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Horse People: Galway Two Star Winner Tiana Coudray

by Kim F. Miller

The United States Eventing Assn's annual convention seemed an unlikely place to meet a world-ranked Irish dancer. But that was the pleasant situation I found myself in when I took a seat at an awards banquet table shared by 16-year-old eventing rider Tiana Coudray and her parents. Tiana didn't volunteer her dancing accomplishments any more than she volunteered her equestrian accomplishments. When asked how the Area VI Young Riders did at last summer's North American Young Rider Championships, Tiana happily reported on the team's gold finish in the Two Star division, but skipped that little detail about her own individual silver in the Championship's One Star division. Modesty is part of Tiana's *modus operandi*. Not the false kind that requires a reporter to beg for facts, but the real kind that reflects a well-rounded perspective on riding and on life.

Irish dancing, popularized in America by the hit show *Riverdance*, may look lovely, but it is rigorous work and, as such, a great preparation for eventing. Competing in her last of five Irish dancing World Championships two years ago, Tiana performed the high-kneed, precision movements with a broken ankle.

"I broke it in practice three weeks before the Worlds," explains Tiana, whose family heritage is French, not Irish. "My doctor told us the quickest way to make it heal was to not use crutches and not put it in a cast. A week before the competition, he showed me how to tape it really, really tight!" The broken ankle prevented Tiana from bettering a career high of finishing 8th in the World Championships a few years earlier, but it didn't stop her from giving it her best shot on the international stage.

Not long after that the poised and pretty Tiana had to give up dancing because of injuries, none of which, she cheerfully reports, outweigh the benefits those 10 years of serious dance training and competition brought to her riding and her life. "It has really paid off," she says. "When we were at the Young Riders last year, a lot of my friends were affected by the crowds. I was kind of like, 'Are you kidding me? There's not even 1,000 people watching.' Performing at places like the Hollywood Bowl and the World Championships taught me to be a competitor."

Physically, dancing translates beautifully to riding. "I was in terrific shape after all that, and things like timing, rhythm, balance and a sense of body awareness, have all been wonderful for my riding."

Another upside of the dancing was going to sporthorse-rich Ireland regularly for competitions. As her equestrian interests grew, horse shopping side trips were fit into the family's Irish dance itinerary. Although it wasn't until just this spring that the Coudrays bought

a horse in Ireland, a newly imported 4-year-old gelding by Master Imp, Tiana began to get a feel for the kind of horse she needed to fulfill her equestrian ambitions.

From Dancer to Rider

As the winner of the Galway Downs CIC Two Star this past April, Tiana marked a milestone with her 10-year-old Irish Sporthorse gelding King Street. He is the first horse Tiana has owned. She began riding during third grade on lesson horses at her Ojai Valley School. Tiana credits the school's director of equestrian programs, Terry Wilson, with giving her a solid, dressage-based horsemanship foundation. Somewhere along the line, Tiana realized that she wanted to be an eventer and that, to advance in that endeavor, she would need her own horse.

King Street, whose barn name is Danny, actually came from Europe through importer Peter Green in Virginia. The gelding didn't seem such a hot prospect at first. "He wasn't impressive in the tape we saw of him," Tiana recalls fondly. "He was stiff and weak and thin because he was still recovering from a virus he contracted shortly after being imported. He had nothing that made you say, 'Oh, I have to have this horse.' But the agent was adamant that he was a special horse."

Tiana went east to try Danny, and wound up selecting him from a group of four possibilities. "He did everything that you asked and was a confident, safe and consistent horse, even though the other horses were more exciting," says Tiana, who was getting her feet wet in the Novice level at the time. "It wasn't until I really started competing him that I got a sense of how great he was. For one thing, he is incredibly forgiving. We've gone from riding Novice to Two Star in two years. He's pretty special!"

Eventers tend to be an independent lot and Tiana is no exception. Ventura County's Ojai is beautiful country but not exactly a hot bed of eventing coaches. Tiana is grateful to veteran Wendy Wergeles, two hours away in Los Alamos, who arranged for catch rides so Tiana could participate in clinics and Novice competitions. Wendy also coached her at events.

With her wonderfully supportive and enthusiastic mother Ellen at the wheel, Tiana regularly hits the road with Danny for the six-and-a-half hour drive north to Pebble Beach, where they recently began working with Bea and Derek DiGrazia. Prior to that, "I cliniced with everybody under the sun," she says. Clinics with Olympic eventers David O'Connor; Kim Severson, Mark Phillips and Jimmy Wofford, and show jumper Anne Kursinski, have provided plenty of goals to work toward.



Photo: Ed Lawrence



Photo: Ed Moore

At home, Tiana and her horses work on their own. She stables them at a low-key Paint horse breeding operation, Oso Ranch, where the nearby Los Padres National Forest provides perfect conditioning trails. She reads every book and watches every video she can get her hands on, and studies video footage of her riding that her mother records periodically.

Tiana rides her own two horses, and exercises another two nearly every day, usually getting home most weekdays around 8:30 p.m. An honor roll student in an accelerated academic program, she finds little time for non-horse hobbies, but that fits fine with her



*Tiana, at age 13, at the 2002 North American Irish Dance Championships in Boston.
Photo: Universal Convention Photography*

long-range ambitions to make a career with horses. "I really do love working with the horses and I really love teaching." Whenever possible, she works with riders of varied ages and teaches regularly at Tecolote Pony Club in Santa Barbara. Tiana's competitive goals this year are targeted at the NAYRC Two-Star team, for which she is already qualified.

Tiana is grateful to her family. Her two brothers are "incredibly supportive, but at arms length—they don't want to have anything to do with horses," she laughs. "My dad is incredibly supportive and my mom has basically made herself my horse slave! She drives us all over the state for clinics and shows." Clearly, Ellen and John Coudray have determined that all the schlepping is worthwhile. If the horse activities have made even a small contribution to Tiana's lovely personality, then they are absolutely right!

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