



Erynn Ballard will represent Canada at the Agria FEI Jumping World Championship with Gakhir. SPORTFOT PHOTO

FREE REIN WITH:

Erynn Ballard

By Kimberly Loushin

**F**ive years ago Ilan Ferder came to Erynn Ballard with a proposition. For her entire professional career, Ballard had worked at her family's Looking Back Farm in Tottenham, Ontario, splitting her time between the jumper and the hunter ring, but Ferder's offer to join his team was enticing.

"You get to a stage where maybe your priorities change a little," said Ballard, 41. "In Canada there's not very many big owners that support just the sport, and it was hard to do the level that I wanted at home. And he gave me an opportunity that I couldn't turn down. So I decided if I didn't do it then maybe I was never going to get the chance.

"He was someone that I really believed in," she continued. "I believe in his program and his horses and his ability to produce results. And he believes enough in me that, as well as being a rider for the stable, he's given me this opportunity to ride in championships."

Since moving to Wellington, Florida, to work for Ferder, Ballard has appeared on two championship teams—at the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games (North Carolina) and the 2019 Pan American Games (Peru)—and she will represent Canada in the Agria FEI Jumping World Championship in Herning, Denmark, Aug. 10-14, alongside Tiffany Foster, Amy Millar and Beth Underhill. She's been riding Gakhir, an 11-year-old Dutch Warmblood (Spartacus TN—Zakhira, Labor's VDL Indorado) owned by Ferder and Esperanza Imports LLC, since the beginning of 2021.

**What's it like being back on the Canadian team?**

I think it's very cool. I think our team is in a different place now with Eric [Lamaze] at the helm as our leader. I feel like now is a very good time to be Canadian if you want to ride on a team, and you want opportunity that maybe didn't exist before. There are some pretty cool vibes going into, especially the [world championship]

this year. We won the Nations Cup in Spruce Meadows, and that was Eric's last team [as a rider], so to be a part of that team and to have him take over and be leading us through the next stages, I think that we should all consider ourselves lucky and definitely embrace the moment.

**What are you most looking forward to about Denmark?**

It's my second time jumping [in the world championships], so I have an idea of what I'm in for. The first time I think you're pretty naïve when you enter into something like that. I think that our build up for it is very different. [I will spend three weeks in Europe beforehand and spent two months in Europe earlier this year.] It was three months training for one event, and that's going to be an experience that I haven't had before. With Lima and with the [2018] WEG, it was just sort of another show on the calendar. We prepared for it, and we got picked for the team, but I went to Lima off of a show in Saugerties [New York]. I spent one week getting ready and one week at the championships. It's just going to be a much different feel going into this. I think that team of girls, especially through the last few months, have really formed friendships that we haven't had before. We've always been friendly, but you get a different feel now about your teammates and the time that you spent with them.

**Can you tell me about Gakhir?**

He's a horse that Eric and Ilan and myself really, really, really believed in, so the team gave him the opportunity, and myself the opportunity, to be the alternate for the teams in La Baule [France] and Rome—sort of to gain that European exposure and be a part of the team without the pressure of actually being on the Nations Cup team and give the horse a little bit of time to develop in a different way. So heading into Spruce Meadows in June,

it was a pretty high-pressure situation because my result at Spruce Meadows is basically make or break, and he handled the pressure beautifully there. He really kind of grew into himself this spring and proved to Canada, to the team, that he was ready to be a championship horse.

When we got him that was sort of his slated plan. You don't come around horses like this very much, and this is a championship horse, so I think that everything is in our favor.

**You had a bad fall in 2013 that resulted in a serious shoulder injury and were advised to stop riding. What was it like coming back from that?**

It seems like a lifetime ago. I had the right surgeon and the right physio, and I don't suffer from any physical pain as a result of it. And OK, yes, it's hard. Maybe I made different decisions afterwards, like coming to work for Ilan full time, because you learn that opportunity doesn't exist like this every day, and injuries can happen, and your lifestyle can change. If you have something that you'll regret not doing, then you better try to find a way to do it before you can't.

**What qualities do you value most in a horse?**

Their character. I like to understand them, but I think that some horses work better with you than others, and I think that that's character. I like blood. I like a forward horse over a slow horse. I like good eyes. I like horses that interact with you. I love the sport. I love riding horses. I also like being around them. So when I come into the barn, and I speak, and the horse knows who I am, that's important to me.

**In a person?**

I think that people should be nice and real. We live in a bubble where everybody knows everybody, and everybody knows everybody's secrets. Life can be hard in this industry. It's cutthroat, so my people who are my people are very important to me. As an overall, I just want to be around nice people. I want to cheer for them, and I want them to cheer for me.

**If you could ride any horse, past or present, which would it be?**

I have a thing for bay mares, small feisty mares. For sure in the past, [Edwina Tops-Alexander's] Lintea Tequila is one that I thought that I would love riding and [Luciana Diniz's]

Fit For Fun—those really sporty, fiery mares that really fought for their riders. I'm also drawn mostly to horses that girls ride because I think that it's comparable. So I think if I see a great horse going for a girl, I'm always like, "Gosh, that would be a horse I would like to ride one day."

**Who or what is the greatest influence on your life?**

There are so many, and I think it's ages and stages of your life, who you looked up to when you were a kid, who you look up to as a professional, who you look up to as a peer in the sport. Laura Kraut and McLain Ward and myself all rode the same large pony [Polaris Smarty]. As far as a female rider that I've always admired, I'd always admired Laura, and I feel like we had a connection through our ponies. And of course, Beezie Madden would be somebody you would want to follow in the footsteps of, her position, her style.

Missy Clark is someone that's been a big influence in my life from when I rode equitation [and won the 1998 ASPCA Maclay Finals] even straight through to now. My life wouldn't be the same without Ilan in it, what he's done for me, and what he's given to me. I'm a rider for the stable, and he's given me three months of not being a part of the stable to accomplish a dream. That's pretty cool. Not everybody is going to be given that opportunity if they have a job.

My parents have let me be who I wanted to be in this career. My whole life, I was never forced to go to school. I got to make my own choices.

There are so many people. I don't think that you become one person because of one person. You become a person you are because of great influences and great opportunities and great horses. This is my third championship with Ilan, and I've done it on three different horses. It's not like I've had one horse for the last four years to accomplish all of this on. I've been able to do it three times with three different horses. So I have to give credit to the horses that made me as well.

**Is there a piece of advice you hold on to?**

You have to keep this [horse] world in perspective. There's so much opportunity, and there's so much wealth and traveling. There are good days and bad days. There are ups and downs, so you have to keep the whole thing in perspective, because it's very easy to lose yourself one way or the other. I think every once in a while, you just have to take a step back—almost step outside your

life for a second—look at the whole thing, and step back into it. Because when you're winning and winning and winning, it's very easy to be confident, and when you're not winning and not winning and not winning, it's very easy to lose that confidence.

Sometimes you're going to big horse shows and jumping huge jumps, and it can be frustrating, and you have all of these emotions, and then you have to a little bit be like, "Wait a second, this is so freaking cool." Who in their right mind wouldn't love this opportunity, good or bad? So you take the good with the bad, and you learn, and you grow, and you have to always want to get better. You can't ever really think that you're better than the sport or better than the horse or better than the professional. Everything that you do has to stay in perspective to continue to be successful.

**What's your biggest pet peeve?**

My biggest pet peeve is people that take their frustrations out on their horse. A horse doesn't know how much it costs. That horse doesn't know what it's supposed to do when it's not doing it. All the horse is doing is what you asked it to do. Some are maybe better than others. Some maybe understand you better than others. For sure some horses work out better than others, and some horses work out less than you'd hoped. The one thing I tell people when we buy horses is, "We didn't ask for their opinion. We decided for them." We decided that this horse is going to be good at this job and is going to jump this big. We didn't ask the horse what he or she thought of that. We have to remember that they do have their own thoughts, and they do have their own emotions, own feelings. And we have to figure out what they are [feeling], but we can't get mad at them if they don't understand what we're asking.

**What do you like to do when not riding?**

I really like my yoga mat. I have a Peloton app, and I use it a lot. Working out, meditating, yoga, Pilates. I like to cook when I have the opportunity.

**What three items can always be found in your kitchen?**

Apples. I'm a big salad maker. I like to make my own dressing, so apple cider vinegar and olive oil, something that I can make my own salad dressing with. I have a few different recipes that are sort of my go-to.

**Do you have any pets?**

I have two dogs from Danny & Ron's Rescue. We're big adopters. I think the industry in general, they're big on adoption, and what Danny [Robertshaw] and Ron [Danta] have done, and how they promote themselves, and the variety of dogs you're able to get, they've certainly become a staple. I don't know how many barns you can go to where there isn't one dog that came from Danny and Ron's in our industry. 🐾

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