

# Kate Conover Rides For Her Family—And The Philadelphia Eagles—In WCHR Professional Final

By LAURA LEMON

Photos By SHAWN MCMILLEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Staring at a questionnaire about her resume and past riding accomplishments, Kate Conover just kept thinking two words: “Go Birds.”

Conover had qualified for the \$25,000 World Championship Hunter Rider Professional Final at the Capital Challenge Horse Show for the first time, and the show wanted her to write down her riding accolades so they could read them over the loudspeaker during the class. Instead, Conover honored her home state’s Philadelphia Eagles football team for each question down the page.

“You have to write these bios: your name, your horse’s name, and what achievements you have,” she said. “I started doing this when I was in Traverse City [Michigan] this summer, when I was showing in the \$100,000 WCHR [Central Hunter Spectacular]. I just thought to myself, I’m not this kind of person that writes down like, ‘See what I did.’ So, I just started writing, ‘Go Birds,’ which is for my Philadelphia Eagles.”

Growing up in Pipersville, Pennsylvania, Conover was lucky to have professional rider Patty Miller as her godmother. While both Conover’s parents had a little background in horses, Miller’s stable gave her a place to really foster her love for riding. She was a barn rat, and Miller rewarded her by throwing her on any and every sales horse and pony to ride.

“I’m youngest; I have three older brothers,” Conover said. “So basically, I was the only girl and the only one into riding, and financially it would have been difficult for us to own any horses or ponies. So, it was mostly just riding sales horses and ponies my whole life.

“I have to say that was the best foundation I could ask for: starting to ride there and learning not just to be a rider,” she added. “I think that was a big development in my horsemanship—just seeing every aspect of not just riding but being with the horses daily and taking care of them. She had quite a big operation, so I helped organize things as a kid. It just was a great way to start off.”

While riding ponies with Miller at Capital Challenge, Conover first watched the WCHR Pro Final. The concept of her idols catch riding four different horses fascinated her, and after she turned professional at 18, she got to witness the class up close.

Kate Conover, pictured riding R&R Hunter Horses LLC’s Small Friendship, topped the \$25,000 World Championship Hunter Rider Professional Final at Capital Challenge.



## HORSE SHOWS



John French and Marnell Sport Horses' Babylon jumped to first in the \$25,000 WCHR Professional Challenge at Capital Challenge.

"I remember when I was working for Bobby [Braswell] and Christina [Schlussemeyer] at Quiet Hill, we used to bring horses there [for the final four]," she said. "Like Louise Serio, I remember when she won and when Scott [Stewart] won. I was on the other side of it, basically helping them by saying, 'Oh, this horse can jump left' or, 'Watch the lead change here'—just giving them details that could help them in the ring."

Eventually her career—with the help of Bill Ellis, Rob Coluccio, Emil Spadone and others along the way—led her to her longtime job at Shadow Ridge Farm in Westminster, Maryland. There she focuses on teaching, riding and sales for the hunter side while Samantha Schaefer helms the jumper side.

"I always say, 'Try and be a fly on the wall in any situation,'" she said. "You can never stop learning if you pay attention, and I'm lucky to have been around a lot of great horsemen.

"I'm very blessed that I have a great job situation that I get to do what I love, but at the end of the day, they are

family," she added. "We really take care of each other. I couldn't ask for a better thing in life."

Conover, 38, never focused on qualifying for the WCHR Pro Final herself until this year.

"I would kind of show in waves," she said. "When we had horses to show, I would show. And sometimes I would go to Europe a lot and focus on looking for horses, because that is also a big passion of mine."

On Jan. 13, while showing at the World Equestrian Center—Ocala (Florida), Conover learned that her brother Gary "Jay" Conover had passed away. He was preceded in death by their older brother Dan, who died in 2010. In the weeks that followed, Kate struggled with showing.

"Riding wasn't easy for a while, just mentally," she said. "I actually spoke to [sports psychologist] Margie Sugarman a little bit, who was a really big help to try and help me clear my head—because I was horse showing when I found out Jay had passed. But I worked through that, and basically at that point, I just started thinking that I needed to show."



Halie Robinson rode Stable Assets' With Leisure for her victory in the \$10,000 WCHR Developing Pro Challenge at Capital Challenge.

like I did it."

While the class was one she always dreamed of winning, Conover wanted the victory more for her family.

"It was surreal," she said. "I did this for them. I got it done because I wanted it for me, but I wanted it more for them."

"My brother was always very proud of me; in his eyes I was the best," she added. "I wanted to actually go and put my head down and really do

it for him. I was, like, 'Hey, you're not here, but look, I did it.' That was the feeling for me."

#### BECAUSE OF BABYLON, FRENCH KNOWS IT'S NOT THE END

The year 2018 nearly broke John French—literally. He broke his collarbone in a fall that May. Then that July, a horse rolled on top of him, breaking seven ribs, puncturing a lung, and spraining his foot. As a go-to catch rider in California, French saw the writing on the wall that perhaps his riding career was ending, and he started questioning what his future in the industry would look like.

"Those accidents made me think maybe I should not be doing this," said French. "But I didn't really know how to change, how to make it different. And so I thought, 'Well, maybe [I'll go] to a new area then try to start more of my own clientele business instead of riding for so many other people.'"

He moved from California to Seattle in the beginning of 2019 to start a more client-based business, so that when he did roll up his stirrups, he could fall back on teaching. But then Olympic show jumper Kent Farrington called him with a proposition to run the hunter side of his Team KPF business in Wellington, Florida. Farrington's offer proved too good to turn down, and because French didn't have a ton of clients in Wellington at first, he focused on bringing along

young horses. One of those horses was a 4-year-old Oldenburg (Crumbie—Die Cera, Balou Du Rouet) called Babylon.

Since then, the gelding has captured back-to-back WCHR Professional Challenge titles in 2021 and 2022, was named the 2022 Chronicle of the Horse Overall Horse of the Year, and has earned junior division championship honors at Devon (Pennsylvania) and at every indoor horse show with owner Ariana Marnell.

"I think it's like having a kid, and you want to everything to go right," French said of "Crumbles." "When you feel like you did everything right—you never over-faced the horse; you went slow enough; you trained him the way that would make him develop into who he was—it just means more than anything to me in doing this, bringing something along. You can go and buy the best horse. It doesn't give you the same satisfaction as knowing that you started a horse that maybe was a little green, a little spooky, and you did everything right, and it turns out this way."

French's 2023 has included a series of major wins that reassure him he's still in the right place, doing the right job for himself: the \$100,000 WCHR Peter Wetherill Palm Beach Hunter Spectacular (Florida) aboard Milagro, the Platinum Performance USHJA International Hunter Derby

Championship aboard Paradigm, and with Crumbles, a third consecutive \$25,000 WCHR Professional Challenge at Capital Challenge, held Sept. 28-Oct. 8.

"Some people say, 'Oh, you had such good years; you should go out on top.' But if I can still do it, maybe I should do it for a few more years," said French, 61. "Without the people that I have, I wouldn't be thinking that. But with them I think that it's a possibility. I want to keep going."

Since Crumbles, now 8, was one of his first horses when he arrived in Florida, the chestnut has come to symbolize to French the reward of change and the revitalization he feels in his career.

"[Crumbles] was the beginning of something new and turned into definitely not the end," he said. "He sort of got me going again—made me realize that it's not the end. This is why you do it, for special horses like him."

#### ROBINSON ISN'T AFRAID TO DREAM BIG

Even before graduating from Chapman University (California), Halie Robinson knew how she wanted her future to unfold: She wanted to open her own equestrian business and strive toward being one of the top hunter riders in the country.

So, she started working backwards.

At the urging of the Shadow Ridge team and Liz Reilly and Chris Iwasaki at Makoto Farms, Kate started seeking out WCHR shows, making the final a concrete goal for the first time in her career. But her renewed focus on showing was for her family too.


"My mom loves to watch me show," she said. "That's something that makes her really happy."

"At that point, I just thought, 'Well, you know what, I'm going to focus on riding because, honestly, it's going to be a way to help myself deal with being sad,'" she added. "It was great because it was really enjoyable for my mom and my dad and my family to watch me perform really well. My mom came and watched at Devon. And then she came to Florida a few times to watch me. She's living and breathing through the live feed that we have at every horse show."

With her mom, Maureen, logging onto the livestream, and 30 friends and clients wearing "Go Kate" T-shirts in the stands of the Prince George's Equestrian Center in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, on Oct. 6, Conover guided R&R Hunter Horses LLC's Small Friendship to the top of the handy round, securing her spot in the final four. And then she did what she's done since childhood: She catch rode. After four rounds, she emerged on top above Brady Mitchell.

"I've always been taught to stay humble," she said. "And I'm going to still try and get better today at something, and tomorrow at something. That's my personality. But it feels

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## HORSE SHOWS

"I was working professionally through college, but when I graduated, I had the opportunity to take over a more local business in my hometown of Santa Barbara [California] from a trainer that I had really grown up knowing," she said. "She had kids, and she was looking for someone to take good care of her horses and her clients.

"So, I took that over. I made it my own and changed facilities," she added. "[I] moved it down a little bit closer to Los Angeles just [so that I could have] more options to have the best stable that I could, so that I could have the best of the best horses and staff. The barn is in Santa Rosa Valley, and it has been a really amazing journey over the last two years. I've gotten so lucky having some really special young horses starting out right when I started the business that have grown into being really incredible horses throughout the country."

Though just 23 when she opened Huntridge LLC, with her background as a working student for Jim Hagman at Elvenstar as a junior, she felt she could hit the ground running.

"That taught me a lot of valuable things, especially in working with horses and building your horsemanship knowledge," she said. "I feel like that really gave me the upper hand in managing horses professionally."

Though she competed in the jumpers, hunters and equitation ring as a junior, the hunter discipline won her heart as a professional.

"So much of our sport focuses on the big equitation and show jumping and how to build towards it," she said. "But I think it takes equally as much skill to compete at a high level in the hunters, which not many people see their focus on. I think of it more as an art. And that is the challenge I find really fun and interesting."

Robinson set her sights on the \$10,000 WCHR Developing Pro Challenge several years ago, and has competed in the class twice before. This year, she brought With Leisure, an 8-year-old Hanoverian mare (Comte—Quanta Costa) owned by Stable Assets. She captured the win above Haleigh Landrigan and In The Know. "It's a class I wanted to win for a while," Robinson said. "I got close a couple times, but I wasn't close enough. So, I was really happy, especially on a horse that we really have produced over the last couple months. The class offers a really nice pipeline for professionals, similar to the goal that I have.

"[Landrigan] went in right before me, and she was so beautiful, I think I needed to get an 89.5 or something more than that to beat her," Robinson added. "I honestly didn't know if I was going to do that. You can have a great round, and it can be a 92, and it can be an 86, and they're both good. Having it come down to such a small, tiny detail, that's what really makes me love what I do. I love the professionalism and details of all of it."

### \$25,000 World Championship Hunter Rider Professional Final Upper Marlboro, Md.—Oct. 6

Judges: Chris Wynne, Virginia Edwards, Brian Lenehan, Scott Fitton, Mark Jungthner, Eric Dicks

Rider	Round 1 Avg./Horse Conversation	Round 2 Avg./Horse 92/Actionable	Round 3 Avg./Horse 91.66/Totoku Fuji	Round 4 Avg./Horse 86.33/A Little Less Conversation	Final Total
1. Kate Conover	88/7/Totoku Fuji		91.66/Totoku Fuji	86.33/A Little Less Conversation	355.33
2. Brady Mitchell	86/Lifestyle	86/A Little Less Conversation	91.66/Totoku Fuji	89.33/Actionable	352.99
3. Shelley Campf	83.33/A Little Less Conversation	85.83/Totoku Fuji	88.66/Actionable	83.33/Lifestyle	341.15
4. Geoffrey Hesselink	VW/Actionable	84.33/Lifestyle	83.66/A Little Less Conversation	91.33/Totoku Fuji	259.32

6 riders competed.

### Capital Challenge Horse Show Upper Marlboro, Md.—Sept. 28—Oct. 8

**3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter, Sec. A CH:** Amazing Grace, Eva Mackenzie.  
**RES:** Day Won, Mary Caroline Nolan.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter, Sec. B CH:** Pavlova, John & Stephanie Ingram LLC.

**RES:** Kalvarie, The Kalvarie Group.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter CH:** Meridian Farm LLC.  
**RES:** Jordan, Sophie Gochman.

**High Performance Hunter CH:** Estimated Prophet, Roaring Fork Farms LLC.

**RES:** Cannon Creek, The Wheeler Family.

**Green Conformation Hunter CH:** McQueen, Walkenbach Equestrian LLC.

**RES:** California Love, Rivers Edge.

**High Performance Conformation Hunter CH:** Worthy, Sunset View Farm LLC.

**RES:** Only Always, John & Stephanie Ingram LLC.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Performance Hunter CH:** Queen Celeste, Glade Run Farm LLC & Partridge Hill Equestrian LLC.

**RES:** Bonne Starlight, Caroline Hoover & Caristo, John & Stephanie Ingram LLC.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter, Sec. A CH:** Showman, Stephanie Ring.

**RES:** Kindred, Rushing Dreams Farm LLC.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter, Sec. B CH:** Frosted, Rindy Dominguez.

**RES:** Small Crown, Evelyn Bay.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter, 6 & Under CH:** Monarchy, Shadowfax Equestrian LLC.

**RES:** Milo, Alexander Hamer.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter, 7 & Over CH:** In Suspense, Haylee Jerkins.

**RES:** Clio, Findlay's Ridge Group.

**3<sup>rd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter Mares CH:** Notorious, Stephanie Bulger.

**RES:** Tangelina, Cara Garlito.

**Green Hunter, Colts & Geldings CH:** Sandori, Shaw Johnson Price.

**RES:** Forsini, Hannah Toehy.

**Adult Amateur Hunter, 19-35 CH:** Canyon, Glebe Ventures LLC.

**RES:** Crush, Kimberly Stewart.

**Adult Amateur 36-49 CH:** Milo, Alexander Hamer.

**RES:** Nureyev SCF, Jaclyn Fisher.

**Adult Amateur Hunter, 50 & Over CH:** Frosted, Rindy Dominguez.

**RES:** Dinner At 8, Glade Run Farm LLC.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Amateur-Owner Hunter, 36 & Over CH:** Hemingway, Stephanie Bulger.

**RES:** Sebastian, Brad Wolf.

**KASK/Vogel Green Hunter North American CH:** On Call, Brad Wolf.

**Small Jr. Hunter, 15 & Under CH:** Acclaim, Parker Peacock.

**RES:** Fabriano, Visse Wedell.

**Small Jr. Hunter, 16-17 CH:** Babylon, Marnell Sport Horses.

**RES:** Ocean Road, Marnell Sport Horses.

**Large Jr. Hunter, 15 & Under CH:** Unprecedented, Monkey Business LLC.

**RES:** San Pedro 15, Walkenbach Equestrian LLC.

**Large Jr. Hunter, 16-17 CH:** Drumroll, Meridian Farm LLC.

**RES:** Spoken, Shadowfax Equestrian LLC.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Jr. Hunter, 15 & Under CH:** SWS High Light, Violet Rheingold.

**RES:** Sincerely, Wade Equestrian Farms LLC.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Jr. Hunter, 16-17 CH:** Crowd Pleaser, West Coast Equine Partners LLC.

**RES:** Next Chapter, Real-Star LLC.

**Children's Hunter, 14 & Under CH:** Con Figo, Harley Holt.

**RES:** Notorious, Madison Wu.

**Children's Hunter, 15-17 CH:** Ratatut, Lakshmi Jeyanandaram.

**RES:** Premium Blend, Mackenzie Teasdale.

**Children's Hunter Pony CH:** Sahara, Taylor Silvius.

**Tie:** CHS Southern Belle, Sofia Meehan & Dream Come Blue, Heritage Farm Inc.

**Small Pony Hunter CH:** Spring Fling, Finley Baras.

**RES:** Dream Big, Reagan Jarrett.

**Medium Pony Hunter CH:** Paris Charm, JJ Torano.

**RES:** Super Sport, Twin Island LLC.

**Large Pony Hunter CH:** Tesoro, Gray Neville.

**RES:** Bronx, Betsee Parker.

**Equitation, 12 & Under, Sec. A CH:** Emi Richard.

**RES:** Kaitlyn Urink.

**Equitation, 12 & Under, Sec. B CH:** JJ Torano.

**RES:** Katherine Mercer.

**Equitation, 13-14-Year-Old, Sec. A CH:** RJ May.

**RES:** Lily Epstein.

**Equitation, 13-14-Year-Old, Sec. B CH:** Taylor Cawley.

**RES:** Olivia Sweetnam.

**Equitation, 15-Year-Old, Sec. A CH:** Kingsley Dey.

**RES:** Anna Markozow.

**Equitation, 15-Year-Old, Sec. B CH:** Shiloh Roseboom.

**RES:** Adriana Forte.

**Equitation, 16-Year-Old, Sec. A CH:** Logan Thomas.

**RES:** Sally Ives.

**Equitation, 16-Year-Old, Sec. B CH, Tie:** Kaitlyn Kiehl & Ariana Marnell.

**Equitation, 17-Year-Old, Sec. A CH:** Ella Cate Duke.

**RES:** Grace Shipman.

**Equitation, 17-Year-Old, Sec. B CH:** Carlee McCutcheon.

**RES:** Tessa Downey.

**THIS Medal Warm-Up Equitation CH:** Faith Schuttemeyer.

**RES:** Violet Tatam.

**Adult Equitation, Sec. A CH:** Julia Greenspan.

**RES:** Lillie Parr.

**Adult Equitation, Sec. B CH:** Annalise Manogoc.

**RES:** Brendan Weiss.

**EMO Trip Of The Show, Jr. Hunter:** Conthagos, Marta Rocha.

**EMO Trip Of The Show, 3<sup>rd</sup> Jr. Jr. Hunter:** Advent, Marta Rocha.

**EMO Trip Of The Show, Pony Hunter:** Paris Charm, JJ Torano.

**EMO Trip Of The Show, Children's Hunter:** Con Figo, Harley Holt.

**EMO Trip Of The Show, Jr. Equitation:** Ella Cate Duke.

**Grand 3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter CH:** Pavlova, John & Stephanie Ingram LLC.

**Grand Green Hunter CH:** Drumroll, Meridian Farms.

**Grand Hunter CH:** McQueen, Walkenbach Equestrian LLC.

**Green Conformation Hunter CH:** McQueen, Walkenbach Equestrian LLC.

**Grand 3<sup>rd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Green Hunter CH:** Frosted, Rindy Dominguez.

**Grand Adult Amateur Hunter CH:** Frosted, Rindy Dominguez.

**Leading Hunter Rider:** Nick Hanes.

**Leading Hunter Trainers:** Geoffrey Hesselink, Brendan Williams, Vivian Yowan and Bethany Lea.

**Best Adult Amateur Hunter Rider:** Rindy Dominguez.

**Grand Amateur-Owner Hunter CH:** Concerto, Caroline Ingalls.

**Best Pony Hunter Rider:** Rindy Dominguez.

**Best Amateur-Owner Hunter Rider:** Caroline Ingalls.

**Best Pony Rider:** Currie Cooper.

**Best Medium Amateur Jumper Rider:** Lisa Butzer.

**Best Medium Jr. Jumper Rider:** Isabelle Ehman.

**Children's Jumper Rider:** Collin Sweetnam.

**Grand 3<sup>rd</sup> Amateur-Owner Hunter CH:** Hemingway, Stephanie Bulger.

**Best 3<sup>rd</sup> Amateur-Owner Hunter Rider:** Stephanie Bulger.

**Grand Jr. Hunter CH:** Babylon, Marnell Sport Horses.

**Grand 3<sup>rd</sup> Jr. Hunter CH:** Crowd Pleaser, West Coast Equine Partners LLC.

**Grand Pony Hunter CH:** Paris Charm, JJ Torano.

**Grand Children's Hunter CH:** Ratatut, Lakshmi Jeyanandaram.

**Steward-Warner Children's Cup:** Wyatt Rofey.

**Harper Tarkier Wright Memorial Trophy:** Finley Baras.

**Tampa H.S. Trophy:** Emi Richard.

**Best Equitation Rider:** Tessa Downey.

**Leading Equitation Rider:** Peter Pletcher.

**Glena Wirtanen Sportsmanship Trophy:** Madison Ramsey.

**\$25,000 WCHR Professional Challenge:** 1. Babylon, Marnell Sport Horses; 2. Queen Celeste, Glade Run Farm LLC; 3. Worthy, Sunset View Farm LLC.

**\$10,000 WCHR Developing Pro Challenge:** 1. Leisure, Stable Assets LLC; 2. In The Know, Madeline Schaefer; 3. MTM Campedo, Emrales LLC.

**WCHR Amateur-Owner Challenge:** 1. Concerto, Caroline Ingalls; 2. Romeo, John & Stephanie Ingram LLC; 3. Five Star, Lexi Mauniss.

**WCHR 3<sup>rd</sup> Amateur-Owner Challenge:** 1. Private Practice, John & Stephanie Ingram LLC; 2. Hemingway, Stephanie Bulger; 3. Bordeaux, Glebe Ventures LLC.

**WCHR Jr. Hunter Challenge:** 1. Babylon, Marnell Sport Horses; 2. Acclaim, Parker Peacock; 3. Flawless, Elan Farm.

**WCHR 3<sup>rd</sup> Jr. Hunter Challenge:** 1. Crowd Pleaser, West Coast Equine Partners LLC; 2. La Vida Loca, Camryn Cass; 3. Calou, Brookside Pine Farms LLC.

**WCHR Adult Amateur Challenge:** 1. Frosted, Rindy Dominguez; 2. True Cassini, Kelly Sims; 3. Dia Caspar, Jara Fisher.

**WCHR Child Hunter Challenge:** 1. Con Figo, Harley Holt; 2. Pursue The Blue, Omi Enkin; 3. Notorious, Madison Wu.

**WCHR Pony Hunter Challenge:** 1. Prestige, Swede Ventures LLC; 2. Bronx, Betsee Parker; 3. Paris Charm, JJ Torano.

**NAL Children's Hunter Final:** 1. Ratatut, Lakshmi Jeyanandaram; 2. Ufo De Nisi, Leanna Lazzari; 3. Qorolis Effect SCF, DCTM LLC.

**NAL Adult Hunter Final:** 1. Cascartini, Julia McNamey; 2. Fivel K, R & R Sport Horses LLC; 3. Spanish Harlem, Judy Rutkowski.

**NAL Children's Jumper Final:** 1. Just Noble, Sweet Oak Farm; 2. Chester, Vivian Golden; 3. Kilbrackin Blue Jay, Grace Lowe.

**NAL Adult Amateur Jumper Final:** 1. Indigo E, Kendall Casaccio; 2. Escot 6, Charlotte Powers; 3. Encore, Madison Smyth.

**NAL Low Jr./Am. Jumper Final:** 1. Byzance Mist, Honor Hill Farm LLC; 2. Kennedy VD Rechli, Julia Curtis; 3. Emzerelda EH 2, Honor Hill Farm LLC.

**NAL Medium Jr./Am. Jumper Final:** 1. Aston Des Etasses, Double E LLC; 2. Diablo, Ashland Farms; 3. Ina, Triple S Group.

**Palm Beach International Academy North American Jr. Equitation Championship:** 1. Tessa Downey; 2. Maddie Tash; 3. Amira Kettaneh.

**THIS National Children's Medal Final:** 1. Faith Schuttemeyer; 2. Hailey Guidry; 3. Brooke Hagerty.

**North American Adult Amateur Equitation Championship:** 1. Brendan Weiss; 2. Annalise Manogoc; 3. Erin Brody.

**North American Flat Equitation:** 1. Taylor Cawley; 2. Schuyler Dayton; 3. McKayla Brombach.

**EMO Insurance Agency/USHA 33<sup>rd</sup> Jumping Seed Medal Final:** 1. Grace Shipman; 2. Sally Ives; 3. Logan Thomas.

**Ariat National Adult Medal Final:** 1. Riley Hogan; 2. Brendan Weiss; 3. Blake Lindsay.