

# California dreamin'

**Susan Finnerty meets the majestic Irish Sport Horse Ringwood Magister and his American owner/ rider Tiana Coudray**

**H**E's been the reason I've travelled the world and he's taken me everywhere," says Tiana Coudray, acknowledging the role played by the Irish Sport Horse Ringwood Magister in taking the young Californian rider to the Olympics. With the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games on the horizon, the talented pair are now bidding for another US team appearance.

Appearing on the world stage is nothing new to Coudray, who started Irish dancing lessons as a child, a typical hobby for Irish-American families. Except there are no Irish ancestors in her family and her surname traces back to Normandy, where coincidentally, the World Games will be hosted this autumn.

"Irish dancing just looked fun. From when I was five, I went to school, I got picked up from school. I went to the dance studio and I danced until I went home and went to bed. That was my life," explains a sunny Coudray, who performed at the Hollywood Ball.

Another life with horses began when Tiana's younger brother Chris began riding therapy as a toddler.

"I wanted to do riding too, desperately, so Mum, when she could, put some money aside here and there so I could have a riding lesson twice a year. By the time I was 11, I was begging, stealing

and borrowing rides from friends that had horses," she recalls.

Coudray was later loaned a horse by eventing trainer Wendy Wergeles, who told her parents that their daughter was "on a mission. It's time to buy her a horse."

Through Lorraine Laframboise, a former Canadian national coach now based in California, the family found the Irish import King Street.

"He was the one who took me all the way to the Rolex just four years after I did my first event. That's the absolutely unfathomable part of it really," she says.

Her affection for the since-retired King Street was beautifully captured in a photograph of his delighted 18-year-old rider embracing the horse after a

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Rolex dressage test which took place during a deluge. He also narrowed down the search for another horse.

"With King Street being such a successful horse, finding another horse by Master Imp was certainly a selling point," says Coudray. Laframboise put the family in touch with Tipperary agent Clare Ryan.

Frequent visitors to Ireland since Tiana's Irish dancing world championship years, the family's next visit was to Peter Leonard's yard, accompanied by Ryan in 2005, where they found Ringwood Magister.

"When they brought Finian (his stable name) out to jog up, we were ready to buy right then. He had real presence and quality," recalls Tiana. The Coudrays were not the only ones impressed by him, with the family inundated with offers to buy him from the day the grey set foot in California.

Getting to grips with an exuberant four-year-old Finn after the schoolmaster King Street brought its own challenges for Coudray.

"He'd buck but when he would feel you slip out the side door, he'd stop and wait until you were back in the saddle before he'd buck again. It's all just a game to him," she laughs. Hand-in-hand with that exuberance came promising results.

"He's a big horse but he's a pony really, it's so easy for him to collect himself. As a young horse, he could already do advanced dressage movements because it was so easy for him to be collected. Although something which is too easy for him is both a blessing and a curse," she adds.

By the time the talented six-year-old had won his first one-star class, he, Tiana and her other horses had moved base to Derek and Bea di Grazia in Carmel Valley.

"I would see them as a second set of parents really, they're incredible. When things are not quite right, I ring them and it's amazing what you can sort out over the phone," she says.

Working at her trainer's yard also meant her finishing her high school education via the internet, a move fully supported by her "wonderfully open-minded" parents, who run a screen printing business in Ojai.

"It's a lot easier to take a crazy leap when you're not actually being told it's crazy. 'You want to go eventing? Off you go!'. 'You want to leave school? Okay!' In hindsight, it's crazier now than it felt at the time," says the rider.

Following three-star wins at Galway Downs and Jersey Fresh, and a sixth place finish that was the best-placed American combination at Boekelo CCI\*\*\* in 2010, the pair headed to the Rolex Kentucky the following spring. Tackling his first four-star event, Finian led an impressive field after dressage but a fall at the bogey fence on the cross-country course ended their challenge.

The combination made another move that summer, to stay with friends Mike and Emma Winter near Cirencester in England. Britain has become the competition mecca for eventing, particularly in a pre-Olympic year, although competing at London was probably the last thought then on Coudray's mind.

"It was Mark Phillips (then US coach) who said I should come over here and do Blenheim. I'd been told up one side and down the other, 'this is the best horse in America, we need this horse for London'. We'd gone to the Rolex, he'd fallen and it was like Superman had had his powers taken away. I was only meant



Tiana and Ringwood Magister meet the horse's breeder, Adrian Bourke

to be in England for three months and then go home but we got here and he was stopping at pre-novice fences out schooling," she recalls.

The Olympic dream was rekindled after an impressive second place, amongst a field of Olympic contenders, at Blenheim Palace International. It came after an offer to help out at Nick Gauntlett's yard in Chipping Sodbury.

"It was perfect as I had far too much time on my hands with one horse and it stopped me over-analysing Finn," says the rider. Her decision to then stay in England was financed by selling her other horses, including the Ghareeb-sired Regal Promise, "the best cross-country horse I had".

Another major decision loomed when the Master Imp 10-year-old became one of the most sought-after horses during the pre-Games buying spree. No less than five international, including three British riders, offered "life-changing money" for Finn.

Once again, it was her supportive parents, John and Ellen, who kept her Olympic hopes going. "I rang Mum and Dad and they said, 'This is everything you've been dreaming of, why would you give up on this now?'"

Their encouraging words paid off when the pair finished fifth and once again best of the US squad at their final selection trial at Barbury Castle the following June. Amongst the spectators was Clare Ryan, who had travelled over to see Finn and another of her Master Imp finds at Leonards, Aoife Clarke's Master Crusoe. Both horses were subsequently selected for Greenwich.



Pete Morris

"I was quite down and out about everything afterwards," admits Coudray. "We were a controversial choice to go to the Games and we didn't live up to the hopes of everybody."

A visit to the Olympic Village proved the perfect antidote. "Luckily enough the American staff said you *have* to go to the Olympic Village. And I'm so thankful I did because it was incredible to walk around and the sense of perspective it brought."

Determined not to throw in the towel, she was granted an entrepreneur's visa which allows her to stay in England until 2016. A full string of six horses, including Felix Vogt's former ride Sambuca F and liveries, are installed in her own yard at Nick Gauntlett's Chescombe Farm.

Mountain Horse and the feed supplement company APF are long-standing sponsors, while instructing is another new venture. Does she enjoy teaching?

"Love it! I really love trying to figure out the horse's mind, what they're thinking, what motivates them and tricky horses, that you have to think outside the box and find another way, those I find really fascinating."

Perhaps none more fascinating than Finn himself, who is now gearing up for his second Badminton run.

"Of all the years to make our debut, I think it was the strongest field Badminton had or probably ever will have," she laughs, thinking of the 2013 stellar line-up which included London double gold medalist, Michael Jung.

Finian delivered another good test, which saw the pair poised in equal 10th place after dressage. "He's fantastically expressive in his movement. When he's relaxed and then goes forward, nothing can beat it and he was such a dude cross-country!"

Not even one of his self-adhesive bandages unravelling through the lake complex deterred him and Coudray, in her trademark sky-blue cross-country colours, from delivering one of the best rounds of the day.

"The irony is I've always used a certain type of bandage and everyone said they can come undone. For some reason at Badminton I decided they're right, so the one time I gave into the pressure, my bandages came undone! Anyhow, that's another lesson to never change anything that's working for you and I've gone back to what I'd always used before."

Two fences down the following day dropped the pair to 17th place. "It's very rare for him to have a rail so that was quite disappointing," adds Tiana.

Bandages and all were packed the following month when the pair got their call-up for the US Nations Cup eventing team for Aachen.

"It was the first time America sent a team to Aachen. It was unlike anything any of us had ever seen and particularly for the others, because I had been to Greenwich, which was a huge help."

The unfazed combination once again delivered a mature performance which saw them finish 10th in a line-up which included London silver and gold medalists, Sandra Auffarth and Opgun Louvo (second) and Michael Jung's Sam (third). Coudray's performance was even more remarkable considering she broke her hand during the cross-country round.

"I'd already torn my shoulder rotator cuff in a fall with a young horse at home so I was quite banged up afterwards," she says.

With an autumn run at Burghley or Pau then shelved, it was an opportunity to take an early break before spring training resumed with new US coach David O'Connor.

"Finn had had such an amazing season. It [2013]

"It was such a long-shot that we were going to make the team, just because we were significantly lacking in experience then. Of everyone on the shortlist, the American media were calling us the 'high risk, high reward' choice," recalls Coudray. "I knew it was true. I knew it was going in and that's exactly what we were."

For the 23-year-old Coudray, the Games were a major learning curve. Standing in 18th place after dressage, the pair had an unfortunate run out at the second element of the Bandstand Rails, which accounted for several falls. Despite losing a shoe on the switchback terrain of Greenwich Park, they completed a course which accounted for 14 rider disqualifications.

Following the withdrawal of teammate Boyd Martin's Otis Barbotiere the next morning, a score of two fences down by the normally clean-jumping Finian now counted for the American team and the London dream result went to a victorious Germany and one Michael Jung.

"There was so much I wish I knew before I got there and there's so much that, if I'm lucky enough to get another chance, I will know to do differently. And if I could re-do the whole two months leading up to it, including the time at the Games, I know *exactly* how I would do it. So that's the fire that keeps you at it, makes you want to go to the next one and makes you want to do it better."

Such hindsight wisdom didn't apply at the time however to the Olympic rookie.

**Irish Sport Horse Ringwood Magister and Tiana Coudray center up the centre line on their Badminton debut in 2013**

## Meeting the Magister

IF HORSES were human, Ringwood Magister would be a Hollywood movie star. It's the closest way to describe this handsome 'silver fox' character who was the Aachen ground jury's pick, won the best-presented prize at the Rolex Kentucky and stole the show at each of the Badminton horse inspections.

"He passaged once he saw the crowds," smiles Coudray, remembering the traditional-bred's red carpet appearance at Badminton.

Nicknamed 'the thespian' by Annabelle James, Chescombe Farm's head girl and his groom at Badminton and London, Finn's theatrics include shivering when washed in cold water and so the new wash bay has a hot water supply installed just for him.

Even though Tiana only finished work at nine o'clock the previous night, Finn has already been scrubbed and ready to meet his visitors, as Finn's breeder, Adrian Bourke and his son, James, are also at Chescombe Farm on a perfect spring morning.

One of a group of breeders who travelled to London to watch their Irish-bred event horses compete at the Olympics, Mayo native Bourke was always keen to meet Coudray and Magister afterwards. Aside from Finn, Bourke and Coudray share other common ground. Tiana is a determined middle child with two brothers, as is Adrian's sister Mary Robinson, Ireland's first woman president.

He has avidly followed their career in *The Irish Field* since 2010 but has always credited local horsewoman Lily McGowan as the mastermind behind the horse-breeding days on his Ballina farm.

"I wasn't doing an awful lot more than paying the bills and learning! It was Lily who made the phone call and booked Master Imp," he insists.

Master Imp, the leading Irish sire in the WBFSH event rankings, was selected in 2000 as the covering sire for Cloonkeen View, a Carrabawn View mare sourced by Lily.

"Mrs Hatton was very good and kept the mare until she went in foal. This foal was the first born at Castlehill and there was great excitement that day," recalls Adrian.

The news that Finn's companion as

a weaned colt was a donkey amuses Coudray: "It all makes sense now!"

The unnamed three-year-old and his dam were sold to Joe Sharkey in Castlereagh and then on to Peter Leonard, where Tiana found him.

"When I first had Finn, I said to someone 'this horse could be ready to go to the London Games'. A 16-year-old kid and a four-year-old horse! I'll never forget saying it because it was so out of character for me to make a statement like that."

The family had 36 hours to register and re-name their purchase. "He was named Ringwood Blueberry and since he wasn't a 13-hand pony and I just couldn't see cantering into the ring at Badminton on Blueberry, it had to change."

Ringwood Master, their first choice, was gone, so Tiana's dynamic mother Ellen came up with a solution.

"I was at school and she faxed through to the school secretary a list of 25 potential names. The secretary just chuckled and brought it to me in class. So Magister it was."

Coudray hasn't been back to California for two years.

"The first time I went home, it took a week and a half to get my visa. When I got back to the yard, he heard me and was nickering over at me. I do sometimes wonder what he would have done with another rider if I had sold him."

That thought doesn't trouble the majestic Ringwood Magister. And his breeder also knows that the horse who made it to the Olympics is in safe hands, as Adrian reflects on meeting what he first remembers as "a wobbly newborn colt":

"I did wonder 'what will Tiana be like, how will Finn react?' says Bourke. "Both questions were easily answered on arrival at the farm as there he was, a beautiful grey, and Tiana is a charming young lady. They make a very compatible combination and the sense of harmony between the pair is visible, you can see it in Finian's mannerisms towards Tiana."

"She is a very special young horsewoman with immense determination and sense of purpose and I wish them the very best of luck in future competitions."

wasn't a championship year for us and I thought it was a really good time, or maybe the universe telling me something, to just take the pressure off and save the horse for this year."

Part of proving themselves to the US selectors was the choice of returning to the Rolex or running at Badminton which is "five miles as the crow flies from our yard". So why go all the way to Kentucky? "In my mind, the reason to go to Rolex is the atmosphere. Since they've had the World Equestrian Games there, that stadium really has a championship atmosphere that you don't get unless you go to Aachen or a championship."

"But at the same time, Badminton really suited him well last year, it's on our doorstep and it's an easier task for him to go there than to fly to America. I said all along, even when I

applied for the travel grant, that it came down to if the horse was ready and I just felt after our last outing at Belton, that he's not quite ready for the Rolex this year."

That decision means her parents and brothers Jason and Chris will be flying over for a second Badminton visit. Their names fill in another jigsaw piece, as Ringwood Magister is registered in the ownership of Jatial Inc, a combination of the family's names.

"It's a company set up by my parents at the time they bought King Street," she explains in an accent that's now more West Country than West Coast. Insightful and articulate beyond her years, she's also immensely grateful to her parents and those who have supported her from the days of borrowed horses to the Olympics.

"The Di Grazias, Nick Gauntlett, Mark Phillips... I do really owe him so much because he gave me a chance. There are too many people to thank," she says.

And then there's Ringwood Magister. "He has lived up to all our hopes and been such a special horse to own. He's 13 now and I'm starting to contemplate what my career will be once he retires, but it's hard to contemplate. Hopefully that's many years away," she says.



Clare Ryan