

Riding Full Circle *with* TJ O'MARA

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TJ O'MARA HAS BECOME A HOUSEHOLD NAME FOR MANY RIDERS aiming to succeed in the equitation ring. Wins in the 2016 Platinum Performance/USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals, the 2016 Pessoa/US Hunter Seat Medal Finals, and the 2016 Excellence in Equitation Championship have proven O'Mara as a top young rider and a competitor. After his achievements in equitation, he is now stepping into the Grand Prix ranks, as well as assistant trainer duties at Stonehenge Stables.

But his story cannot be told without going back to his roots in the sport—and how he is evolving within the very program where he began. O'Mara's career in the competitive levels of show jumping began at age 12, when he was connected with Max Amaya and the Stonehenge Stables team, just a short drive from his childhood home in Rumson, NJ.

"Max saw my passion for riding, so he let me ride extra horses, set courses, and get a behind-the-scenes look at a young age," O'Mara said. "I knew I wanted to go into this and Stonehenge Stables was the epitome of what I wanted to do." After admiring the success of Amaya's star

students like Brianne Goutal and Jessica Springsteen, O'Mara knew he had a chance for success himself at Stonehenge.

Having learned from Amaya's expertise throughout most of his junior career, O'Mara (22) is now an assistant trainer at Stonehenge, where he focuses on shaping young equitation riders to take on the same challenges he faced as a junior rider.

"The biggest thing the equitation gave me was confidence in the show ring," he said. "I learned the basics of track, pace, quality of the jump, and the perfect distance. The intersection of all those skills allowed me to walk into any ring and feel confident."

Feeling confident is one thing, but teaching confidence is an entirely different challenge. O'Mara admits the mental aspect of equitation is the hardest part, not only for the riders to conquer, but also for the trainers

to manage. His nerves helped him succeed by fueling his adrenaline when he took on the biggest finals of his junior career. O'Mara believes, as a trainer, he has the added benefit of having experienced exactly what his equitation riders are going through. He knows firsthand how the pressure of









As a show jumper, O'Mara uses his equitation background nearly every day in his riding and training. In his mind, nothing compares to the pressure he felt in 2016 when he took home so many equitation titles. Grand Prix classes are a different level of pressure.

"When I walk into the Grand Prix ring today, it seems like second nature answering all the technical questions they ask, because I spent so many years really perfecting those skills in the equitation," he said.

O'Mara intends to use his equitation experience to take his junior students to the top. The discipline is still fundamentally the same as when he was competing, aside from changes in the point-accumulating system to allow more riders to qualify for the finals. With his student qualified this year, O'Mara hopes for a solid round with a positive experience, and to only build on that for the future.

"I hope next year I'll build on that with more clients qualifying," he said. "The next goal would be for one of my riders to place at a final, and eventually, have one of my riders win a final. It's sort of a gradual process, but that's the long-term plan."

Still looking on from the sidelines is Max Amaya, whose lessons are now being echoed through O'Mara. "Everything I know I learned from Max, so I'm teaching my students exactly what he taught me," O'Mara said. "I'm hoping that they look at me the way I looked at Max when I was 12 years old." ■



competing at an equitation final affects a rider, and how that pressure can lead to mistakes for even the most talented competitors.

To help his students manage high-pressure situations, he always stays relaxed and talks them through the difficulties. "I'm a very level-headed rider and I try to apply that approach to working with my students," he said. "It's important to keep things simple and stay calm so they are able to go in the ring feeling confident." He breaks things down piece by piece so his riders have something to focus on, and his calm demeanor is there to assist through anything stressful that arises.