

“March to Your Own Drum”

How Gabrielle Strigel has paved her own way to the top

WORDS: KARA PINATO SCRO / JUMP MEDIA



FROM THE moment Gabrielle “Gabby” Strigel stepped foot in the Leadline ring as a young child, she was all business. Her hair was wrapped neatly over her ears in a hairnet with the ponytail tucked under her helmet. Her borrowed mount was groomed to the nines, tack gleaming. At a quick glance, Strigel—being led around among a sea of hair braids and bows—looked more like a miniature show jumping athlete than a Leadline competitor. And that wasn’t by accident.

The daughter of Danish trainer Ole Strigel of DK-USA Sporthorse and American amateur rider Christy Phillips, Gabby had been surrounded by top horse and rider athletes from the beginning. Ole ran a training and sales operation in Durham, NC, that allowed Gabby to watch and, alongside her father, interact with some of the best professionals in the sport as a young child. Though Gabby may have seemed like your average pony-crazed barn kid, these experiences were the underpinnings of her desire to look far beyond the pony ring and set her sights on becoming a well-respected high performance athlete and professional.

“I was basically my dad’s secretary by the age of eight; I saw everything at such a young age, and it stuck with me,” says Gabby. “I was practicing my handshake at five years old.”

“As a kid, I walked FEI five-star courses with my dad as if I was preparing to win the class,” she says. “I wanted to look like the riders in the grand prix ring and act the part.”



THIS PAGE: Gabrielle Strigel and Nelloke HD

FAR LEFT: Strigel and Cosmo at The Devon Horse Show

“You’re going to have to make some sacrifices at the end of the day. But if you never give up, something will come out of it.”

—GABRIELLE STRIGEL

RIDERS

A dual citizen of the United States and Denmark, today, Gabby is 19 and her goals are well within reach as she competes internationally under the Danish flag. Her unorthodox timeline from riding ponies to showing in Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI) level classes was remarkably quick and her path toward success was equally remarkable yet undeniably unique.

FROM PONIES TO PERFORMANCE HUNTERS

Despite growing up a trainer's kid, Gabby only owned one pony. At the age of six, her parents purchased a small green pony named A Dream Come True, a.k.a. "Rex," in the barn. Rex was also six, so the two could learn and grow together. While Gabby taught Rex the basics—like how to jump off of both leads—Rex taught Gabby the importance of feel, something that would prove formative long after her pony days.

"In my pony classes, I wouldn't count my strides," she says with a laugh. "My dad said I would ride with feel and that's set me up for how I ride today. I've always kept my natural feel rather than focusing on counting."

When Gabby outgrew Rex, she rode what was available to her—her parents' former mounts, two testy jumpers who were far cries from being schoolmasters. Though they challenged her daily, she bonded with them on the ground to strengthen their partnership and trust in one another. In the saddle, she relied on her natural feel to help her understand the horses' specific needs and how they preferred to be encouraged.

When Gabby was 12, she got the ride on a stallion called Cosmeo that Ole had imported as a sales prospect from Europe. What was initially meant to be a casual catch ride for Gabby became an unflappable partnership. With Cosmeo, Gabby showed in her first FEI Children's Nations Cup class in Wellington, FL, and later, because of his impressive jumping style, they took on the High Performance Hunters and hunter derbies, earning multiple top 12 finishes in some of the most prestigious USHJA International Hunter Derbies in the nation.

Gabby credits her experiences with



Strigel and Diocento competing at Knokke Hippique in Belgium this year

Rex and her parents' former jumper mounts for preparing her to be successful with the hot-blooded stallion. In turn, her time with Cosmeo helped her become well equipped to take on more challenging mounts and step into the international jumper ranks.

Amid the flurry of success as a junior competing against some of the biggest names in the hunter world, Gabby kept a keen eye on her show jumping idols, such as Canada's Tiffany Foster, aiming to emulate them as much as possible. When Cosmeo was sold, rather than step into the equitation ring like most of her peers, 15-year-old Gabby, with the support of her parents, moved to Canada for eight months to live and train with 10-time Canadian Olympian Ian Millar and his daughter and fellow Olympian Amy Millar.

LEARNING AND ADAPTING

While Gabby was gaining competition experience in Canada, she was also watching some of the world's best riders, taking notes on what she liked, this influencing her personal style of riding. When she moved to Belgium in 2020 Hunters and hunter derbies, earning multiple top 12 finishes in some of the most prestigious USHJA International Hunter Derbies in the nation. Gabby credits her experiences with

"Even before I went to Europe, people said I had a very European-American style," Gabby notes of how various global influences affected her riding. "I had hunter experience, so I had an American two-point position, but I lacked the equitation training, so I came up a bit quicker on landings and was more visible in my movements."

Though Gabby considers herself a student of the sport, learning something new each day, she is a strong believer in not losing sight of her individual style and needs. "It's important to remember what you've been taught, but you also have to remember what works best for you as an individual, as well as your horse," she adds.

This philosophy has paid off in the nearly three years she's been in Europe. In 2022 alone, she's successfully competed at the Danish Jumping Championships, has grown her string of horses from two to six, and officially kicked off her sales-oriented business, REO Sporthorses, LLC. Her successes, however, didn't come without challenges, and required her to be adaptable.

"If you think about it, it has taken me 18 years to build a six-horse string," she says. "Right now, if you look at my horses, it looks like a circus! One is tall, one is short, one is hot, and one is a massive chunk. It's a whole different vibe riding



With Kan Fly at home (left) and competing in the Under 25 Semi Final at WEF 2022 (above); and where it all started, with her father, Ole Strigel, and Marzipan in a leadline class at Blowing Rock Charity Horse Show

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each one. Riding with feel and remembering what has worked for me in the past helps me adapt to their specific needs."

MARCHING TO HER OWN DRUM

Gabby isn't only a stylish rider; she is stylish off the horse as well. Though she has a pulse on fashion trends, just like her individualized approach to adopting riding techniques that work for her, she's quick to note that her choice of riding attire and streetwear is based on what makes her feel the best.

"Obviously you want to follow trends, but for me growing up, I didn't have the super long hair, suitable for braids and bows, she says, "or a long, lean body type.

But I found clothing that made me feel more comfortable and confident."

If you run into Gabby on the show grounds today, she's more than likely to be found wearing a pair of statement sunglasses and sporting her go-to show jacket by Lillie by Flying Changes, a collection of bespoke show jumping jackets designed by U.S.-based international show jumping athlete Lillie Keenan. "Lillie does a great job of offering out-of-the-box colors but still making sure the jackets fit well and look professional," says Gabby. "If you feel like you look good, it'll pay off in your riding."

At the end of the day, Gabby is a firm believer in embracing individuality and

finding and forging your own path—whether that's as a rider, business professional, or even with fashion and style—and hopes younger junior riders will stay true to themselves and remain confident in their own journey, however unique that may be.

"There doesn't always have to be an orthodox way of reaching your goals," she says. "That said, you're going to have to make some sacrifices at end of the day. But if you never give up, something will come out of it."

Her advice for juniors with big dreams? "Have some confidence in yourself and what has worked before. March to your own drum, kid!"