

ROAD TO ATLANTA



STUTTGART CONCLUDED A MEMORABLE YEAR FOR MICHELLE GIBSON

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

As told to Charlene Strickland

I've had an exceptionally good year, and I couldn't be more pleased with how things have been going. Our tests have been improving, and the scores are showing it.

Stuttgart [Germany] is a special show for me because it was my first international show in 1994. It closed out one great year at Grand Prix. This year we were fifth in the Grand Prix with a 69 percent and fourth in the Grand Prix Special with a 72.93 percent.

I have to say, the Special was one of our best tests. The piaffe and passage were active from the hind leg, very rhythmic and consistent. The canter tour was also very "through" and coming into the bridle with expressive two-tempi and one-tempi changes, as well as the pirouettes. The trot tour had its strong points in the half-passes, as well as a good walk tour.

A lot of the things that we've been working on went well. It showed that the work we've been doing over the last weeks and months has been coming together.

There were many Americans visiting for the Stuttgart show, including a judges' forum. They were people I had read about but never met. It was so nice to meet them, and I was very flattered when they gave me a standing ovation. That was my first ever—certainly never to be forgotten. We even have it on tape!

Sherry Frank, a friend who has always believed in me and has given her all to dressage, scraped together enough money to make her first trip to Europe. I was so pleased to spend time with both her and Charlene Strickland, and to be able to show them around a little. They, in turn, were impressed with my rides and my freshened-up, fluent German. I didn't come by my German easily!

Peron's owner, Carole Meyer Webster, and her mother-in-law, Billy Snow, were also at Stuttgart. I very much enjoyed the time we spent together. Carole was thrilled with Peron's performance, as well as his condition and appearance. (He has developed a lot during his tour in Germany, and he is pampered more than ever.) She was also there to accept the German Trakehner Verband Horse of the Year award.

It was hard to say goodbye to everyone. I do miss living in the United States and my family and friends very much. Although this is my third Christmas in Germany, it's my first being on my own.

My new groom, Beate, really helps me a lot. From the first, she understood just what to do. I trust her—she's very conscientious about taking care of Peron, and they like each other. I've only had her a few months, and what a help! She especially makes all the difference in the world at shows. Carole and Russell Webster provide her for me.

The week after Stuttgart, I had a week's vacation with my family in England. Then on the first weekend in December I showed at Frankfurt [Germany], a national show. We were second in the Grand Prix with 69.20 percent and first in the Grand Prix Special, scoring 72.05 percent.

We had good tests there, although a few small mistakes. In every test there is something to be worked on. I guess if there weren't, it wouldn't be a challenge.

As for next year's schedule—we'll just have to take it as it comes. It's 1996, and the qualifiers for the Olympic Games in Atlanta begin. At the moment, we're having a break from showing, and we'll soon be tuning up for these very special shows. Two shows I'll attend will probably be Bremen [Germany] and Dortmund [Germany]. I need to show at two CDIs with FEI O-rated judges, who have to each give me a minimum of 60 percent.

Juggling Finances And Hours

Managing financially isn't easy. I work a full day for Rudolf Zeilinger to pay for training and board and a few living expenses. The horse shows pay for themselves. Yes, I do win prize money, but from that I must pay such expenses as horse transportation, hotels and food for Rudolf and myself [Rudolf is also paid a daily fee for training], as well as entry fees and stabling. And you can't forget the 15 percent tax taken out by the German government. When you add the numbers up, I'm fortunate if I have enough to live on.

For example, I was invited to show at



(Charlene Strickland Photo)

Peron looked confident and alert as he approached the warm-up arena at Stuttgart.

Stuttgart. I paid my own way. At shows, the entry fees are from \$335 to \$535 and stabling can run from \$200 to \$300. Peron traveled to the show with Johannsmann, and that costs an average of about \$650. I use that company because they're one of the best and I don't take any risks with Peron. [Peron rode home from Stuttgart in the same van as German champion Rembrandt.]

I work a minimum of 10 hours a day. By the time I get home in the evenings, I'm ready to sit down for a hot meal, especially this time of year.

I try not to worry too much about balancing my full-time job with preparing for next summer. I just do it—you can't make yourself crazy thinking about it all. My approach is to concentrate on what I'm doing and get it done. I focus so much that people sometimes misunderstand my concentration.

I have to do all my shopping and errands at lunch due to the shopping hours. The shops here close at 6 or 6:30 p.m., which leaves any telephone calls or paperwork for the evenings. It's a lot to do, and often I end up having to make a list just to keep up with all of it. It's just too easy to forget something that you've been meaning to do since last week.

I'm used to the work, and I'm used to the schedule. That's not a problem for me. Sometimes getting up in the morning isn't so easy, but often it's harder for me to get all my phone calls made and my paperwork done at night.

For me, the most difficult part of the week is Tuesday and sometimes Saturday. You're always really motivated on Monday, and then Tuesday is like a hump day. Saturday is the end of the week.

You're tired from the week and you're ready to have a day off, a couple of hours free.

At Rudolf's barn, I have a variety of horses ranging from beginning levels through Grand Prix. All horses are different in their personalities—that's what makes this job so interesting. Part of being a professional is adjusting to this and dealing with their personalities. It's similar to people in that some are easier to get along with than others. A large part of that often comes under the heading of having patience and understanding of that particular horse and situation that you're presented with, at any given moment.

I think it doesn't matter whether a horse is a Trakehner or a Hanoverian, a Holsteiner, or an American Thoroughbred. If it's a good horse, it's a good horse. I think most professionals look at it that way as well. There are quite a few Trakehners, like Peron, in this sport. Yes, people do make jokes. When a Trakehner does something wrong, they say, "typical Trakehner." There's always that.

Believing in the Dream

People often ask me how I've gotten so far when I started with nothing—with limited training, no horse and no money. How does someone make it this far with such a bleak beginning?

It starts with believing in yourself and your dreams, and a desire to make your dreams come true in a sport that you love. It has to be larger than any other need. For me, the horses and the riding have been more important than anything else.

Years into my dream, it almost seemed as though divine intervention helped me through. Things came together as though they were meant to be. First was my good fortune in meeting Rudolf and being able to work for him for three years. The major

break I had been waiting for was meeting Carole and her husband, Russell.

When their horse Peron first came to me, he was very much out of condition from standing in the pasture. I wasn't exactly sure how far we could go, but I believed in him. I felt as though we had a good chance to compete in Europe. Rudolf confirmed my feeling after he saw Peron in a clinic, in the fall of 1993 in New Jersey.

The next question was how to bridge the gap financially. I found individuals to sponsor me. First Ben and Connie Kushner, and then Brad and Laura Thatcher, came into my life. These people, business professionals from Atlanta, had fund raisers for me after knowing me for only a short time. These fund raisers, attended by other professional people from Atlanta, made my trip possible.

Through the Asmis scholarship and grants from the U.S. Olympic Committee, we've been able to climb that mountain. And we have more of those mountains to climb.

Where are we now? We're one of the top competitors in Europe. We're competing and placing among the best, like Isabell Werth, Nicole Uphoff-Becker, Klaus Balkenhol, Martin Schaudt and Reiner Klimke! It's a great feeling. The best part is, there's more to come.

The question is, financially, how do we keep going? It takes more than talent. We've done portfolios, fund raisers, and newsletters, but we need to do more. With the limitations on tax-deductible donations, it's hard to convince people to contribute donations to an individual athlete.

We're looking forward to the coming year. We'll deal with and conquer the unknown obstacles sure to come our way, and we'll continue to strive to be the very best we can be. □



"The piaffe and passage were active from the hind leg, very rhythmic and consistent," said Michelle Gibson about Peron's tests at Stuttgart.

(Charlene Strickland Photo)

Bits About Michelle



(Charlene Strickland Photo)

Michelle Gibson

Age: 26

Home: Roswell, Ga.

Supporters: Parents—
Marshall and Marie Gibson.

Family: Single

Mentor: Rudolf Zeilinger

Favorite color: Blue

Pets: Bertie, a cocker spaniel.

Awards: U.S. Olympic Committee Equestrian of the Year; Nominated for AHSA/Hertz Equestrian of the Year; Peron was Horse of the Year with both the German Trakehner Verband and the American Trakehner Association.

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.