

FREE REIN WITH:

Max Amaya

By **Tori Repole**
Photo By **Jump Media**



Max Amaya wakes up seven days a week with the same level of drive and intensity that saw him dedicate his life to horses 28 years ago.

“Every day I wake up and I say, ‘I don’t want to fail. I don’t want to not be able to achieve this. I want this horse to be well. I want this horse to do good. I want this rider to succeed,’” said Amaya, 46. “In my personal space, I can only be in charge of my actions to not fail. When I’m dealing with riders and students, not only do I have to try to not fail myself, but also, I have to persuade that person to not give up in order not to fail. So, it’s challenging, but it’s what keeps me going.”

Amaya founded the Colts Neck, New Jersey, and Wellington, Florida-based Stonehenge Farm in 2006. He trains the next generation of jumper and equitation riders, and he’s been instrumental in the development of riders like Brianne Goutal, Jessica Springsteen and TJ O’Mara.

Amaya represented Argentina at the 2006 FEI World Equestrian Games in Aachen, Germany, and at the 2007 Pan American Games in Rio de Janeiro. At both events, he rode the Irish Sport Horse gelding Church Road (Taldi—Ozymandias).

Originally owned by John and Beezie Madden, “Goldie” was sold as an amateur’s ride to Sarah Becker and B & B Saddlery. Amaya met Becker through his work at Synergy Farm, the former sister barn to Beacon Hill. In 2004, when he needed a horse to compete in the \$50,000 Samsung Nations Cup in Wellington, Becker offered him a loan.

“[Church Road] was a quirky horse, nice horse, always tried,” said Amaya. “I had ridden him a couple times for her to get him ready, but I never thought the horse was maybe capable of doing that. Little did I know, I started with him that season, and within two, three weeks, we ended up jumping the Nations Cup. It was a thrill for me; it was exciting. It was the first time I got to experience being part of the big league or the big jumping here in the U.S.”

“I have an incredible love for my little dog Poncho. He’s a mini Dachshund; he’s like a person,” said Max Amaya. “He spends every day, all day with me. He’s 10 years old now. I got him when he was 3 months old.”

Amaya was born in Mendoza, Argentina, and moved to Buenos Aires when he was 7. His paternal grandfather Ricardo Romero rode in the Argentinian army and introduced Amaya and his older brother Victor Amaya to horses. Unlike Victor, who naturally took to horses, Max kept a distance, but when he visited a relative’s ranch in Córdoba, he met a gentle palomino and the gaúcho, or cowboy, who convinced him to ride.

“[He] really saw my fear for it, and he somehow talked me into riding this old palomino, a fat horse that he swore to me would not do anything but take good care of me and make riding a good experience,” said Max. “I started riding that horse that was literally barely moving. That’s what basically got me, at that young age, to believe that horses weren’t mean.”

Max played polo briefly, then turned to show jumping when his parents bought him a chestnut gelding named No Problem.

“All he had was problems,” said Max. “He used to stop; he had bad feet; he was lame once in a while. I remember brushing him and watching the sun hit him and him being shiny, but he was so fat. The horse was completely unfit.”

Three years later, when Max turned 16, he ventured to the Hipódromo Argentino de Palermo, where he started exercising race horses and underwent an apprenticeship. After graduating from high school, Max received a family friend’s recommendation about show jumping opportunities in Bromont, Canada.

“I didn’t want to go to college, and my dad was very clear with me: ‘If you are here, you will do college,’” said Max. “I went to Canada in 1992. My dad gave me \$2,500 and said, ‘OK, you have a [round-trip] ticket. When you’re done with your adventure, you can turn around and come back and go to school.’”

Max booked himself a stay at a fancy bed and breakfast in Canada, and he was running low on his \$2,500 by the seventh day. Then he met Roger Deslauriers at an event party.

“[Deslauriers] said, ‘Why don’t you come to my barn tomorrow at 1 p.m.?’” said Max. “So, I did. He saw me ride, and he said, ‘My son Mario [1984 FEI World Cup

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Final winner at the age of 19] is coming to town in two days. Maybe he'll watch you ride, and we'll discuss.' Mario came, and I got a job. To this day, I remain close with his family. Roger was basically, besides my grandfather, my first real mentor, a person I looked up to."

In 1995, after three years with the Deslauriers family, Max moved back to Argentina when his mom, Susana Romero, was diagnosed with brain cancer. He worked with the Werthein family at Harás el Capricho until 1999. Itching for a return to the States, he contacted Joe Fargis, who got him a job interview with Frank and Stacia Madden at Beacon Hill.

"By April of that year, I moved here, and I started at Synergy, owned by Pam Diaco," said Amaya. "It was a beautiful barn with 14 horses, a couple hunters. I was questioning what I was doing, but that's normal at the age. I was 26; I wanted to do everything; I wanted to be everywhere; I wanted to jump the Olympics. I wanted

to do all these things, but most importantly, I wanted to have a job and succeed in this country that I always admired and wanted to be part of."

Talk about the partnership between Beacon Hill and Stonehenge.

When I was thinking about opening Stonehenge, I wanted to stay in touch with Beacon Hill and work together.

When I worked at that sister barn, we had a very similar dynamic; we worked very well together, complemented each other, so it was in my nature and in my gut to maintain the same.

The financial agreement is very simple. We're a completely separate business, and all we do is share a percentage of each other's earnings at the end of the year, regardless of who makes 20 or who makes 10.

There are a decent number of students that [we work with] together. [Stacia] coaches in the equitation, and I coach the jumpers. We share families; we share customers, professionals.



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You've lived in New Jersey since you made the move Stateside. What do you love most about the area?

New Jersey summers are beautiful, especially the area we live in. It's central east Jersey; it's very close to Sandy Hook Bay, the water. We are basically a 50-minute train ride away from Manhattan. We have lovely beaches and restaurants, and it's just very nice.

Where would you go on a dream vacation?

I like the Caribbean, and I'm a boat guy. I own a boat, and I spend a lot of my free time boating, so I think it would be somewhere simple. I'd like to have my boat anchored near the Bahamas for a week. That would be a dream. It's not difficult to do, but with our time schedule, it becomes a little bit difficult.

Do you miss life in Argentina?

I don't miss anything except the friendships I have with people there and the good food they cook there. As far as living there, I don't. Since the age of 14, all I wanted to

do was come to the States and become a citizen. In 2012, I was granted citizenship, and it was one of the happiest days in my life.

What does the term "horse of a lifetime" mean to you?

That horse of a lifetime is the one that takes you to that level you thought was hard to achieve, and they did it in a way that created confidence, and they were part of you. Church Road—every time I rode him, I knew I could do what I set out to do that day. I *always* knew; I never questioned.

I remember being in Aachen, which was a dream for me. We arrived there on Monday. I did the vet inspection, and then Tuesday is a warm-up. There were riders from all over the world, so each team they let have 90 seconds to go in the ring. The place itself was intimidating, and this horse just walked in there like he was walking into Synergy. Somehow, I just felt that it was OK, that I was going to be fine with this horse because every time I rode him, he gave me that feeling.

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The horse was incredibly kind. He had a huge heart; he didn't know what he couldn't do; he always tried. I just had an incredible chemistry with him. He believed in me; I believed in him, and that's probably what a horse of a lifetime means, at least for me.

What's your favorite food?

Barbequed steak. I eat red meat probably five to six days a week. My wife [Krista Freundlich] is a fish and chicken lover; she does not eat red meat.

What do you love most about working with students?

For me, it's watching the rider progress. Watching them start from a green base and basically learn about the sport and learn about horses. The most satisfaction I get is when I see a rider *click*. Everybody talks about the "click," when I see that a rider all of a sudden, at a show or at the school, understands what this is about.

We never stop learning. I don't care if you're Jos Lansink or Beezie Madden or McLain [Ward]. They all learn every time with every horse and every situation. We all learn every day, but there's a time as a young rider that you end up understanding what jumping a horse is about. Even though you keep experiencing and developing and learning, you understand the process, the timing, the feeling. So, when I see a rider click and start doing that, that's the best feeling for me.

Name an item that's always in your refrigerator.

Sparkling water.

What do you do for fun?

I boat. I cook, and I drink good wine with friends.

What would you say is the hardest aspect of riding?

I think to be patient, to understand the horse. It's hard for me today, and I have experience. The horses, they don't know what we want. They don't know what they're supposed to do. When they're young, they know even less. Sometimes you have to have a little bit of a strong hand so the horse understands because they're 1,500 pounds. They don't speak our language. So, the only way of communicating that with them is through body language.

You can't be, all the time, so strict that the horse has no place to express himself, and you also can't be so loose that the horse never has structure. Finding that balance and understanding it takes patience and a real skill to observe a horse and try to understand it.

I have learned to understand them a lot more, but every horse is a different soul, a different animal. You can meet similar horses, but they're all different. What I've learned is you treat every horse differently, even though you treat them all the same with the same kindness, the same care and the same love.

What is something on your bucket list?

Exploring odd places in the world like the North Pole or Antarctica. It's something people don't normally get to do. Mostly Antarctica, it's quite fascinating.

What are you watching on TV?

I don't watch a lot of television, but I like documentaries a lot.

What are your thoughts on show jumpers wearing safety vests?

I haven't worn one myself yet, and I haven't really opened up the conversation with my clients. That being said, I am very pro wearing vests. I think it's something that we're all going to have to end up doing, the sooner, the better. With the injury of Kevin Babington, I think it opened everybody's eyes a lot.

Are you reading anything at the moment?

No, I'm a terrible reader. I actually don't like to read. My wife says, "You should do audiobooks or podcasts." For some reason, ever since I was a kid, I hate reading. I don't like to have my attention just focused on a square and little letters. I have bad eyes, so that probably adds to it.

If not horses, what sport would you participate in?

I did play rugby for a long time, but as you know, rugby's quite a violent sport, and I'm not a big guy. I'm not small, but I'm short, and when I reached a certain age, I was getting hurt a lot. I didn't enjoy being hurt, so it probably wouldn't be [rugby] because, at a professional level, it's tough. I was not the greatest soccer player. To be quite honest, I've been so immersed into riding that I never really let myself explore, at an interesting level, any other sport.

What are your cravings?

Even though I eat it six times a week, I crave steak. The other thing I crave a lot is dulce de leche; I love it. I don't eat it often because, even though I'm not showing at a high level, I still try to watch my weight and stay fit and try not to indulge too much. 🍷