

# ROAD TO ATLANTA



## MICHELLE GIBSON IS TOTALLY IMMERSED IN GERMAN DRESSAGE

*In this series the Chronicle follows six riders as they seek to fulfill their Olympic dreams in 1996.*

*As told to Charlene Strickland*

Peron and I moved to Germany in the fall of 1994, after I got an award from the Carl-Heinrich Asmis Dressage Scholarship Fund. I'm a working student at Rudolf Zeilinger's barn in Milte, near Warendorf.

Peron lives at Zeilinger's, and I have an apartment nearby.

Over the last year and a half, Peron and I have been working on basics. By improving the basics, the most difficult movements are becoming more stable and consistent.

Most days our work consists of 30 to 45 minutes. Beginning with the walk on a long rein, I pick up the contact to where the horse is in a normal frame (not with his head up or down too low). We start at the sitting trot and go straight ahead a couple rounds, a couple times each direction. Then we start with the lateral movements.

I go into the shoulder-in and half-pass in both directions, continually asking for more impulsion and connection into the bridle, as Peron becomes more supple. Then I work my way up from there, looking for the intensity of the energy coming from behind and the activity of the hind leg.

I know after 10 or 15 minutes that he's warmed up. I keep asking for more and more. I can feel it in the contact of the reins and my back, and I just move on from there.

Our routine changes only slightly, depending on how he feels and where we happen to be in our work.

Some days I have to do an extra couple of rounds of half-pass or shoulder-in or regular trot. There are days where I do 10 more minutes in canter, or a few more minutes in the trot or in the piaffe and passage. There's not one thing I can say we've been specifically working on to make it better.

Peron is very consistent in his work, and we're able to work very well together. He is a very special horse—not because of the funny things he does, but just because it's his personality.

He has an even personality, but he's not a deadhead—he's got enough energy to get through the Grand Prix test! You could say he'd have a dry sense of humor.

When I ride Peron every day depends on when Rudolf has time to help me.

Sometimes I ride him first thing in the morning, or last before we go home for the noon break, or somewhere in the middle of the morning.

The intensity of our training often depends on what's happening and where we are in our training. For example, before a horse show Rudolf will often give me a private lesson or ride Peron himself. In between shows, we're normally both riding, so he keeps an eye out and gives me tips. The day after a show, Peron gets the day off. For me, it's a normal work day.

### The Days Fly By

My day starts with breakfast at 6 a.m. and then off to the barn. I'm on my first horse by 6:40 a.m. Counting Peron, I presently ride seven to 10 horses a day, six days a week. The others are custo-

mers' horses at Rudolf's barn—they're all different in breeding as well as levels of training. It never gets boring.

My days just fly by, and I ride horse after horse after horse. I don't have time in the day where I can say, "I've got to get this ready," or "I've got to get prepared for that." It just happens!

My horses are made ready for me in the barn. Pretty much every day I have the same schedule of horses to ride. Every now and then I have a horse change, depending on who's coming or what's going on.

I know basically when I'm going to get Peron, and they bring him out for me. I now have a groom specifically for Peron. At home she helps in the barn and gets my other horses ready, but her main job is taking care of Peron. At shows she sleeps in the barn to make sure everything is OK.

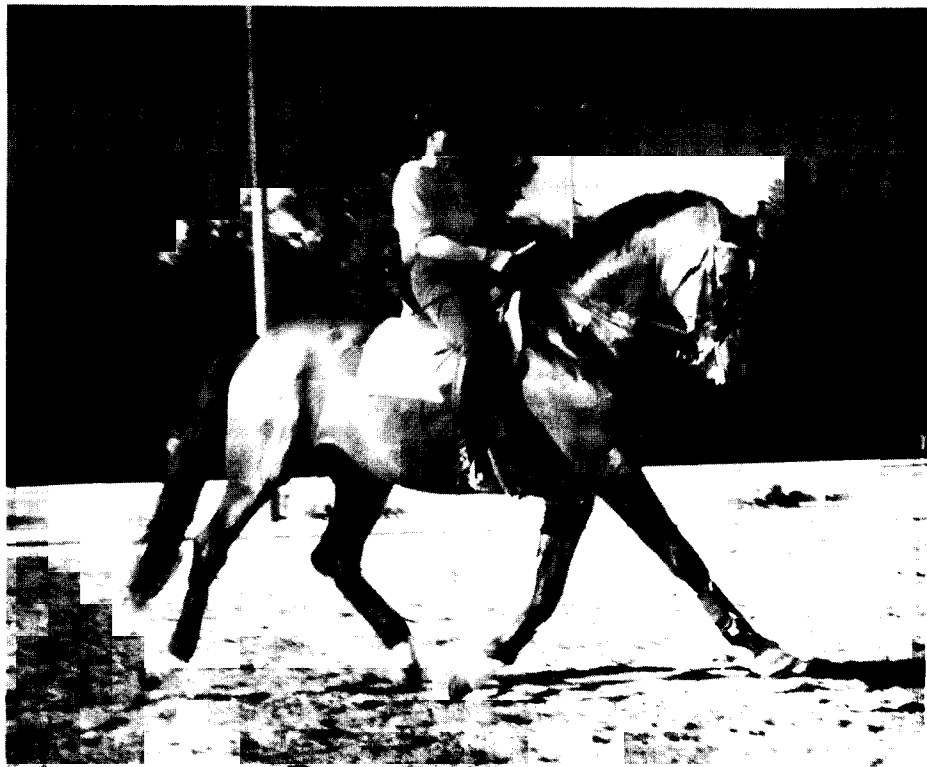
Peron gets grazed in the afternoons and a little bit of handwalking, which he enjoys very much. We don't turn him out.

Peron has a corner stall in the barn, with only one horse next to him. He likes having next-door neighbors. He gets along with everybody, unless there's a horse next to him that's aggressive—then it shows that he's a stallion. He gets along with any gelding.

With his neighbor in the barn, they like to "fight" with each other come dinner time. There's a concrete wall between them, so they can't touch noses. They just rear up and throw their heads over the wall and make ugly faces at each other.

He gets a good view outside. In the summer he peeks out his window and watches what's happening with horses in the outdoor arena.

Peron's worming and shoeing are on the same schedule as the other horses in the barn. He's shod every six weeks. I have



Michelle Gibson working Peron at the CHIO Aachen (Germany), her most important show this year.

a very good farrier over here. He does a bit of corrective shoeing, but basically it's normal shoes, nothing special.

Peron gets fed three times a day. He gets fresh crimped oats and two supplement feeds like many of the other horses in the barn. One is like a sweet feed mixture, and the other one is a multigrain Muesli-type feed with a lot of vitamins. He goes in and out of phases where he loses a little bit of weight, and then he gains some more. He looks good right now.

Peron travels fine. He's done enough of it, so he should be used to it by now. Normally I travel with Rudolf, in his big horse van. On one or two occasions, I've taken Peron in a two-horse trailer, or I've used a professional transport company.

This summer we were on a roll, preparing for my season goal of the CDIO Aachen [Germany] in late June. In the weeks coming up to it, I'd had several shows. I had Munich [Germany] and Weisbaden [Germany], one right after the other. Then I had a week off before Bad Honnef [Germany]. There was another week off, and then Aachen.

Peron held up incredibly well. It didn't affect him in any way, and he stayed in form. There was no problem whatsoever. That's the first time I've had him to so many shows, one right after the other with only short breaks in between. We were more than pleased—he'll hold up under pressure.

I was trying to get some extra sleep here and there. I went six weeks without a day off. You consider at a horse show, I'm not riding my 10 horses a day, but I still have the high stress. For me, being up early and going to bed late—it's still just as stressful. I'm not in the hotel room that much. It's usually take a shower, run out for dinner, and run back in to hit the bed as fast as I can!

I really like the shows over here. The spectators are fabulous. They're knowledgeable to an extent. They recognize a clean flying change, and they know what piaffe and passage are supposed to look like.

The Aachen show had lots of high points for me. I was really pleased with both of my rides. I rode conservatively in the Grand Prix. My basic concern was to qualify for the Grand Prix Special, with the quality of the riders. It wasn't that I wanted to be fifth or third. I wanted to have a really good, clean test without mistakes.

We had a clean ride, good and a little bit conservative in some of the movements. It was good enough to be seventh, after the Germans. We had good piaffe and passage, and we had good tempi changes and pirouettes. I was pleased, and Rudolf was pleased. We knew it wasn't enough to beat the Germans, but we were both happy with how it had come out.

In the Special, I "gave it a little bit more gas." Again we had a 100-percent clean test. There were one or two little bobbles, but I think everybody has that in any test. I was very pleased, and so was Rudolf. [Michelle finished sixth with the highest score ever earned by an American rider at Aachen.]

My parents [Marshall and Marie Gibson] came over to watch me ride at Bad Honnef and Aachen. Unfortunately, dur-

ing the vet check at Aachen, a horse crashed into my mother and broke five bones in her foot. She was determined to stay at the show, despite having her foot and leg in a cast.

#### A Short Breather

Both Peron and I took a breather after Aachen. In mid-August we showed at Rotterdam [the Netherlands].

As a U.S. rider, I enjoyed meeting Kathleen Raine and Shelly Francis. I've ridden before at shows with Kathy von Ertfelda. I also enjoyed seeing Robert Dover, because I'd only met him briefly a few times before. He was very friendly, helpful and considerate.

At the shows, I'm really hard on myself. Rudolf is very fair. When I come out of the arena, we talk about, "This could have been better," or "You came into the pirouette a little bit crooked," or "You didn't prepare enough," or whatever. Basically I come out of the arena and Rudolf says, "All right, Michelle." He's never said to me, "You really blew it this time."

He stills puts pressure on. Rudolf just knows when to put the pressure on and when not to. He also knows that I put a lot of pressure on myself to do well.

Our last show, in mid-September, was Donaueschingen. It's a town in south Germany, set in beautiful countryside. Unfortunately there was no beautiful weather. The first few days, it did nothing but rain. Everything was wet!

We placed third in both the Grand Prix and the Grand Prix Special, so we had a successful show. There are always things to work on, but I'm basically happy with our performance. In the Grand Prix we had a bobble or two, and it wasn't quite as relaxed and elastic as we would have liked. We worked on that for the Special in our Sunday warm-up.

The Special was very good. He felt supple, elastic and was going great, up to one mistake in the last piaffe. That cost us second place. Too bad! What more can you say—mistakes happen. Next time I have to try and make sure it doesn't happen. Rudolf was third in the Grand Prix freestyle, and we were quite happy overall.

This year we've had several inquiries about buying Peron. After my first shows, a lot of people, Europeans and Americans, called asking if he was for sale. A lot of people called his owner, Carole Meyer-Webster, in Lafayette, Ga. The answer is absolutely not—there's no chance.

They gave up, and now everybody knows he's not for sale. Carole's coming over to watch us ride in the Stuttgart German Masters show at the end of October.

Carole pays for Peron's vet bills, farrier bills, and if I need tack like a new bridle. I use my saddle, a Stubben Schultheis. I pay for his board and training, and for the horse shows and the transportation.

In March I received a \$2,500 grant from the U.S. Olympic Committee. At home, my mother's pushed to get sponsors for me. She's organized fund raisers, and individual people from Atlanta have generously donated. My mother also sends our "Michelle's News," a regular newsletter, to my friends and supporters. □

## Bits About Michelle



**Michelle Gibson**  
with her father, Marshall,  
and Peron at Bad Honnef (Germany).

Age: 26

Home: Roswell, Ga., but has been training at Rudolph Zeilinger's stable in Germany since Autumn 1994.

Family: Single

Support Crew: Parents Marshall and Marie Gibson and two sisters.

Pets: Bertie, a Cocker Spaniel.

Interests outside of horses: Occasionally enjoys going to the beach and any kind of fishing.

Candidate horse: Peron, bay Trakehner stallion, 11, by Mahagoni—Peru II, owned by Carole Meyer-Webster.

#### Career highlights:

1994 CDN Dusseldorf (Germany)—third Grand Prix, fourth Grand Prix Special

1994 CDI Munster (Germany)—fourth Grand Prix, first Grand Prix Special

1995 CDN Darmstadt (Germany)—first Grand Prix and Grand Prix freestyle

1995 CDI Donaueschingen (Germany)—third Grand Prix and Grand Prix Special

1995 CHIO Rotterdam (the Netherlands)—fifth Grand Prix, second Grand Prix Special

1995 CDI Dortmund (Germany)—fifth Grand Prix, sixth Grand Prix Special, Best Foreign Rider Award.