

Natalie Dean Traveled Up The Pipeline To Her Dreams

The 22-year-old is proving she belongs in a pinque coat.

By **Laura Lemon**

Natalie Dean will never know exactly what happened one fall day in 2018. All she knows for certain is she was on a horse walking, and then she was on the ground. The rest of that day disappears into a black void.

Her concussion diagnosis meant eight weeks of no riding and no school. As she recuperated at her parents' house in Palo Alto, California, Dean considered her lifestyle. Studying mechanical engineering at the University of California, Santa Barbara, left her little time for horses. And while she protected her healing brain, she asked herself if she was happy.

"I was always doing work," said Dean. "When I got the concussion, and I had to take that time off from both school and riding, I really realized how much I missed riding and how important it was to me."

She'd competed in the high junior jumpers and represented Zone 10 at the FEI North American Junior & Young Rider Championships and U.S. Equestrian Federation Prix De States (Pennsylvania). But with her schedule and college course load, she felt riding had become more a hobby.

"I wasn't sure if I would be able to make a career out of riding," she said, "but when I got the concussion, I was like, 'I want to be able to see how far I can go in this sport, and I'm not going to be able to do that if I can't ride and show more often.'"

Her first step started with school. She enrolled in online classes at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in the spring and found an interest in marketing—a

major not offered at UC Santa Barbara. And from there, with remote classes she could take anywhere, her riding flourished. She moved East and started training with Ilan Ferder to take on FEI five-star classes.

The concussion had lifted the fog and crystalized her dreams.

THE SPARKS

Dean first caught the equine bug via summer camps and vacation trail rides with her grandmother. Her parents, Jeff Dean and Heidi Hopper, withstood the begs and pleas until Natalie's 11th Christmas when they finally surprised her with once-a-week lessons.

"I think they sort of thought it was going to be a phase, and I would outgrow it," said Natalie. "Here we are all those years later. I'm sure they probably wished it was a phase, but my parents are so supportive of it now, so I'm really lucky."

Trainer Jennifer Kallam gave Natalie a foundation with horsemanship and riding lessons and introduced her to the Portola Valley Pony Club (California).

"I mostly did local shows," said Natalie. "I'd take care of my horse myself and groomed and braided it myself for the shows. And then when I was a junior in high school, I decided I wanted to focus a little bit more on riding, and I moved to a different barn that went to some bigger shows."

When she entered Butch and Lu Thomas' Willow Tree Farm on the final days of 2015, her focus was to excel in equitation. But soon after, the jumpers grabbed her attention.

ASHLEY NEUHOF PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO





“He’s for sure the horse that kicked things off for me and really made me believe that there was a way that I could maybe do this at the top level,” said Natalie Dean of Don’s Diamant. *KAITLYN KARSSSEN PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO*

TAKING THE STEPS

In August of 2019 at Old Salem Farm (New York), Natalie hoisted a bouquet of flowers above her head as a bronze medal dangled around her neck. In her third showing at the renamed North American Youth Championships, she’d earned a spot on the individual podium with her horse Don’s Diamant.

She’d purchased the now 14-year-old Dutch

Warmblood stallion (Diamant De Semilly—Whitley, Phin-Phin), bred by C.E.G. Van Den Bogaard, the year prior from Ferder.

“Our main goal was to do Young Riders with him, and he ended up being so much more than that,” said Natalie. “He’s just a horse of a lifetime.”

From that performance, Natalie earned a spot on the young rider team for the FEI Jumping Nations Cup Youth Final CSIOY in Opglabbeek, Belgium. She seized the opportunity to peek into life of a team rider.

“The main goal is obviously to win, but I think we really learned a lot about being on a team,” said Natalie. “It was amazing to work with a chef like Anne Kursinski and the U.S. team vet; everyone really made it feel like an important event. They really try to model that Nations Cup like the senior Nations Cup Final in Barcelona.”

With the American flag stitched onto her saddle pad and Don’s bonnet, the pair produced two clear rounds to help the U.S. team earn the top position. Natalie’s riding impressed Kursinski, and so did the then 20-year-old’s attitude.

“It was big and hard, and boy she was focused,” said Kursinski, U.S. show jumping development program chef d’equipe. “That was her first time doing something like

“They encouraged me to start doing the jumpers, because they’re mostly a jumper barn,” she remembered. “I thought the jumpers sounded like fun, so I basically switched to the jumpers when I moved there.”

With her mare Mary Poppins, Natalie started in the children’s jumper division in 2016 and ended the year in the high junior jumper classes. But to Natalie, “Poppy” and the Thomases didn’t just instill a love for show jumping; they allowed possibilities to bud.

“We moved up pretty quickly there, and Butch truly believed in me and gave me a lot of confidence,” said Natalie. “My first jumper, Mary Poppins, was an amazing horse and took me from the 1-meter to the 1.40-meter in less than a year. Starting then I was like, ‘Oh, maybe I can do some grand prix and be more competitive in this.’”

She earned a bronze and silver in the team young rider’s competition at NAJYRC in 2017 and 2018 respectively, and just before her concussion she started breaking into national standard grand prix classes. The next step was a five-hour plane ride away.

“I really wanted to advance in the sport, and I think it’s hard in California because there’s not that many FEI shows,” said Natalie. “So, I knew if I wanted to compete and move up the levels, I needed to be on the East Coast.”

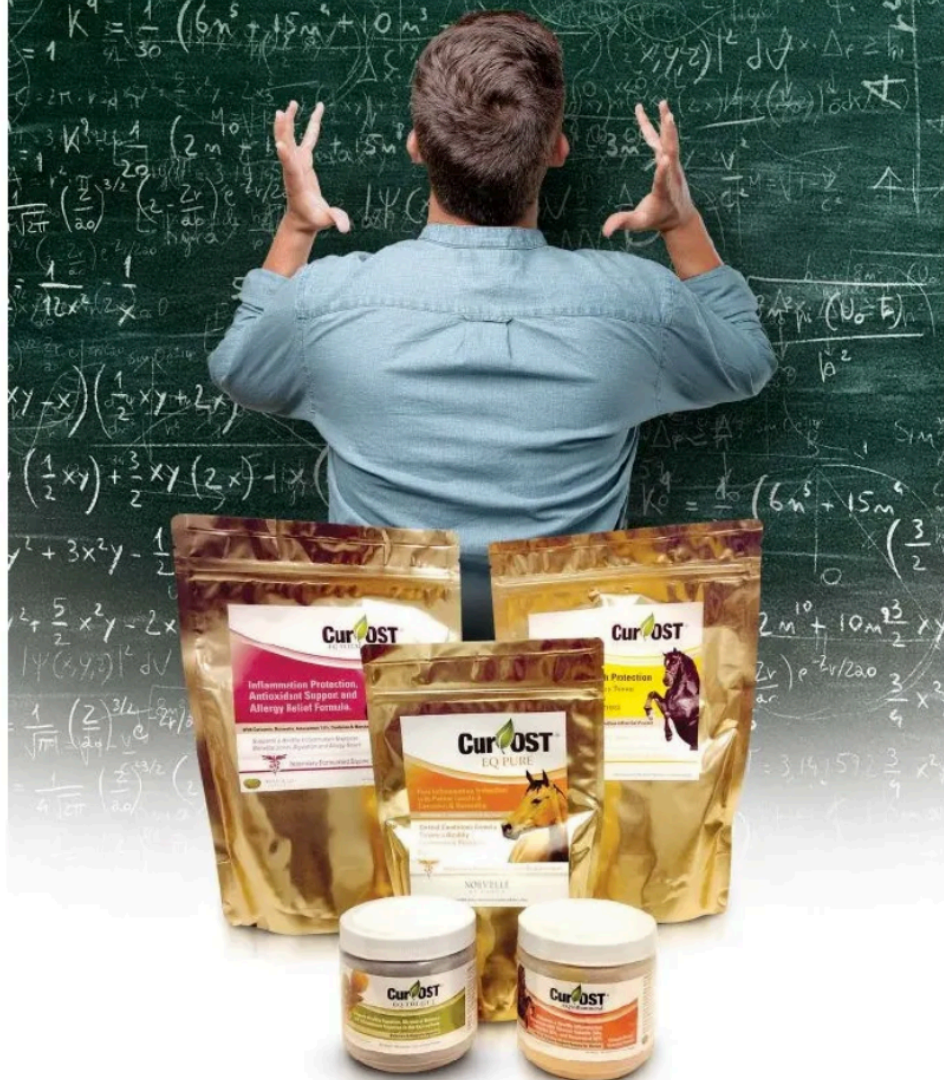
that, [and] boy she just handled it beautifully. [She was] totally focused and wanting to win—all of that, and yet [she was] having fun at the barn and loving her horses. Just a wonderful character, a great balance of that eagerness to win and be successful and, ‘How can I work at it?’ and loving the horses and laughing at the barn.

“For me to see this wonderful young rider that I knew in California [at one of my clinics], to see her at that event, so focused, and [she] rode beautifully under all this pressure,” she added. “For me as a coach, to be excited about someone like her, it’s like having a great young horse come along that you’re all excited about that you think is going to go jump the five-star grand prix or maybe the Olympics one day. That kind of excitement. Seeing that talent and focus and desire and her doing it—it was just a great experience.”

Natalie progressed onto the U25 level and then her first 1.60-meter classes, and Don continued helping her learn the ropes until he retired in 2021.

“When I moved to the East Coast, I didn’t really know what to expect,” said Natalie. “It was definitely a shock because I’d been jumping the California grand prix, and I kind of expected to be able to just jump right into the East Coast grand prix. They’re a lot bigger on the East Coast. There was definitely a bit of a learning curve there, but I’m really fortunate—I have some amazing horses that helped me out a lot. He’s for sure the horse that kicked things off for me and really made me believe that I could maybe do this at the top level.”

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At 22 years old, Natalie Dean made her senior Nations Cup debut aboard Chance Ste Hermelle at Spruce Meadows. *ASHLEY NEUHOF PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO*

You can't be intimidated. The time allowed is tighter. You have to be able to manage all of those things at the highest level."

After Natalie jumped clear in two five-stars at the Great Lakes Equestrian Festival (Michigan) last summer, Ferder called Chef d'Equipe Robert Ridland.

"She asked me a few times to go on different teams, and I said, 'No, you're not ready,'" said Ferder. "So, when I felt like she was ready, then I made a phone call."

Ridland asked Kursinski her opinion about giving Natalie a spot on the Spruce Meadows Masters CSIO5* Nations Cup (Alberta).

"At that age, a really top athlete with the focus and the drive and the desire and the talent—it doesn't always come that fast; everybody's different," said Kursinski. "But when Robert needed a rider for Calgary, I said, 'I think she'd be a great one. It would be a beneficial experience for her, and she can even produce for you.'"

In her pinque coat, Natalie rode her 14-year-old Belgian Warmblood mare Chance Ste Hermelle (Calvaro F.C.—Nancy, Hemmingway), bred by Sainte-Hermelle. They helped the U.S. earn second place, tallying a single time fault and then a four-fault round in her Nations Cup debut.

"Some put the pinque coat on the first time they ride, and they wilt. And she didn't," said Kursinski. "She really stepped right up and showed everybody she belonged there."

"I think it means something different to everybody, that experience," said Ballard, who helped Canada win that Nations Cup. "You're riding for other people, and I think that in Calgary specifically she really held her composure. She showed the world that she was meant to ride on a team."

To Ferder, Natalie's showing on the famed grass field—and her ninth-placed finish in the CP International Grand

DONNING THE PINQUE COAT

As the calendar year closed and the mad rush to the 2021 Winter Equestrian Festival (Florida) commenced, Natalie, Ferder and his rider Erynn Ballard decided that it was time for the 22-year-old to take a crack at the five-star level. The transition to the senior level, Ferder knew, presented new mental challenges, but he and Ballard worked to cement Natalie's confidence.

"I don't know if she lacked it, but she was always a little bit insecure—always questioning herself," said Ferder. "We're still working on it. It's a process. It's not something easy. But she's definitely way more mature about it and way more confident than she used to be. I think we went in a lot of classes just going to swim in the water."

As Natalie gained experience, Ballard witnessed her rise to the focus.

"Her understanding that at that level it is the horse-rider combination; it's the partnership; everything has to come together on that day," said Ballard. "It's not just about having an opportunity of riding a great horse and having success. It's about having that great horse in a great program and being a partner with it and understanding that you have to really ride every step of the way and work. Your concentration has to be better.

Prix with her other five-star mount Cocolina—affirmed the success of her journey up the U.S. athlete pathway system.

“I think you have to go through the steps,” he said. “You cannot go to Rome in one day; you have to go through the steps. She did all of the steps the correct way and always believed in us. They let us do what we felt was right for her, and I think that paid off.”

At press time, Natalie sits ninth on the Rolex/USEF Show Jumping Ranking List. She continues to harbor new dreams, but she appreciates how far she’s come.

“It’s really surreal to be able to say that we accomplished being on a senior Nations Cup team,” she said. “That’s been a big goal of mine for a long time. I wasn’t sure if it was actually going to become a reality for me, so for me, to accomplish that goal at 22 years old is really exciting. Sometimes it’s hard because you see all these people doing all these amazing things, but you also have to remember, a lot of these riders are 30, 40, 50 years old. You can do this sport for a long time. Sometimes you just need to take a step back and realize just how much time [you have].” 🐾



Don's Diamant helped Natalie Dean gain experience from the young riders level to grand prix classes. PHOTO COURTESY OF NATALIE DEAN



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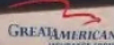
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