

After excelling on the German dressage show circuit, Michelle Gibson and her equine partner Peron will return to America to compete for a spot on the United States Olympic Team.

By Susan Woods

Breathing down the necks of some of the world's most noted riders, Michelle Gibson and Peron placed seventh—out of 39 rides—in the Grand Prix CDIO class at the 1995 Aachen CHIO, often called the best horse show in the world. Finishing with a handsome score of 69.5 percent, Gibson was delighted to be positioned just behind such respected riders as Klaus Balkenhol on Goldstern, Nicole Uphoff-Becker with Rembrandt Borbet, and Monica Theodorescu on Ganimedes TecRent. Quite a feat for a 26-year-old “Georgia farm girl.”

I managed to catch up to this busy young woman in a little German beer garden a few hundred feet away from the Aachen show grounds. Some of the most prestigious dressage riders were warming up their horses a stone's throw from our table. Unlike what I'm used to seeing in the United States, the grandstands surrounding the main arena were

This page: As kids, Gibson and her sister Leia rode as often as possible.

Left: Gibson and Peron hold their own on the German dressage show circuit.

filled with several thousand fans.

When I asked Gibson about the Grand Prix ride she had just completed, she said it was “a good, clean, solid go,” which was exactly the outcome she had been aiming for.

A true dressage perfectionist, she did

combine a little luck, some innate talent and a magnum of hard work.

Until she was nine years old, Gibson lived on a farm in Maryland with her parents, sister and two horses. “I can't remember not being interested in horses,” says Gibson. “My sister and I used to ride bareback and barefoot.”

When Dad was transferred to Georgia, the horses had to stay behind, but Gibson so missed them that she nagged her parents until they found a local riding instructor—Kaye Smarslik—for her to learn from.

After six months of taking lessons, Gibson—now ten years old—secured her first working student position to pay for her new passion.

Was she an ideal student? Well, yes and no. Smarslik—now also living in Germany—describes her as “difficult.” She was always demanding to know how and why things should be done, and she didn't follow orders well. But Smarslik is also quick to say that Gibson was a “special, talented” student who was “hungry for knowledge”—the kind of student that every instructor is thrilled to have.

From Smarslik, Gibson learned about



Courtesy, Marie Gibson

manage to allude to “a few little things that she would have liked to be different.” Later that day, she placed sixth with a 72.60 percent in the Grand Prix Special, just behind Uphoff-Becker and Rembrandt Borbet.

So just how does a Georgia farm kid get to be an international contender? It wasn't surprising to learn that it's a com-



Martin Förster

"The trust between Peron and Michelle is often very apparent, even on the ground," says Gibson's mother.

the basics of dressage and some eventing. Along the way, she acquired her first horse, Allspice, an Appaloosa/Thoroughbred gelding that was, in Gibson's words, "crazy as a loon."

The loon was eventually replaced by a Trakehner mare named Chaussee and Gibson went to work for Laura Wharton in Woodstock, Georgia. Now 13 years old, Gibson spent four years with Wharton

and advanced to Second Level.

In order to finish high school four months ahead of her classmates, Gibson took extra courses and attended summer school. Two weeks after completing all the required courses, she went to work for Michael Poulin in New England. During her tenure with the famed Olympian, she traveled from his family home in Maine to the winter show circuit in Florida.

Meanwhile, Chaussee and Gibson progressed to the Prix St. Georges Level, showcasing their talent in some of the Young Rider classes in Florida. But the

mare didn't have the necessary ability to help Gibson attain the next levels in dressage.

Gibson realized that she needed a "push" in her career. Something that would help her reach her goals. It came in the form of a trip to Germany.

In 1989, a good friend of the Gibson family—coincidentally from Germany, but living in Atlanta, Georgia—helped convince Gibson's parents that their daughter should move across the Atlantic. Gibson had no knowledge of the language and little travel experience, but her parents agreed.

"To me, the word German translated to 'a history of dressage,'" remembers Gibson.

Her parents and their friend arranged a "student exchange" with a German family, who sent their son to live with the Gibsons in Atlanta.

When Gibson got to Germany, her new family had found a jumper trainer that was looking for a working student. Although Gibson tried it for two months, she decided that it wasn't for her.

One day, the matriarch of the German family took Gibson to the German Olympic Riding Committee—a riding center for Olympic riders like Harry Boldt and Nicole Uphoff-Becker. Dressage icon Willi Schultheis' barn just happened to be located around the corner. Clad in riding breeches, Gibson decided she needed to meet him. "This meeting was pure luck," she quips. "But he put me on one of his horses with no spurs or whip and we did everything—it was a wonderful ride."

Schultheis didn't have room for another rider for his horses but he must have seen something special in this young lady because he started her out riding his wife's racehorses—in dressage. But he would coach her with the Thoroughbreds and put her on one of his horses two or three times a week.

It was here that this not-so-shy Southern belle met her current trainer, Rudolf Zeilinger, who was a breiter for Schultheis. When Zeilinger decided to set out on his own, he offered Gibson "the opportunity of a lifetime"—the chance to work and train with him.

After working for another three years with Zeilinger, Gibson realized that she



Hugo Czerny

Gibson has worked with Rudolf Zeilinger for six years, four of them at his barn in Warendorf.

needed a horse—make that a Horse.

On a brief trip back to the United States, Gibson met Carole Meyer-Webster who had recently written an article on Gibson. She invited the young rider to work with her Trakehner stallion Peron and was pleased with the pair's chemistry. With the help of her trainer Zeilinger, Gibson transported the horse to Germany.

It was Zeilinger who helped Gibson develop the seat that won the "Best Seat" award at the Düsseldorf show last fall—an honor that is determined by a vote of the show's judges. She gives all the credit to Zeilinger for her success, because "he has done such a tremendous job of getting my butt in gear." Perhaps the seven to ten horses she rides each day had something to do with it.

When asked to respond to Gibson's credit, Zeilinger says, "Of course you need three things to have success: the rider, the trainer and the horse." When pressed a little further, Gibson says of developing a good seat, "There are no tricks or quick tips. For me, it was practice, discipline and hours of watching Zeilinger ride."

Now here she is, at the Aachen CDIO with almost a 70 percent. Sounds easy, doesn't it?

Shifting gears a little, I asked Gibson what kind of riding background makes a good dressage rider—did she find it helpful to have ridden jumpers and event horses and racehorses? "I think it is absolutely a good idea. The jumping is good for

At the 1995 Rotterdam, Holland show (not pictured here), Gibson and Peron placed fifth in Grand Prix and second in the Grand Prix Special.

confidence as well as your seat. You have to think and react, and you have to be able to do those things when you are riding dressage, too.

"Dressage might look quiet, but you are working up there! You develop confidence in going forward, too, and you learn to trust the horse, as well as yourself," she adds.

So then, what advice might she give to aspiring American dressage riders? "I think, most of all, they have to be open to learning and be willing to take help from someone who knows what he or she is doing. They have to be willing to pay a little bit more to take more lessons."

For young riders trying to advance, Gibson has this advice: The path for each individual "depends on what opportunities are available to him or her. I have always been a working student, and that has been really good for me, because I had to learn to do everything.

"You have to be willing to sacrifice the other things in your life. If you can, come to Europe and work and ride as many



Courtesy, Marie Gibson

At Zeilinger's barn, Gibson rides and trains customers horses as well as her show partner Peron.

Hugo Czerny




horses as possible, with a good instructor," she continues.

Just where did all this focus and singleness of purpose come from? Gibson's mom Marie says she has always been the independent, stubborn, serious child that Smarslik described. "She set the goals, she took on the responsibility and she was focused from the start."

"She never had to be reminded of her responsibility. She wanted to do it, and all we have done is help her get it done," adds Dad.

For Gibson, the sacrifices of success include the moving back and forth. "Just when you get comfortable and start to make friends, there you go again. It's tough." She currently lives in a small country town—Warendorf—and enjoys the peace and quiet. When she's not riding, she's sleeping or eating—preferably ice cream. Her German boyfriend also rides, and occasionally, they go to a movie so they'll have something to talk about other than horses.

Gibson works the now 11-year-old Peron on dressage six days a week, hand walks and grazes him in the evenings for a change of pace and takes him on an occasional hack if the weather is good. "He is very willing, has a clear mind, a super attitude and will do just about anything," says Gibson of her partner.

During an interview with Dr. Reiner Klimke, I asked him to cite some interesting American riders. Gibson's name came up. In fact, "She rides very well. She could ride with more impulsion, but she is on the right way," were his exact words. Coming from a man who has six Olympic medals, I thought this was rather a nice compliment. When I relayed the conversation to Gibson, she looked, for a moment, nonplussed—then happy. Then, well, *very* happy. As well she should be. 

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