

GRACE RUSSO

The importance of community in an individual sport

WORDS: APRIL BILODEAU



Russo and Esme Root

WHEN GRACE RUSSO thinks back on some of her earliest memories, she recalls the days she spent watching her mom ride. At just three years old, Russo had developed a liking for horses and begged her mom for lessons.

Her wish was granted a year later and she began taking lessons once a week at a nearby farm. While her talent was recognizable at an early age, Russo showed a desire to become a true horsewoman and learn as much as she could from the professionals around her.

At nine years old, she began riding with Archie Cox, and soon after found herself competing on some of the country's biggest stages.

While her success in the show ring is something Russo is proud of, one thing that hasn't changed is her desire to continue learning, always putting her horses first along the way.





Competing in Las Vegas

“EVERYONE WHO has influenced me even in the slightest has helped me become the horsewoman I am today and will become in the future,” Russo tells *The Plaid Horse*.

Now in her last junior year, Russo is excitedly looking at the road ahead and exploring her options on how to continue developing her skills both in and out of the saddle.

A CAREER IN CATCH RIDING

While Russo has a few great horses of her own (more on them later!), she has also gotten the opportunity to catch ride several different horses, from local horse shows to Junior Hunter Finals.

“Catch riding has improved my ability to adapt my riding style to a horse,” says Russo. “It’s valuable

to learn from a variety of horses. The ability to adjust your mindset and adapt your plan in the ring based on the horse that you have is crucial for becoming a well-rounded rider.”

This mentality proved to be important in Russo’s reserve championship in the USHJA 3’6” Gladstone Cup-West. During the

testing portion, she swapped horses and rode G-Star to move up from fifth to her final standing.

“With only 90 seconds and two pre-set jumps to warm up on our assigned mounts, my experience with catch riding helped me adapt to G-Star, as that’s a limited amount of time to learn a horse! It was an incredible experience.”

She also received third place honors in the USEF/NCEA Junior Hunter Seat Medal Finals after competing on another rider’s horse during the bracket phrase.

While Russo says she has had a lot of wonderful catch rides over the years, a few that stand out to her include Ceremony, a junior hunter owned by the Little family



Russo and her brother after a championship win

“The support that I can provide a teammate, or vice versa, produces a positive mindset. My relationship with my fellow teammates motivates me to make them proud.”

—GRACE RUSSO



Russo and Naomi Wegner



Russo holding the IEL Varsity High Point Rider Trophy



Russo celebrates her career high 94 on Black Jack

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and trained by John French that she rode Indoors in 2023; and Day Won, a small junior hunter then owned by Balmoral and trained by Carleton and Traci Brooks.

IN THE BARN

While Russo cherishes the time that she spends riding, she enjoys spending time with and learning with her horses even more.

Her current equitation horse, Diplomat, has been her partner for

almost two years. When she first got him, he had never done equitation, but within a couple of weeks, Russo piloted Diplomat in the USHJA 3’3” Hunter Seat Medal Final-West to a fourth place finish.

“He’s a lovely horse and as I’ve gotten to know him, I’ve learned how to prepare him to improve our results in the ring,” says Russo. “For example, I know he goes better if he hacks in the ring in the morning. Then, based on his reactions to the

ring, I know how to set him up for our success in the class.”

In the barn, Russo cares for Diplomat and her other partner horses, including jumper Diane De Sivry and equitation horses Casalino and Jarabel K Z. “On the ground, I like to be involved with the care of my horses—it’s helped me to be more knowledgeable about them. Understanding their behavior in the stall is revealing about their personalities and how they may behave on course,” she says.

FINDING COMMUNITY IN AN INDIVIDUAL SPORT

Russo loves building relationships within the human equestrian community as much as she does with her equine partners.

Russo attends Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy (FSHA) near her

home in Pasadena, CA. Balancing life as an in-person student with a 4.260 GPA and competing at the highest levels on both the East and West Coasts takes a lot of discipline and hard work. She often has early morning lessons before school to balance her academic and equestrian pursuits; she currently trains with Susie Schroer at Meadow Grove.

“I love starting the day riding before school; the burst of cool air, the sun coming up...it all sets the tone for a better day,” says Russo.

The young rider also finds community at school, where she is a member of the Interscholastic Equestrian League team, an organization that includes almost 100 high schools across Los Angeles and Ventura counties. Russo was named FSHA’s Most Valuable Rider and earned the title of league champion



FEATURE

for high point varsity rider for the 2022-2023 season. In the same year, Russo also won the championship in the varsity horsemanship medal final, where Karen Healey was judging.

Russo loves riding with and for a team, and takes in as much as she can from her fellow teammates. “We all have the opportunity to watch and support each other,” says Russo. “The support that I can provide a teammate, or vice versa, produces a positive mindset. My relationship with my fellow teammates motivates me to make them proud.”

Russo rides on both coasts, traveling across the country to venues such as Desert International Horse Park, Wellington, Traverse City and Kentucky. While she thrives on the competition, Russo says she is grounded in the camaraderie and horsemanship that maintain a supportive equestrian community.

“I appreciate competition because it makes me better. I get to work with those around me to improve myself and watch my friends around me do the same,” she says. “I enjoy the community feeling that I have with

many of the girls I compete with. We all love and respect the horses that do so much for us.”

LOOKING AHEAD

While Russo plans to finish her junior years competing at Indoors on the East Coast, she is looking forward to the future, both academically and in the saddle.

Russo takes honors and AP courses and is committed to continuing her high academic standards in college. Alongside academics, Russo is excited to continue riding at the highest collegiate level. Over the years she has watched friends participate in different styles of collegiate competition—one of the unforeseen benefits of her strong community is hearing from other girls about their experiences. From these conversations and visiting schools and camps, Russo knows that she wants to ride for an NCEA Division 1 school.

“I want to ride for an NCEA team. The style of competition uses my skills honed from catch riding, including being intuitive about what different horses need. It expands my mindset and I’ll get to experience more horses as I feel like that constantly improves me as a horse person,” says Russo. “I love being part of a team—I feel that I have a lot to offer to the horses, my teammates, and my school.”

Until that next step, Russo will continue her journey of constant improvement, grateful for the many people who have aided in her success along the way. “I have such an incredible community of trainers surrounding me,” says Russo. “So many people have given me something over the years, big and small, and I’m honored and humbled.”



“One of Grace’s strengths is that in a short time of riding a horse she figures out how to ride the horse in the way the horse likes to go best. [She] is very appreciative of the horses she rides and they sense that.”

—JOHN FRENCH, TOP TRAINER



PHOTO: SHAWN McMILLEN PHOTOGRAPHY (FAR LEFT)

PHOTOS: KATE ROMERO (TOP AND BOTTOM NEAR LEFT); SPORTFOT (BOTTOM RIGHT)

GRACE RUSSO'S RECENT HORSE SHOW HIGHLIGHTS

2024

- WIHS Overall Winner, Desert Circuit I
- Winner, Equitation 16-17 3'3" Flat, Desert Circuit I

2023

- ASPCA Maclay Winner, National Sunshine 2
- Winner, WIHS Hunter Phase, National Sunshine 2
- Winner, WIHS Hunter Phase, Blenheim International Jumping Festival

- Champion, Large Junior Hunter, Blenheim International Jumping Festival
- Winner, EMO Ins/USHJA Jumping Seat Medal, Blenheim Fall Tournament
- Champion, Large Junior Hunter, Blenheim Fall Tournament
- Winner, USHJA Jumping Seat Medal, Del Mar Classics 1 & 2
- Winner, CPHA Style of Riding, Del Mar Classic 2

- Winner, WIHS Jumper Phase, Del Mar Classic 2
- Winner, West Coast Equestrian Medal, Del Mar Classic 1
- Winner, WIHS Overall, ESP Summer II
- Winner, 1.00 m Jumper, GLEF VI
- Winner, WIHS Overall, Del Mar Festival 1
- Winner, Equitation 15-17, Blenheim Spring II

- Champion, Equitation 15-17, Los Angeles Spring Classic
- Champion, 3'6" Junior Hunter, Los Angeles Spring Classic
- Champion, Equitation 16-17, Desert Circuit IV
- Winner, ASPCA Maclay, Desert Holiday III
- Winner, Jr/AO Classic, Desert Holiday III
- Winner, USEF/NCEA Junior Medal, Desert Holiday II

