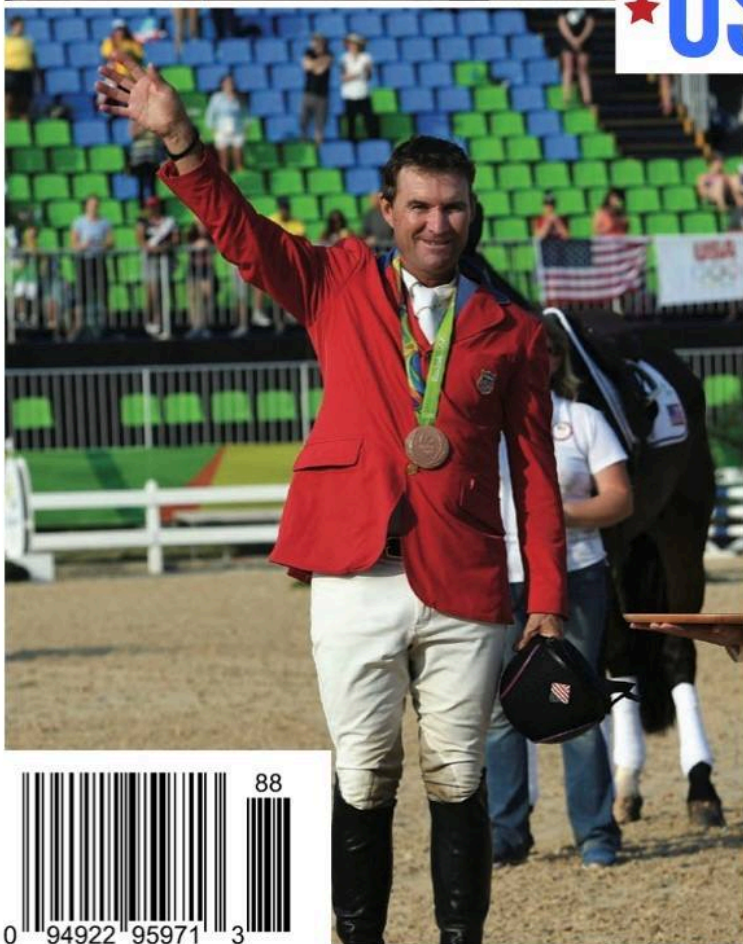


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Caitlyn Shiels

LEARNING FROM THE BEST

By Lauren Fisher



Piloting Cavalier II around a course
Photo by Victoria DeMore

Caitlyn Shiels is in a great place in her life. The 33-year-old professional rider and trainer manages the care of talented horses and teaches riders of all levels at Canterbury Farm in Hampshire, Illinois, with head trainer Greg Franklin. She recently closed on the purchase of her first home nearby and travels nationwide competing at top horse shows in both the hunters and jumpers.

Many young riders struggle with what to do after their junior careers, and Caitlyn is a perfect example of the commitment it takes to make the big move from amateur to professional and find a career that suits you. But Caitlyn will be the first to admit that it took many different experiences to figure out what she really wanted in order to get where she is today.

Riding With Andre

Caitlyn started out as a horse-crazy kid taking lessons at a local farm in her hometown of Sheffield, Massachusetts. As her riding continued to improve, Caitlyn set her sights on competing in the national equitation championships, but trainer Mary Mead saw that Caitlyn's potential had outgrown her expertise. Mary sent the rider to top equitation coach Andre Dignelli at Heritage Farm in New

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— Caitlyn Shiels

York, where Caitlyn was able to continue her education.

Seeing Caitlyn's talent and dedication, Andre agreed to take her on as a working student. The opportunity presented the young rider unparalleled experience at one of the nation's top training facilities and solidified her desire to take her riding to the next level.

To this day, Caitlyn considers everything she learned from Andre to be “the base of it all.” She began riding with Andre when she was 16 years

old and went on to finish in the top 10 of every major equitation final during her last junior year. She also worked closely with trainer Kate Stoffel Oliver during her time at Heritage. As a working student, Caitlyn had the opportunity to ride many different horses and learned a lot about behind-the-scenes care and management.

“I rode whatever Andre had for sale or anything that was super green,” Caitlyn noted. “He’d say, ‘Okay, we’re going to Lake Placid and you’re going to show in the Maclay, but the horse has never done it.’ I rode a lot of the difficult ones, and I think that made me a better rider.”

Moving On Up

After her final junior year, Caitlyn went on to compete as an amateur and bought a jumper named Memphis who made her biggest dreams come true. In 2004, Caitlyn and Memphis earned team and individual gold medals at the North American Young Rider Championships. Following one of the biggest feats any amateur rider could hope for, Caitlyn decided to strike out on her own and see where a professional career would take her.

The first job Caitlyn accepted was with professional show jumpers Jonathan and Christine McCrea in Connecticut. She worked

with the couple for four years and gained invaluable experience in the jumper industry. It felt like a natural step in her developing education and also gave her experience training others.

“When I started working for Jon and Chris, I really focused on training the clients,” Caitlyn explained. “Before that, I didn’t really have training experience on my own. If you want to do this, you have to gain a lot of confidence and really understand how to train certain people. Every rider is different emotionally, physically and talent-wise. You can’t just say, ‘This is my way of training and every horse and rider has to fit in that mold.’ You have to learn how to mold your training techniques to fit every horse and rider.”

In 2010, Caitlyn went to work for hunter/jumper trainers Ken and Emily Smith in Florida, serving as an assistant trainer and rider. During two years there, she refined her hunter expertise and also had the opportunity to bring along two young jumpers that she’d purchased as investment projects.

Caitlyn recalled, “I learned a lot from Ken with the hunters. That job involved more riding and showing, and it was the first time I had the opportunity to compete in the professional hunter divisions. That was a big learning experience for me.”

The next step took Caitlyn back to the Grand Prix divisions, working with young show jumper Katie Dinan and her trainer, two-time Olympic gold medalist McLain Ward, in summer 2012. Though she only worked with McLain briefly during that time, as he was busy preparing for the summer’s Olympic Games, Caitlyn learned a lot.

“One of the biggest things I learned from McLain is that every horse is different and you need to adapt yourself to each horse that you’re riding,” Caitlyn explained. “They also didn’t jump a ton of courses at home. They did a lot of different exercises and grid work, focusing on certain exercises that would make the horse jump better and improve their fitness.”

Moving To Illinois

In 2013, Caitlyn received the offer to work for Canterbury Farm, and although she was at first hesitant to move to the Midwest, taking that job ended up being one of the best decisions of her life. Caitlyn made the big move to Illinois, bringing all of the knowledge that she’d learned from these and other industry professionals along the way. At Canterbury, she found a family atmosphere that felt like home and quickly settled into her new life and a focused career path.

Caitlyn and Greg train together, combining their positive attributes to build a customized,

Caitlyn’s career highlights include team and individual gold at the North American Young Rider Championships.
Photo courtesy of Caitlyn Shiels





Caitlyn Shiels
Photo by Andrew Ryback

well-balanced program for every horse and rider at Canterbury Farm.

Caitlyn pointed out, "I'm very competitive and fast-paced; that's my personality. I'm very talkative and outgoing, and Greg is more easygoing, and patient, and methodical. He moves at a slower pace, which helps me tone it down a little bit, whereas I help him amp it up a bit when things need to happen."

While Caitlyn was competing as an amateur, she also attended college at Lynn University and received a degree in business management. She puts that knowledge to good use at Canterbury Farm as well, helping in all aspects of the business from management to sales. "I'm extremely happy at Canterbury. I just bought a house locally, and I feel like this is home now," she stated. "This career makes me happy. You have to work up to where you want to be, and I feel like I finally found what makes me happy. I'm extremely grateful for all of the opportunities that I've had, and it gave me time to find out where I really wanted to be. I know now that Canterbury is exactly the place that I'd been looking for, and it took me some time to get there, but that time really made me grow into myself." **SI**



Caitlyn, aboard Granted Wish, learned the base of her foundation from trainer Andre Dignelli.
Photo by Alison Hartwell