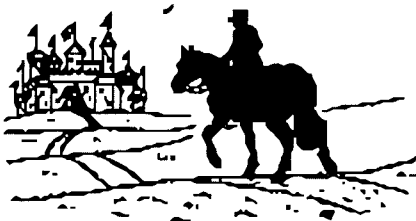


ROAD TO ATLANTA



1996 STARTS PERFECTLY FOR MICHELLE GIBSON

In this series, the Chronicle follows five riders as they seek to fulfill their Olympic dreams.

As told to Charlene Strickland

The CDN at Munster [Germany] on Jan. 17-21, was our first show of the year after more than a one-month break from showing. We were considered "favorites" to win by the German press, and so I felt a bit of pressure.

It was a new perspective for me to be the "favorite." I mean, do people still look at you the same? I think they do, and the lesson I've learned from all this is that it's still a horse show like all the others. You have to do your best because at this particular moment in time, you're the one everyone's trying to beat.

We did our best, and out of a field of 28 in the Grand Prix, we won with 71.02 percent. The Grand Prix Special

was a different arena, a different day, and under different circumstances, but we did it. We won the Grand Prix Special with 72 percent. What a way to start the year!

The second show on our schedule was the CDN Bremen [Germany] on Feb. 8-11. We rode against a strong field of Germany's top combinations, including Martina Hanover on Rubenstein, Isabell Werth on Anthony, and Nadine Capelman-Biffar on Gracioso, to name a few. We came in fifth with a 69.76 percent.

I was determined to do better the next day in the Grand Prix Special. And we did just that—we came back to win with an excellent score of 74.42

percent. That was our best to date! I was very proud of Peron and myself, and, as always, I was thankful that Rudolf [Zeilinger] was there to coach us to this awesome score. After the awards ceremony and bringing Peron back to the stall, we celebrated. Peron got plenty of apples, and as for us humans, a glass of champagne was in order—on me, of course!

Well, so far, so good! We went on to my first qualifier, the CDN at Dortmund [Germany] on March 8-10. This was an Olympic preparation show for the Germans. That means all German horse-rider combinations were required to ride, excluding the combinations of Nicole Uphoff Becker with Rembrandt, Isabell Werth with Gigolo, and Klaus Balkenhol with Goldstern—their multiple gold medalists.

I was the only foreign rider there, and to be honest, I went with the hope of getting a good score and placing in the top six so I would qualify for the Special. We had a fabulous Grand Prix, placing second behind Monica Theodorescu on Grunox with a score of 72.72 percent. I felt really good about our test, and as I got the "thumbs up" from Rudolf, I knew it was the right feeling.

I was glad to be qualified for the Special, where we tied for third with Martin Schaudt on Durgo with 72.79 percent. This was truly an honor for me to place among these riders. This is the stuff that dreams are made of.

Planning the Freestyle and Returning to America

We have one Olympic-qualifying criteria left to complete, the musical freestyle. I've been questioned lately about my freestyle, such as who's doing the choreography, what type of music are we using, and what I think about the freestyle in general.

Rudolf and I have done the choreography. It's quite time-consuming and involves a lot of putting pieces together or putting ideas together, seeing what works, and trying to combine these ideas into something. I think we've done quite well. I like my freestyle, and I can't wait to see how it comes across to the judges as well as the public.

The music is half the freestyle. This may sound like a simple statement, but it can influence how the spectator interprets the combination of the rider, horse and choreography. I feel it's very important to have music that fits the physical appearance as well as the character of the horse and rider. I also think the rider should enjoy the music she chooses to use; however, that needn't be the deciding factor.

All the elements need to add up. I have chosen music that's modern, American and upbeat. I'm very fortunate to have friends who are very involved with music and have put it together for us. To have music professionally arranged costs several thousand dollars. So let's just wait and see!

I've been asked how I feel about leaving Germany. Talk about mixed emotions! I wish it were possible to stay a few more weeks to continue our train-

Peron's consistently high scores have caused Michelle Gibson to feel a new kind of pressure. "It is a new perspective for me to be the 'favorite,'" she says.

ing. I must admit I have delayed making any definite plans about returning home and when I might come back to Germany. Germany is without question the best place for dressage. My trainer is here, and the horses and horse shows can't be beat due to the popularity and the financial backing of the sport.

But my family and friends are in America. What I've decided to do is to wait and see how things go, and see what opportunities come my way. It would be ideal to spend the summers in Germany and the winters in Florida.

I've lived more than five years in Germany, and I've enjoyed the concentration and mentality toward the horses and the competitions. In the summer, it's possible to go every weekend to the show of your choice. In the winter is the indoor show circuit, where you can see all the top riders in dressage as well as jumping. It's been quite an experience—one that every true equestrian should have!

Gaining Support

In June, we'll be returning to America for the final selection trial in Gladstone [N.J.] The financing of this trip has been a mystery. How are we going to afford it?

Well, an article appeared in the German horse magazine, *St. Georg*, that told our story and our financial difficulties in getting to the qualifiers. Because of that article, Guido Klatte with International Equine Services, together with his American partner, Tim Dutta, contacted me, offering to sponsor our transportation to Gladstone. It was such a wonderful offer—how could I possibly say no. I said, yes, great, and where do we get started?

The sponsorship includes transportation for Peron, as well as for Rudolf, my groom Beate, and me. Guido and Tim have been very helpful, and I want to thank them very much for their interest and support. I'd like to say that they've been an inspiration for me, a light at the end of a dark tunnel where you're not sure which way to turn. When I say, "Thank you," they tell me it's their way of giving back to the sport.

The fund-raisers have also helped us. One of the first and biggest imponderables about getting from your home town to the Olympics is how in the world to fund the adventure. You can be as diligent as possible on training, but unless you have access to the substantial sums needed to get to the countless required shows and events, you may as well be riding circles in your own backyard.

It's the classic chicken-and-egg situation: How do you convince total strangers to make non-deductible contributions to your "cause"—before the "cause" is anything close to tangible, for lack of having gained the experience that you need the funds to do?

I've been really blessed to meet along the way some energetic people with a host of excellent contacts and a willing suspension of disbelief. Ben and Connie Kushner hosted my first official fund-raiser. Laura and Brad

Thatcher, who own Applewood Farm (Peron's home in Atlanta), came to the first fund-raiser, and they got bitten by the excitement of my longshot opportunity. (It didn't hurt that my Mom refused to let any lull in their enthusiasm take root.)

We all worked together to plan for a "make-it-or-break-it" fund-raiser at Applewood Farm in April 1994. Dad and I had just come home from the spring circuit at White Fences in Florida, where Peron and I scored better than anyone expected. We had to raise \$11,000 to pay for Peron's and my plane fare to Germany, where we would get the critical experience we needed.

Getting ready for the fund-raiser was a group effort if ever there was one. Everybody had a job. In four days' time, Dad and Brad managed to paint all the farm fences white and the barn blue, to make Applewood reminiscent of White Fences in Palm Beach. Laura's invitations to the event promised nothing but fun, and they included an unashful plea for big donations. Mom and Laura bought horseshoes to give away as souvenirs, and my good friend Karen Lipp painted them gold and wove them with red, white, and blue ribbons suggesting the hoped-for "gold" of 1996.

Laura's wonderful caterer (Jean Benton of Benton and Associates) donated her time and helped plan a fabulous and economical picnic worthy of the most elegant steeplechase. The Applewood boarders and friends planted shrubs and flowers and made the barn and tack room shine.

Brad and Laura's friends came out in droves and left mountains of "venture capital." It was exactly enough for the plane fare to Germany, with me riding as groom in the box with Peron and two other horses. As you can see, lots of friends and lots of prayers must converge to make ends meet.

We're now gearing up for the final fund-raiser, to be held in May at Applewood Farm. This will help defray the countless hidden costs that accelerate when you get this close to the finish line. Brad and Laura are using the same ideas and techniques that were so successful in 1994.

This time Peron and I won't be there to offer our own brand of encouragement. In our place, Dr. Carole Ludwig, from Athens, Ga., has agreed to perform a musical freestyle. People can watch videos of Peron and me competing at several of the European shows. At least this time we have some concrete successes to point to, as we ask for our friends' critical financial support.

To show my thanks to the people who have given so generously to get me where I am today, I have tried to send periodic newsletters. They keep my supporters abreast of what I've been doing in Germany, and the trials and successes Peron and I have had along the way. Mom, Dad and Sherry Frank have kept the friendly pressure on me to keep the newsletters going, and the address list growing by

word of mouth. If I fall behind, we get phone calls.

I'm thrilled to say that we have gotten many favorable responses, some completely out of the blue and accompanied by donations! Because most of my supporters have been professional people from the Atlanta area (who knew nothing about dressage), it has been a great teaching tool. □

Bits About Michelle



(Monika Warstat-Frieler Photo)

Michelle Gibson

Age: 26

Home: Roswell, Ga.

Candidate Horse: Peron, a bay, Trakehner stallion, 12, by Mahogoni—Peru II, owned by Carol Meyer-Webster.

What I would do if I had the time and money: "If I had the money, I would buy a nice young horse. If I had the time, I'd go to Australia for a vacation. Of course the young horse would come first."

What I would change about my life, if I could: "I would add a social life and take my dog, Burton, with me everywhere."

I'd like to say "Hi" to:
 Laura and Brad Thatcher
 John Aldridge
 Dawn and Cameron Thomas
 Tony and Anton DiSclafini
 Dr. Carole Ludwig
 Karen Lipp
 Nell O'Callahan
 Holger Bechthoff
 Kathy Von Ertfelda
 Shelly Francis
 Deborah Adams