

CONTENTS



SHAWN MCMILLEN PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

32



SHARON PACKER PHOTO

58

YOUNG ENTRY

- 28** Yeager Steals The Show At Platinum Performance USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Final—East

By Kimberly Loushin

- 32** Less Is More For Brown At WIHS Equitation Final

By Mollie Bailey

- 36** Griffiths-Madden Gets It Done At The Dover Saddlery/USEF Hunter Seat Medal Final

By Mollie Bailey

- 46** Troy Medina Finds Solace At The Barn

By Kimberly Loushin

HORSE SHOWS

- 54** 5 Questions With: Todd Minikus

By Tori Repole

- 56** Washington International Horse Show Photo Gallery

Photos By Shawn McMillen Photography

DRESSAGE

- 58** Free Rein With: Rebecca Hart

By Lindsay Berreth

- 62** Parrish Makes The Most Of Amazing Opportunity At GAIG/USDF Region 1 Championships

By Lindsay Berreth

- 66** Howington Rides A Redheaded Mare To The Top At GAIG/USDF Region 3 Championships

By Mollie Bailey

- 68** Leafdale Blows Past 2020 Obstacles For GAIG/USDF Region 6 Title

By Elizabeth Putfark



ALYSSA HAMEDI PHOTO

68

On The Cover: *KIMBERLY LOUSHIN PHOTO*

Less Is More For Brown At WIHS Equitation Final

The 15-year-old focuses on her mental game to win her first major equitation title.

By Mollie Bailey

If she can't be there herself, Alicia Brown always sends her daughter Tessa P. Brown a motivational quote the morning of big competitions. So on Saturday, Oct. 24, the day of the second and third phases of the Washington International Horse Show Equitation Final, Tessa opened her phone to find a text from her mom.

"Believe in yourself and love yourself to the point where it becomes irrelevant if others believe in you or not," the note read. "At the end of the day your source of drive and motivation is within. It is you. It is your purpose."

That text inspired just the kind of motivation Tessa needed for a great day in the show ring. She moved up from seventh to third after a winning jumper phase, and then she topped the leaderboard after earning the highest scores of the competition—a 91 and 92—during the final work-off.

"I talk with a sports psychologist, and one of the biggest things we talk about is that less is more," said Tessa, whose parents are former athletes, and her sister Sophie is a serious tennis player. "We say focus on the things that make you feel good. We try to keep all that we're talking about as a positive, so we have a positive outcome. 'Thoughts become things,' my mom always says, and my dad talks about having grit. If you have that along with all the other things it comes together."

Sophee Steckbeck claimed second in the feature equitation class of the Washington International Horse Show, held this

year at the Tryon International Equestrian Center in Mill Spring, North Carolina, Oct. 21-25, and Ellie Ferrigno took third after a strong final phase.

Before the last round of competition, in which the top 10 riders swap horses, Tessa turned to her support system for a boost. She called her mother, who advised her to "just be you," shared a special good-luck handshake with her dad, and had an uplifting conversation with her trainer, Kyla Makhloghi.

"Before I walked in, she's like, 'You know, Tess, this is so exciting that you're here; you're getting a top-10 ribbon no matter what. So just go out and ride. Trust your feel. Trust your horse. Trust everything that we've been doing,'" said Tessa, 15. "I have so much respect for Kyla as a trainer and a horsewoman and everything else. Having her by my side, even if it's just her presence, is very reassuring to me."

Tessa has been riding with Makhloghi since she was 8, and Makhloghi described her as an impeccable student.

"She's always been very analytical, even at a young age," said Makhloghi, who runs Rosemont Farm in East Windsor, Connecticut. "She's always been very teachable. She's the student everybody wants. She thinks about everything in and out of the saddle. She cares. She studies. She's dedicated to physical fitness. She's self-disciplined. She's everything you want—plus she has a natural talent but also an innate affinity for the animals and the sport. It's animals first, sport second, always with her."

Washington International Horse Show Equitation Final Tryon, N.C.—Oct. 23-24

RIDER	HOMETOWN
1. Tessa P. Brown	Jamaica, Vt.
2. Sophee Steckbeck	Clarksburg, N.J.
3. Ellie Ferrigno	Newtown, Conn.
4. Dominic Gibbs	Colorado Springs, Colo.
5. Eliza Kimball	New York, N.Y.
6. Hannah Hoch	Whitefish Bay, Wis.
7. Natalie Jayne	Elgin, Ill.
8. Zayna Rizvi	Wellington, Fla.
9. Austin Krawitt	Okotoks, Alta., Can.
10. Skyler Fields	Wellesley, Mass.

➤39 riders competed.



Mental preparation helped Tessa P. Brown jump to the top of the WIHS Equitation Final on Davide. SHAWN MCMILLEN PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

“It’s animals first, sport second, always with her.”

—Kyla Makhloghi

Tessa, Jamaica, Vermont, embodies that in her relationship with Davide, a 12-year-old warmblood of unrecorded breeding. The two paired up at the beginning of the 2018 season after the gelding had spent several years in the equitation ring under the tutelage of trainer Dyanna Rucco.

“The moment I set my eyes on him and rode him I knew he’d be the one I’d want to be on this intense equitation journey with,” said Tessa. “I feel like I can do anything

when I’m on him. I think we’ve connected because we’re sensitive to each other. We communicate, compromise and give each other strength. I’m competitive at heart. I look at ‘Devy,’ and I think this is why I’m a part of the equestrian world. I love horses and animals, and Devy is a picture of that. When I look at him, I see another best friend, someone I can count on, and a partner.”

It’s the first time that the Rosemont Farm team, led by Makhloghi and aided by assistant trainer Ashley Davis and barn manager Olivia Grupposo, have had a student win a major equitation final. Makhloghi described the feeling as surreal, though she never doubted her student’s ability.

“When Tess and I started with Devy, I believed that if everything went our way, we had a shot at something,” she said. “Did I think we’d win Washington her second year going? No. I was crossing my fingers getting her into the top 10. But I’ve never felt like we were out of place.”

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YOUNG ENTRY



McKayla Brombach made her WIHS Pony Equitation Final debut a winning one aboard California Dreamin'. *JUMP MEDIA PHOTO*

When COVID-19 hit in mid-March, Tessa left the Winter Equestrian Festival (Florida) to spend time with her family. She didn't get back in the tack until about the first week in May when her horses returned from Florida. Tessa brought her computer to the barn and worked from there, helping with barn chores between classes. Even once the show season picked up again, Tessa stayed close to home and only showed a handful of times before equitation finals began.

Tessa mostly focuses on the equitation and jumpers, but she occasionally catch rides a hunter. Her ability to ride multiple horses helped in the final phase, when she swapped onto Dominic Gibbs' Cent 15. Tessa said she and Gibbs exchanged pointers about their mounts before they got on for the final round.

"The deciding factor was her change of horse," said Robin Rost Brown, who judged the class alongside Erynn Ballard, Jimmy Torano and Nicole Shahinian-Simpson. "She rode Dominic's horse, who had a rail down with Dominic. We thought she really brought out a good jump in that horse. Of course they're tired at the end of two days. She was able to create a good jump out of him. That put her over the top. We didn't know who won till the end because they have to tally the scores. It turned out to be very close [between Tessa and Steckbeck]. Both were very good.

"It was a thrill to get to judge it and to be involved with such a great panel," continued Robin. "Jimmy and I had never judged together. We didn't sit together, but we seemed to be on the same page. All four of us have a strong jumper background and really put emphasis on the riding and not just a pretty hunter round. We wanted to see strong riding and the ability to get good jumps out of the horses." 🐾