

From U-25 To The International Stage, Statesman's Taken Laliberté Around The World

By LINDSAY BERRETH

Over the past six years, Naima Moreira Laliberté has traveled the world with Statesman, starting in the Under-25 Grand Prix division, then moving into the senior ranks to represent Canada on the biggest stages.

With two Pan American Games, a World Championship, and a reserve slot at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics under her belt with KML Inc.'s 17-year-old Hanoverian gelding (Sandro Hit—Bella Italia, Brentano II), Laliberté is hoping to do one better in Paris this summer and make the team of three riders.

She earned her final qualifying scores at the World Equestrian Center—Ocala CDI3*, held May 22-26 in Ocala, Florida, when she and Statesman won the Grand Prix (70.37%) and the Grand Prix Special (70.72%).

"He's taught me so much. He's taught me resilience; he's taught me patience. He's taught me to always be positive and take every day as it comes," said Laliberté. "As many people know in the horse world, there are always ups and

downs, and you just have to stay calm, and take it as it comes, and do the best you can with what you have. Statesman has an array of personalities in one horse and many, many different kinds of moods, which makes him a little unpredictable throughout the years in various types of situations. He's a horse, but he's really many horses in one!"

Laliberté grew up in Montreal, Quebec, riding and jumping in Pony Club. Her father, Guy Laliberté, who co-founded the international touring circus Cirque du Soleil, started to get nervous as the jumps got higher and gently redirected her away from jumping.

"At first, I wasn't loving the idea, but he had a friend who had an equestrian circus, and he brought me to his farm where he had Lusitanos and all sorts of different breeds and specialties for me to experience," said Naima. "I wasn't totally sold until I met a young 4-year-old Lusitano called Nao who I fell in love with."

Naima and Nao did some circus training, and eventually



Naima Moreira Laliberté and her longtime partner Statesman earned CDI3* wins at the World Equestrian Center—Ocala CDI3* (Fla.) in May, and the Canadian rider hopes that will stamp her ticket to the Paris Olympic Games. ANDREW RYBACK PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

she found dressage through a friend that she was helping restart off-the-track Thoroughbreds.

"I thought [retraining OTTBs] was the coolest thing. I had no idea what it was. We had so much fun doing it together," she said. "One day during the Beijing Olympics [in 2008] I was at her house, and she put on the dressage on TV, and then came Ashley Holzer, and she was explaining to me all the movements, and she was saying we were super proud of Ashley as Canadians. I watched Ashley and was like, 'Wow, I really want to try this.' I had no idea what I was getting into."

Naima, 12 at the time, signed up for a Canadian youth program clinic with Albrecht Heidemann and realized she had a lot to learn.

"I showed up with my circus Lusitano, a Portuguese saddle with a chest harness and stirrups embroidered in gold. It was quite a sight!" she said with a laugh. "I don't think Albrecht understood at the time what I was doing in that clinic. I had no notion of stretching a horse, circles—I had no knowledge. The whole concept of being on the bit and forward was quite something to learn. It took years."

Naima gradually moved on to purpose-bred warmbloods and competed in the Fédération Equestre Internationale junior and young rider classes, including four FEI North American Junior and Young Rider Championships, where she learned to deal with the emotions and stress of a team environment.

In 2018, Naima started competing the Swedish Warmblood stallion I Do Kiss (French Kiss—Idonna, Donnerfly) in her first U25 Grand Prix classes after competing on the small tour, and she got Statesman that year as well.

Statesman had been started and trained up to his first few CDI Grand Prix competitions by Spanish rider Jordi Domingo Coll, including the FEI European Dressage Championships (Sweden) in 2017. Holzer, who formerly rode for Canada and is now riding for the U.S., connected Naima with Statesman. Coll has stayed on to help Naima when Holzer isn't able to be ringside, and Naima spent a year and a half at his farm near Barcelona, Spain, training.

"We had the gift of not only gaining a wonderful horse but gaining a wonderful friend," said Holzer. "We've kept Jordi very much in the loop with training the horse. We thought it was very important to make sure that connection and that relationship stayed with us as well."

Naima, now 27, said she and Statesman matured together. "We went through ups and downs and experienced a lot. We learned a lot inside and outside the arena," she said. "He's always kept me on my toes, and I've always had to adapt to different kinds of riding and approaches and think outside the box at times. I feel like every horse has that aspect and uniqueness about them, but with Statesman, it's like, oh, you think you have something under control, or you've got the movements, and it's going well, and then, oh! Suddenly he's changing his way of doing it, and I have to adapt to what he's bringing to the table. He's always been like that. Not in a bad way, it's just that I'm always learning something, even [though he's] 17."

Holzer agreed, adding that Statesman's abundance of personality makes him that much more special and has aided his move into the CDIs.

"He still wants to do his job, and I really must say that's a feather in Naima's hat, because she's got a great way of having the horses want to work for her," Holzer said. "He has a lot of joie de vivre. He likes life. He's not a sleepy horse. He's going to paw and scream when you come through the barn with the apples.

"There are days where he's a little bit fresher than others, and we laugh at him because, we're like, OK, Statesman, you're older, and you're still fresh," she continued. "These horses have to be a little hot and frisky for them to be as sensitive as they need to be to do their job, so it's just part

and parcel. They've got personalities; they're fun to be around. I think Naima's done an amazing job not squelching that, not playing into that, having a good time with that, and helping him behave but not feel like he's pushed into a box."

With a team gold from the 2019 Pan Ams (Peru) and a team bronze from the 2023 Pan Ams (Chile), Naima is continuing to work towards her international team aspirations with Statesman.

"[Championships] become addicting, you know? It's always something I want to try and do if I have the horse able to do it," she said. "Being part of Canadian history is something I thrive on. My long-term goals are always to improve and be a better

rider and be a better human towards my horses. It's always evolving and perfecting. I call myself quite a perfectionist in everything I do in life. With the horses I think sometimes you just have to just do it. It's taught me a lot, and as frustrating as trying to be a perfectionist in this sport can be, it's very humbling because of it, too. I want to get better and bring more horses up to the Grand Prix level and have a lot of fun doing it."

She has two other top candidates in her barn coming up behind Statesman—KML Inc.'s 11-year-old Dutch Warmblood stallion Inspire (Vitalis—Danin V, Johnson TN) who just made his CDI Grand Prix debut this spring, and KML Inc.'s 10-year-old Dutch Warmblood mare Jaliska L.D. (All At Once—Saskia, BMC Kigali), who's winning at small tour.

"I think as a coach, it's fun to have a student that really enjoys their horses and enjoys their training," Holzer said. "She's got a great head on her shoulders, and she's very kind to her animals. She's got a few coming up the pipeline that are just fabulous athletes. It'll be exciting to see what happens with them." 🐾

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—NAIMA MOREIRA LALIBERTÉ

World Equestrian Center—Ocala CDI3*
Ocala, Fla.— May 22-26

CDI3* Grand Prix For The Freestyle: 1. Guateque IV/A. Chia/CAN, 68.87; 2. Inspire/N. Moreira-Laliberté/CAN, 67.10; 3. Gladstone Zee T/C. Shipka/USA, 65.71. **CDI1* Prix St. Georges:** 1. Knight/J. Irving/CAN, 67.64; 2. Escada RB/C. Osborne/GBR, 65.91; 3. Dante/S. Francis/USA, 65.64. **CDI3* Grand Prix For The Special:** 1. Statesman/N. Moreira-Laliberté/CAN, 70.37; 2. Genesis/J. Irving/CAN, 68.26; 3. Eclips/C. Von Martels/CAN, 67.34. **CDI1* Int. I:** 1. S-Express/L. Petersen/USA, 69.16; 2. Escada RB/C. Osborne/GBR, 67.40; 3. Sir Rubin/P. Matute/ESP, 66.27. **CDIJ Jr. Rider Team:** 1. Campanero HGF/J. Boyer/USA, 66.41; 2. Farah-Jade/L. Edwards/USA, 64.39. **CDI3* Freestyle:** 1. Guateque IV, 74.52; 2. Gladstone Zee T, 70.33; 3. Skyfall/M. Munter/USA, 68.40. **CDI3* Grand Prix Special:** 1. Statesman, 70.72; 2. Eclips, 69.12; 3. Indiana R/A. Webster/USA, 67.95. **CDIJ Jr. Rider Individ.:** 1. Campanero HGF, 66.91; 2. Farah-Jade, 66.86. **CDIJ Jr. Rider Freestyle:** 1. Campanero HGF, 72.25; 2. Farah-Jade, 68.44. **CDI1* Int. I Freestyle:** 1. Escada RB, 69.50.