseback: She gets just as much, if not more, satisfaction out of watching her children achieve their own successes. Though Tyler never rode again after a horse spooked and cantered with him aboard, he found his passion elsewhere. Now 16 and 6 foot 5, he's awesome at basketball and a great student, Tamie says.

In February, Kaylawna was selected to participate in the 2020 USEF Eventing 25 Emerging Athlete Program, and is herself a budding young professional. "Watching Kaylawna ride is so rewarding," Tamie said. "She is light years better than I ever was at her age, and not only is she an amazing rider but she's an amazing human. She has a thriving business and a good string of horses that she's produced, and that's the biggest accomplishment of any ribbon or medal: When your kid actually is thriving and successful, that is the true proof of someone's success."

Kaylawna feels fortunate to compete and train with her mom day in and day out. "She's one of the



Tamie with Mai Baum, owned by Ellen and Alex Ahearn and Eric Markell.

best so having her on and by my side through it all is priceless," Kaylawna said. "My mom pushes me to be the best. In business and riding. We are family and, of course, we can have our mother-daughter moments but all in all we're there for each other and always will be 100 percent."

At home in California, the Smiths have a Boxer named Diesel, a French Bulldog named Willie (or Will Smith), and a cat named Callie, in addition to Dave's assortment of aquarium fish. When Tamie travels, Will is her sidekick while Diesel and Callie are "best buddies" at home.

Despite her accomplishments, Tamie isn't finished yet. "I still feel like I have so much more to achieve before I consider myself successful," she said. "I'm always surprised when someone asks for my autograph, or wants a picture with me. It's odd to feel like people look up to you, but if I can make an impact on someone then I feel like I'm giving back to the sport."

And in the end, that's what she wants to do while she continues to pursue her own dreams. "It's important to me to help people know that if they work hard enough and stay true and honest," Tamie said, "they can achieve so much more than they ever imagined." **SI**

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