

# MEET THE NATIONAL TEAM PROGRAM ATHLETES

## ERYNN BALLARD | TOTTENHAM, ONTARIO

*By Jennifer Ward*

Erynn Ballard's name is synonymous with Canadian equestrian sport. Since making her debut at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in 1988, Ballard has not missed a single edition. She made headlines in 1998 when she was the second Canadian to win the prestigious ASPCA Maclay Medal National Final at Madison Square Garden in New York City, and made her presence felt in the show jumping ring by claiming the individual gold medal at the 1999 North American Young Riders' Championship with Leacock, a horse her grandfather had purchased for her.

Known for her prowess in all three rings, often on catch rides or sales horses, Ballard, 41, is a role model for aspiring young riders. Having spent her career working alongside her parents, David and Sandi, running the family training business, Looking Back Farm in Tottenham, ON, Ballard took a leap of faith in 2020. She now rides exclusively for Ilan Ferder Stables, a large training and sales business based in Wellington, FL. The partnership has proven to be incredibly successful with Ballard showcasing the numerous horses in Ferder's sales program, which often means she doesn't retain the ride for long before they are sold. One exception is Gakhir, an 11-year-old chestnut Dutch Warmblood gelding (Spartacus TN x VDL Indorado) that owners Ilan Ferder and Esperanza Imports LLC have kept as her partner for the 2022 World Championships in Herning, Denmark.

We caught up with Ballard on the eve of the World Championships.

### **What age did you start riding and what was the name of your first pony or horse?**

My first pony was named Rusty. My mom bought him from a Zellers' parking lot. He didn't know how to canter because all he did was pony rides. I taught him how to canter up the driveway at our farm, and then he would bolt home. So, all I really did was teach him how to bolt home. We got him in 1985 when I was five.

### **You are currently named to the National Team Program 'A' Squad with Gakhir and to the 'B' Squad with Jack Van't Kattenheye. How long have you been partnered with each horse, and what are your goals with each for this season?**

I've had Gakhir, who we call "Curly," since February of 2021. The idea with him was to have a horse for the World Championships, that he was a championship horse. We had a good 2021 and then the start of 2022 was inconsistent. We came to Europe and competed as the alternate for the Canadian Nations' Cup team at La Baule [France] and Rome [Italy] and then had a strong Calgary. That ultimately named us to the team after our result in Calgary. We're now back in Europe for a month to prepare for the World Championships. I've named it, "Erynn and Curly on Tour – Summer 2022."

"Jack" I didn't even have for a full year. I showed him for the first time in March 2021 in Wellington and he won an FEI ranking class there in April. He won a 1.55m class in September in Calgary and was double clear in the Nations' Cup at the 'Masters.' It was a very successful partnership and, ultimately, that's what got him sold.

It's certainly a big opportunity to ride for Ilan [Ferder]. I've ridden for him for five years now. This will be our second World Championships together, and we were also double clear with Fellini S at the 2019 Pan Am Games. Having done three major championships in five years is significant considering Covid, and that Canada only sent one person to the Olympics. Working with Ilan, I know I will always have a horse for the major games. We currently have some great eight- and nine-year-olds and exceptional seven-year-olds. As long as we keep selling, there will always be one to keep for major games.

Preparing for World Championships has meant three months away from my job, but it's an incredible opportunity for me to have. Ilan



*Starting Gate Communications*



*Courtesy of Erynn Ballard*

Erynn Ballard with her first pony, Rusty, at her family's Looking Back Farm circa 1986/1987.



*Courtesy of Erynn Ballard*

Erynn Ballard with the large pony Polaris Smarty, who was formerly ridden by Laura Kraut and McLain Ward, now both U.S. Olympic team gold medalists.

currently has 50 horses in Michigan, and I'm in Europe with one horse. Ian is committed to the Canadian team program and has given the opportunity to me and the horse to spend this summer away from the riding and the sales program in order to qualify for World Championships and let this dream play out under Eric's control where it's much more about being a team. World Championships is not just another show on the calendar.

*Editor's Note – Eric Lamaze is the chef d'equipe of the Canadian Show Jumping Team.*

### **What is your favourite competition memory?**

There are so many. I always say it's ages and stages of your career. I can't really pick one. From Maclay Finals to individual gold at North American Young Riders' Championship to being on two winning Nations' Cup teams at Spruce Meadows - they were all so special. The first time I was on a Nations' Cup team was also the first time that Canada won at Spruce Meadows; that is one of the greatest accomplishments. It wasn't just about me, it was about the whole moment, so that stands out. There are so many; you can't name one.

### **Favourite horse show venue to compete at?**

Spruce Meadows because it's so Canadian and because it's so exceptional. That being said, how cool was it to show in Rome? I also like the history of Devon, and I like winters in Wellington. Toronto is also a cool place to show. You're in your own backyard and able to have that experience of competing at the Royal.

### **Which competition is still on your bucket list?**

Aachen, basically for the same reason as Spruce Meadows. It's recognized as one of the best horse shows in the world, has so much history, and the jumps look bigger than anywhere else. I'd also like to go to the Olympics now that I've done Pan Am Games and two World Championships. It's every girl's dream to compete at the Olympics for their country.

### **Dream vacation?**

To have one!

It's really a funny question. I spent three days in Florida between showing at Tryon and going back to Europe. It was like a mini-vacation with no horses to ride or shows to be at. We are always packing a suitcase. The idea of being home for a minute without the hustle and bustle of being at the show; I think sometimes we forget what Florida has to offer. To have a few days there without riding is a pretty ideal vacation for me!

### **Cats or Dogs?**

Dogs. I have two dogs from Danny and Ron's Rescue, Moe and Lu. I got them both during Covid, one at the very beginning and one at the very end. They are pretty important animals in my life. I got the second one so Moe wouldn't be alone. They are currently at summer camp in Toronto enjoying life at the farm while I'm living in a hotel in Belgium.

### **Last show you binge-watched?**

All I do is watch t.v. On this European adventure, I'm currently on the sixth Harry Potter movie. I've seen them all before, but when I run out of t.v. to watch I go back to movies. I watched a good Netflix series recently called *Lincoln Lawyer* and I really liked it. I'm also up to date with the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. Unfortunately I can't binge-watch that because it's a new season!

You could say that I binge-watch ClipMyHorse because all I do is watch horses jump all day.

### **Favourite motto or saying?**

I have custom-made socks that say "IFS" on them, and I always tell people when I'm making reference to being part of a team, "you have to wear the socks." You have to be all in; you can't have one foot out the door. I also have Canadian socks, because the focus is all about the World Championships and being here and embracing the experience. "Wear the socks" means you're all in.

### **What three things are always in your fridge?**

Sparkling water, Diet Coke, and oat milk.

### **If you could ride any horse in the world, past or present, which one would you pick?**

Lintea Tequila, a bay mare that Edwina Tops-Alexander had. It was spicy and beautiful and sporty. Bay mares as a rule are my favorite – bay mares and chestnut geldings. I also liked Fit for Fun that Luciana Diniz had. And I have to say Gakhir because he's the perfect horse for me.

### **What's one thing most people don't know about you?**

What you see is what you get. I ride a lot of horses. That's pretty much it.



Erynn Ballard with Fellini S, her partner for the 2019 Pan American Games in Lima, Peru.



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