

GABRIELLE STRIGEL

TACKLING GOALS WITH GRIT AND GUMPTION

By Kara Pinato Scro

For many North American-based hunter-jumper riders, qualifying for the top national equestrian finals represents the ultimate goal, especially for Junior competitors. But Gabrielle “Gabby” Strigel, now 18, wasn’t just any Junior rider. A dual citizen of the United States and Denmark who competes internationally under the Danish flag, Gabby never set foot in the equitation ring.

Instead, at the age of 12, Gabby found herself competing on a stallion against top professionals in the High Performance

Hunter divisions and hunter derbies. Despite her success in the hunter ring, she always held FEI-level show jumping aspirations. When she moved to Canada at age 15 to train with 10-time Canadian Olympian Ian Millar and his daughter, fellow Olympian Amy, the dream of competing at the international level seemed within reach. Her time with the Millars set the stage for her eventual move to Belgium, where Gabby began training with her current coaches, Olympic bronze medalist Stanny Van Paesschen and his son, Constant.

According to Gabby, this trajectory—however odd it may seem to most American Junior riders—was “100% supposed to be this way.” Her unconventional Junior career is what shaped her philosophy about working with horses and reinforced the charismatic young rider’s desire to become a world-class show jumping athlete.

Gabrielle “Gabby” Strigel, with Nelkie HD owned by NCS Equestrian, discovered her love of jumpers at an early age and skipped competing in the equitation ring.

Gabby with Kan Fly is the daughter of American amateur rider Christy Phillips and Danish trainer Ole Strigel of DK-USA Sporthorse.

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LEARNING WITHOUT A SCHOOLMASTER

The daughter of American amateur rider Christy Phillips and Danish trainer Ole Strigel of DK-USA Sporthorse, Gabby was born in Durham, North Carolina. As a trainer’s child, Gabby said her view of the competition world was largely shaped by what she was exposed to at her father’s training and sales operation. As a Danish-born rider, Ole was predominately focused on the jumper discipline.

“Before I got into showing as a kid, I only saw the FEI ring or Young Horse ring,” Gabby said. “I never really saw the hunter or pony rings. The first pony in my dad’s barn was mine simply because I was too small to ride horses.”

Her pony was a small named A Dream Come True. Known as Rex in the barn, he was the only pony that Gabby ever owned. “I got Rex when he was 6 and I was 6, so I was basically breaking him,” she said. “At first, he couldn’t jump off the left lead, but turned out to be the best pony.”

Although she enjoyed her time with Rex, Gabby was already thinking well beyond the pony ring. “I never fantasized about Pony

Finals; I was dreaming about five-star Grand Prix classes.”

When she outgrew Rex, Gabby moved on to horses. It was a formative experience that would shape her young career. “Coming off of a nice pony, you would think my first horse would be a schoolmaster. Instead, I got my dad’s old jumper that was a 17-hand bucking bronco, and mom’s former hunter that was more like a dragon,” she laughed. “From a really young age, I had to learn how to convince a horse to do something.”

It was a pattern that continued for Gabby, who earned top awards throughout her Junior career but never with a push-button ride. “I learned how to deal with each horse by understanding their specific needs,” she explained. “Never having a schoolmaster made me a lot tougher. I learned to sense if I’m riding a horse that needs to be told what to do, or a horse that requires a little more patience and encouragement from me. I live by the philosophy that if you are as relaxed as you can be, they will be, too.”

This philosophy paid off when her father purchased the stallion Cosmeo, and Gabby embarked on a journey that strayed from the typical Junior pathway.

THE UNORTHODOX PATH

Ole imported the stallion as a jumper from Europe and let his daughter campaign Cosmeo in her first FEI Children’s Nations Cup class, held in 2016 in Wellington, Florida. Cosmeo’s stylish jump, however, made him an ideal hunter prospect and before long, the pair began showing in the High Performance Hunter ring since stallions are ineligible to compete in the Junior divisions. With Cosmeo, Gabby was patient and the two developed a special bond. “Stallions are sensitive in ways other horses aren’t—you have to show them they can trust you,” she said. “I have a love for stallions, and it came from him. He was my best friend and gave me so many opportunities.”

With guidance from Jack and Hardin Towell and Liza Boyd, Gabby and Cosmeo became a force to be reckoned with. In 2017, they claimed fourth, 10th place and 12th place in the USHJA International Hunter Derbies at the Devon Horse Show and County Fair, Tryon International Equestrian Center, and the Winter Equestrian Festival, respectively.

Her achievements with Cosmeo against some of the most decorated professionals in the

business left Gabby hungrier than ever to step into the international jumper ring. Her parents took note and arranged for her to move to Canada to live and train with Ian and his family.

"After the whirlwind of showing Cosmeo, I didn't want to stop there," she said. "Moving to the Millars' made sense at that stage in my career. They were close with my parents, they'd been to the biggest shows in the world, and they had a proven track record."

While her parents remained in Durham, Gabby spent eight months competing on the Canadian circuit with the Millars. She was exposed to higher levels of international show jumping and began claiming top placings including champion in the High Junior/Amateur 1.40-1.45m division at the CSI³* Ottawa International and second place in the 1.30m Prix de States team competition at the renowned Spruce Meadows.

DOING IT HER OWN WAY

Her time in Canada proved transformative. Gabby had not only proven to herself that she was capable of living abroad and holding her own at some of the most prestigious shows in North America; she had also proved to her family and the professionals around her that she had the dedication and grit required to make a successful career out of the sport. While her parents may have laid the groundwork, the enthusiastic young rider always knew she wanted to make a name for herself in her own unique way.

"A lot of my drive came from my parents," she said. "I realized at a young age, when I was the kid that went to business dinners, that I wanted to carve my own path as a professional."

In 2015, Gabby joined Denmark's Youth team and, in 2020, she moved to Belgium to train full time with the Van Paesschens. In 2021, she represented Denmark at the FEI European Junior Championships in Vilamoura, Portugal.

"It was an opportunity for me to be in the FEI ring," Gabby shared of her decision to ride under the Danish flag and make Europe her home base. "You have endless opportunities to ride FEI Nations Cup courses and to connect with the world's best show jumpers."

Gabby credits the Van Paesschens for giving her the knowledge and tools she needs to progress in the next phase of her career—building her string of horses and defining her brand as a professional. "I have learned an immense amount from Stanny and Constant," she shared. "Stanny has been instrumental in showing me how to produce young horses, and Constant has helped me apply my skills on course."



Gabby has been developing her own sales-oriented business, REO Sporthorses, LLC.

According to Stanny, Gabby's natural abilities are special, but her thirst for learning and attitude toward the horses and the sport make her a stand-out young rider. "She has quite a lot of talent, she loves her horses, and has an amazing feeling with them," he shared. "She also has a lot of motivation and is a believer in what she does. She's very demanding with the learning process. It's amazing, I find, for young people to have the belief in themselves that she has. I think she has a great future."

Like any motivated young rider, Gabby dreams of competing at events like the Olympic Games and World Championships. While she's not losing sight of those goals, her unconventional route to this point in her burgeoning career has proven that a concerted focus on a horse's individual needs and striving for consistency are key.

After successfully competing at the 2022 Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Florida, Gabby and her horses flew back to Europe where she is focused on developing her own sales-oriented business, REO Sporthorses, LLC, and continuing on her path of once again representing Denmark internationally with her growing string of horses.

"My goal has always been to get to a place where I'm consistently riding FEI three- and four-star courses," she said. "I have smaller goals but once I achieve those, it's not like I'll take a breath. I'm so eager to keep going that I have to remind myself to reflect on what I've accomplished. But I'm here for the long haul, and this is what I want for my life." **■**

For more information, follow @GabbyStrigelShowJumper on Instagram

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