

## MICHELLE GIBSON HAS GOTTEN MOST OF WHAT SHE WISHED FOR

Charlene Strickland

Contemporary wisdom declares that American dressage riders can't defeat Germans on German turf. In the last year Michelle Gibson has proven otherwise, twice.

At the prestigious Munster show, Gibson placed first in the Grand Prix Special with a score of 69.60 percent. She and the Trakehner stallion Peron topped 15 other riders, including Reiner Klimke and Isabell Werth. Gibson also placed fourth in the Grand Prix, of 32 riders.

Gibson, 26, was delighted with her performance. "I'm thrilled," she said. "That was my first win at Grand Prix."

In February, she earned three first places at Darmstadt, a national show. Here she beat 34 Grand Prix contenders. She was also fifth in the CDI Stuttgart (Germany) in late October.

To get to this point, Gibson labored for seven years as a working student.

"I set short-term goals that I can meet, and I just keep working. Before Christmas, I said my goal is to win somewhere—I didn't care what show. I never expected it would happen so soon," she said.

Gibson set that goal after she earned a 1994 Carl-Heinrich Asmis Scholar-

ship, which sent her back to Germany to train for international competition. She returned to work for international trainer Rudolf Zeilinger, who currently trains several international Grand Prix horses.

Gibson, who's still at Zeilinger's, has devoted herself to the pursuit of dressage in the classical style. At Zeilinger's barn, she seeks to master the discipline, beyond riding and showing. For her, success with horses requires a total immersion in the sport.

"There's a difference between riding and training," she said. "I'm interested in being able to influence different types of horses."

### Hard Progress

Gibson started riding at age 10, when her family moved from Maryland to Georgia. She competed in eventing, but at 16 switched to dressage. On her Trakehner mare, Chausse, she advanced to second level. At 18, a stint as a working student with 1992 Olympian Michael Poulin fueled her aspirations.

Sherry Frank, president of the Georgia Dressage and Combined Training Association, said, "Michelle got familiar with the highest levels

of dressage, having gone to the Florida circuit with Michael. She's always been a good rider, but when she decided to get serious about it, she got better really fast."

After a year and a half at Poulin's, Gibson was riding fourth level in junior/young riders classes and showing Chausse in Prix St. Georges. She went to Germany as an exchange student, and quickly found work in a German jumper barn. Through her host family and the German federation, she encountered the legendary Willi Schultheis.

She recalled, "Frau Schultheis offered me her race horses to ride, and then I could sit on one of Willi Schultheis' dressage horses to ride. I had no idea who Schultheis was in the dressage world. I was in for a big surprise when I found out! It was very much an accident, and I couldn't believe how lucky I was."

Schultheis has trained many horses and riders to the international level. At his barn, she met his assistant, Zeilinger. This talented trainer had recently established his own barn in Warendorf, and Gibson became a working student for him in 1989. Zeilinger's methods are based on the principles of his predecessor Schultheis, who studied with the famous Otto Lorke.

After three years as an apprentice, Gibson said she had begun to understand her sport. She learned that for a correct test, the rider must comprehend the principles that govern the horse's anatomy and musculature and the rider's aids.

In 1992 she said, "I'm starting to understand more about riding itself. The more you learn, the more there is to learn. I understand more about the horse, its structure and movement, and how important the basics are. You understand how to make a half-halt, what exactly it is, how it works, and its importance."

Gibson's pursuit of education reflects her constant focus on perfection. Her mother, Marie Gibson, describes this as an "insatiable desire for knowledge. With Michelle, when she's learning, she's happy."

Riding with Zeilinger rarely involves a lesson format. He offers comments, but Gibson helps train horses under his supervision and learns from the horses' responses. Through correct training, horses consistently perform calmly, forward and straight.

"I try to see in my mind what Rudolf does with a horse when I'm riding it. I think about what I see him do when he rides, and when I ride one he's ridden, I try to do what I see him do. I visualize, 'What if I put my hands down now,' or 'Did Rudolf go forward with the horse?'" Gibson said.

### Realizing A Dream

In 1992, Michelle returned to Roswell, Ga., and dared to define her dream—to ride in her state's Olympics in 1996. She had a German education and talent, yet she didn't have the right horse or the name recognition of Carol Lavell or Hilda Gurney.

Finances also posed a barrier, as



(Hugo Czerny Photo)

Michelle Gibson met Peron through a newspaper article.

the expenses of international competition were beyond the means of the Gibsons. The family held fund-raising events to enlist sponsors who agreed to contribute to the hometown girl's dream.

Circumstances had introduced Michelle and Rudolf Zeilinger, and chance led her to meet Peron. Rider and horse met through an article in an Atlanta newspaper. Michelle received a call from Dr. Carole Meyer-Webster of Lafayette, Ga. The radiologist suggested that Michelle ride her Trakehner, recently brought home from Robert Dover's barn and competed at Prix St. Georges by Kenn Acebal.

Peron, who was foaled in Germany, is a dark bay stallion by Mahogoni—Peru II, by Cocktail. Peron completed the first segments of German stallion licensing before being imported to Canada by Gunter-Bertelmann.

Meyer-Webster first saw Peron when he was at stud at Pat Goodman's Wonderland Farms in Pennsylvania. There Peron earned his approval with the American Trakehner Association by competing in a combined training event.

"I fell in love with him," recalled Meyer-Webster. "I thought he was a wonderful horse from the first, even before I saw him move. He had a fabulous personality, wonderful eyes and a wonderful heart."

In 1993, Meyer-Webster decided to bring Peron home from Dover's barn. The horse had been turned out in a pasture before Michelle first rode him.

The pair clicked: Meyer-Webster called their performance magic. "It's like watching a wonderful ballet. I have seen them ride at fund-raisers where everybody was crying—even people who don't know anything about horses. Even the caterers were crying."

In 1994, Gibson and Peron competed on the Florida circuit. In the Palm Beach Derby, they won the Intermediaire II with 73.42 percent and scored 71.4 in Intermediaire I. Peron became the 1994 USDF Horse of the Year in Intermediaire II.

"They have a spark, and they're a special kind of team" said Meyer-Webster. "Peron is reaching his full potential, and Michelle is so good a rider. They're more than the sum of their parts. Peron is truly enjoying himself. He's happy and they're both so focused."

Last year Gibson planned to compete in the qualifiers for the 1994 U.S. Olympic Festival. But she changed her mind after winning the Asmis grant.

Zeilinger invited Gibson to return to his barn. "Rudolf helps me in things I couldn't see for myself. It's important to have someone else on the ground and sometimes in the saddle," she said.

Gibson believes Peron has no weak points. "His piaffe and passage are super. The transitions have gotten very strong. His canter work is good, and now even better. His trot work is also very good."

She explained how Zeilinger pointed out a slight hesitation in Peron's transition from piaffe to passage, and suggested how to correct the moment between the movements. Besides offering advice, he occasionally rides the horse.

Michelle rode her first Grand Prix in Europe, placing seventh of 18 at Nurnberg with 62.47 percent. At Dusseldorf, the pair's second German show, Michelle and Peron earned 65.70 percent and third place in Grand Prix. They were fourth in the Special with 66.78 percent. Her first CDI was at Stuttgart, where she placed seventh in the Grand Prix with 65.95 percent and achieved a 70.34 percent in the Special.

Her artistic performances have captivated the German press, which features her in magazines and on radio sports shows. At Stuttgart, she received the coveted award for the rider with the best seat, given by the judges.

Gibson has obtained her German riding license and Peron is registered with the German federation. They no longer need to file a special application to compete in national shows.

She does have to cope with competing in the same classes as her mentor, though. She recalled, "The first time I rode against Rudolf, I was really nervous about it. But there's no competition among ourselves. It has to be a personal challenge."

At Zeilinger's, Gibson continues to work in return for training and housing. She shares an apartment with two other students and works six days a week. Her day begins at 6:30 a.m.; she rides six horses in the mornings. After a lunch break, the students return to the barn at 3:00 p.m. and work until 6:00 p.m., or sometimes later into the evening.

Gibson benefits from her association with a master, but she pays the price of diligent labor. "In Germany riding is a job. In the U.S., riding is a privilege," she said.

Michael Hedlund-Beining, a German trainer who trained with Schultheis, said of Gibson, "She's a very hard worker, and very dedicated." He added that most riders don't realize the demands of apprenticeship.

For example, before the Darmstadt show, Gibson worked her usual hours despite a bad cold and having to make up for the absence of a fellow working student. She also put together her first freestyle for the show.

Gibson plans to stay in Germany through the spring and summer. Later this year she plans to return to Georgia to prepare for Olympic qualifiers.

"Everyone dreams of being an Olympian. As far as realizing that it could really happen, it's only in the last year that I started to think that I could possibly make the team," she said. "Before that it was what I would like to do, and sort of a joke in my family. My dad would say, 'By the time you make it to the Olympics, they will be in Atlanta.' Of course then we had no idea the Olympics would really be coming to Atlanta any time soon. I say, 'Be careful what you wish for!'" □