



Jeff Ayers and Cartel jumped to first in the \$15,000 USHJA International Hunter Derby North Regional Championship at the Saratoga Classic II. *JESS WINDHURST PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO*

Jeff Ayers Makes The Most Of A Long-Term Partnership With Cartel In Saratoga

By **HANNAH SHERK**

When he was in his 20s, Jeff Ayers' career came to a crossroads. Then an up-and-coming hunter trainer, Ayers realized his two passions were incompatible, and he'd have to choose one path or another.

"I worked as a DJ all through the '80s into the '90s, but I had to stop doing it because I wouldn't get home until 2:30 in the morning, and sometimes I'm getting up the next day for a horse show," said Ayers, who worked at disco dance clubs around Allentown, Pennsylvania. "They're totally different, but I did enjoy both DJing and the horses."

Ayers may have dropped the night-owl schedule, but luckily for his friends and training clients, he hasn't let go of his impressive record collection.

"I have a disco in the basement where I sometimes have parties, and then I'm the DJ," Ayers said, describing the basement he's outfitted with a dance floor and lighting. "And I still have all the records; I have thousands of records."

With his focus firmly on the horses for the last three decades, Ayers has grown his hunters and equitation operation, Equi-Ventures Incorporated in Sellersville, Pennsylvania. On June 19, Ayers and his 13-year-old warm-blood gelding Cartel (Conthargos—Zihn Ya, Cassini II) clinched the \$15,000 USHJA International Hunter Derby North Regional Championship at the Saratoga Classic II in Saratoga, New York.

"He's a very good jumper; he uses all his parts correctly," Ayers said of Cartel. "And because he's 18 hands, the jumps are very easy for him."

Having owned and developed the gelding for nearly 10 years, Ayers said that he was impressed with how confidently Cartel stepped into the unfamiliar derby ring at Saratoga.

At this stage in his development, Ayers said the gelding needs very little preparation at home to be show-ring ready.

"When I initially started showing him when he was 5, he could be spooky, and that's gone away; he's very reliable in the ring," Ayers said. "He won that derby, and they didn't let you even go into the ring and handwalk ahead of time, or ride in the ring. So he went in basically cold and still was very good and won."

Over two rounds, Ayers and Cartel, a giant with a "puppy dog personality," earned a score of 356, beating out Callie Seaman and Diamante by just one point. Ayers also took the grand hunter championship earlier that week on Gerald Camera's Westport.

"He showed through all of Florida and did very well there, so it didn't surprise me that he did well at Saratoga because he's not a spooky horse at all, and he pretty much goes around like he owns the ring," Ayers said of Westport, a 7-year-old Irish Sport Horse (Clinton Jack—Legend Rossas Girl) he's worked with since December.

After a long weekend in the show ring, Ayers said the first place he goes to relax when he gets home isn't that record-filled basement—it's the kitchen.

"I find it very relaxing at the end of the day," Ayers said. "In fact, I'll drive home from a horse show, four hours or something, and go right to cooking right away because I enjoy it."

He said his best dishes have been prepared by adhering to one simple secret: "Follow the recipe!" Ayers said. "Find a good recipe and follow it. I always figure that the people making up the recipes know more than I do, so I try to follow what they suggest." 🍳