

Stephanie Danhagl is Up For a Challenge

By Emily Riden/Jump Media

When Stephanie Danhagl left the 2016 Capital Challenge Horse Show, she went home to Boston with not just one tricolor ribbon, but rather an impressive four, after a clean sweep of the Amateur-Owner 18-35 Hunter 3'3" and 3'6" division titles.

At any horse show it would have been a notable accomplishment, but at the Capital Challenge Horse Show – host to the World Championship Hunter Rider (WCHR) Finals and some of the nation's finest and most competitive hunter divisions – it is particularly impressive.

But, as with any notable success, it did not happen overnight.

Learning the Ropes

Danhagl, originally of Pacific Palisades, CA, first started riding at the age of 12, taking dressage lessons from a small, local barn.

"Nobody in my family was really a horse person, but I always really loved animals," explained Danhagl, now 30. "I made my mom and dad turn our suburban household into sort of a barnyard with ducks and chicks and all different kinds of dogs and hamsters and guinea pigs and turtles. My parents weren't too keen on my riding, but we would go to the zoo and I'd get to do pony rides. That was my earliest exposure to horses."

While beginning to learn dressage, Danhagl took note of the jumper riders also at the barn, and – attracted by the excitement of the jumpers

– decided that she wanted to switch disciplines. A family friend put Danhagl's parents in touch with Archie Cox, now a highly-successful and well-known hunter/jumper trainer, who, at the time, was just starting his business and did not yet have many clients.

Danhagl met with Cox, and he watched her ride. Shortly thereafter, she had her first lesson with Cox, who is based in Lake View Terrace, CA.

"My first lesson with him, he said, 'Jump the four stride.' I had never jumped before, and I said, 'What do you mean? What's a four stride?'" said Danhagl. "I didn't know what counting strides was. Archie said, 'Wait, you've jumped haven't you?' I explained that I had not, and he said, 'Oh we've got a lot to learn!'"

From there, Danhagl's hunter/jumper education began. While Danhagl got what some would consider a late start to her junior riding career, Cox quickly helped get the young rider up to speed, teaching her not only to ride, but everything from care in the barn to parts of the horse, often quizzing her on topics like types of bits. In the saddle, Cox deemed the 13-year-old rider to be too old to be competing over the 'little jumps,' so, with Cox's instruction, Danhagl began competing in the 3' before moving up to the 3'6" the very next year.

While training with Cox, Danhagl also made her very first visit to the Capital Challenge Horse Show, competing in the Junior Hunter 15 and Under divisions.

Stephanie Danhagl and Golden Rule accept the Amateur-Owner 18-35 Hunter 3'6" championship and the Grand Amateur-Owner Hunter 3'6" championship awards from Troy Hendricks at the 2016 Capital Challenge Horse Show. Photo by Shawn McMillen Photography



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Stephanie Danhaki and Golden Rule competing in the Amateur-Owner Hunters at the 2014 Capital Challenge Horse Show in Upper Marlboro, MD. Photo by Shawn McMillen Photography



Stephanie Danhaki and Quest at the 2016 Capital Challenge Horse Show. Photo by Shawn McMillen Photography

“Capital Challenge was one of my favorite shows as a junior,” said Danhaki, who earned numerous Capital Challenge championships, and at the 2004 Capital Challenge Horse Show, Danhaki was named the WCHR Junior National Champion aboard Lifetime.

Continuing Excellence and Education

Following her successful junior career, Danhaki took nearly seven years off from riding to pursue academics, completing both her undergraduate and Master’s degrees in Art History at the University of Pennsylvania. From there, Danhaki spent a year working at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston before beginning her PhD in Art History at Boston University.

While Danhaki continued to advance her education, she also felt the desire to return to riding and competing.

“I had always wanted to stay involved in the horse world. It worked out that I got back into it, and it just snowballed a bit. I have six horses that I show now, and I really love it,” said Danhaki, who resumed riding five years ago, this time on the East Coast with Scott Stewart and Ken Berkley out of their River’s Edge Farm in New Jersey.

Stewart has found all six of Danhaki’s mounts for her, including her 2016 Capital Challenge Horse Show Amateur-Owner 18-35 Hunter 3’3” champion and reserve champion, Quest and Enough Said, as well as her Amateur-Owner 18-35 Hunter 3’6” champion and reserve champion, Golden Rule and First Light.

It is a winning line-up of mounts that Danhaki rode to numerous victories throughout the 2016 indoor circuit, in addition to her success at Capital Challenge. However, just prior to the start of her 2017 season, the continuation of Danhaki’s success in the show ring was put on hold.

A Bump in the Road

The talented amateur planned to spend the beginning of her year competing at the Winter Equestrian Festival (WEF) in Wellington, FL, but Danhaki was not planning to begin showing until the second week of the 12-week circuit, using the first week of the circuit instead for a ski trip.



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In a sweep of the Amateur-Owner 18-35 Hunter divisions, Danhagl rode Quest to the Amateur-Owner 18-35 Hunter 3'3" championship, the Amateur-Owner 3'3" Hunter grand championship, the EMO Best Amateur-Owner 3'3" Trip of the Show award, and the Best Amateur-Owner 3'3" Hunter Rider award. Photo by Jump Media

During that trip, a skiing accident left Danhagl with a broken left leg and a wrecked right knee, requiring surgery to replace her ACL. With both legs out of commission, Danhagl was sidelined from riding not only for the 12 weeks of WEF, but for more than four months.

"The leg healed on its own, but the knee - I'm still working through it," explained Danhagl. "I'm still strengthening it and getting my coordination back and my balance and all of that. That was definitely a bummer. I kept thinking, 'I'm going to show by the end of circuit. I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that.' Everyone said, 'You can't.' I could barely walk, so there was no way I was going to be jumping around. The Devon Horse Show seemed like the most realistic goal to get back in the ring. There was really no earlier week that I could have been showing."

Rising to the Challenge

Danhagl not only got back in the ring at the Devon Horse Show in Devon, PA, she claimed the Amateur-Owner 18-35 Hunter 3'3" reserve championship on Enough Said and the Amateur-Owner 18-35 Hunter 3'6" reserve championship on First Light, winning both the handy and the stakes class in the division.

"Devon was one of the best Devons that I've had," Danhagl said. "It was really exciting. It was kind of a fairy tale horse show to just come back after not having shown in nine months and to win. It was just a great comeback for me to be there and to do so well."

Now, Danhagl has her sights set on another comeback, this time returning to Capital Challenge as the defending Amateur-Owner 18-35 champion in both the 3'3" and 3'6" divisions. Having missed much of the show season and opportunities for qualifying points, Danhagl anticipates Capital Challenge being her only indoor competition in 2017.

"Capital Challenge is really going to be what we'll work up to this year with my horses," said Danhagl. "It's always very competitive, which I like. The divisions seem to be bigger than at any other horse show, so it's always very exciting to go and to see some of my friends from California. It's nice to have the national feel where people are coming from all over the country to compete there and bringing their top horses. It's always one that I hope to do well at and am very excited in the weeks leading up to it."

Look for Danhagl and her mounts competing in the Amateur-Owner Hunters at the 2017 Capital Challenge Horse Show on Wednesday, October 4, and Thursday, October 5, and learn more about Capital Challenge, running September 29 - October 8 at the Prince George's Equestrian Center in Upper Marlboro, MD, at www.capitalchallenge.org.



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