

Tiana Coudray Went From Gym Class To Rolex

This young rider entered the eventing world with a bang after an unusual start.

Katie Christiansen

THE PHRASE “DO-IT-YOURSELF” conjures up lots of images when uttered—a trip to your nearest home improvement center or a haphazardly constructed piece of furniture. But for Tiana Coudray, the DIY mentality has

taken her to the highest levels of eventing, an accomplishment many riders cannot achieve without the guidance and input of an ever-present trainer.

The 20-year-old from Ojai, Calif., has

proven that raw talent, determination and a good horse can sometimes be an auspicious combination and, if the stars align correctly, may even lead to some of the world’s toughest events.

Horses Over Handball

Unlike most children who begin riding in a summer camp or at a small farm down the road, Coudray began her career at the Ojai Valley School under the instruction of Terry Wilson.

A small independent school in southern California, OVS offers a unique equestrian program that allows students to ride after school in lieu of more traditional physical education activities like tennis and swimming. It was in this gym class that Coudray essentially determined her career.

“There is no doubt at all that Terry and the fact that the school had the horses and the program are absolutely Tiana’s beginning. That [experience] gave her the initial interest and was her introduction to horses, quite frankly,” said mother Ellen Coudray.

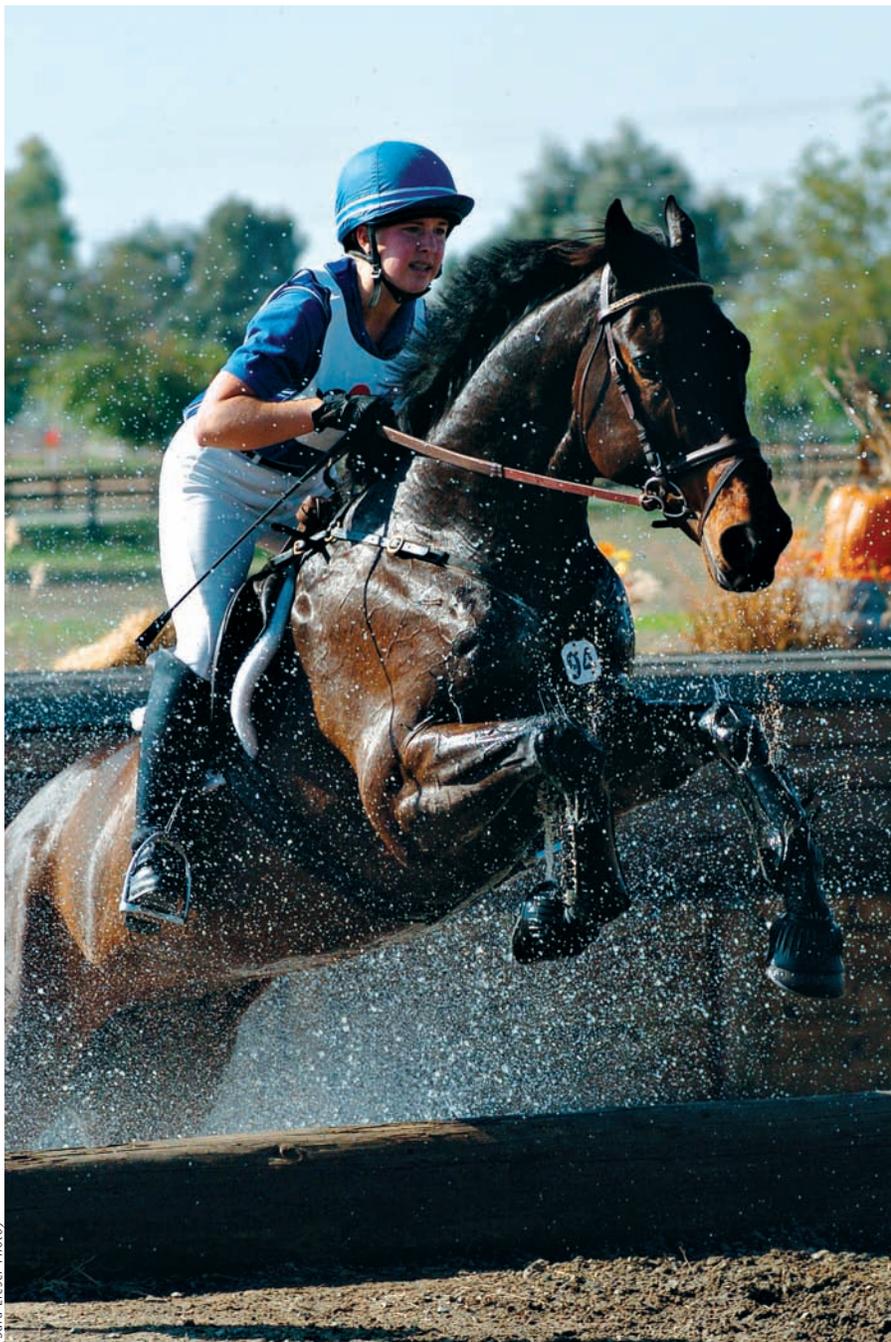
Tiana is equally as thankful for the school’s outstanding program. “I wanted to get into eventing, and our school program was strongly dressage. Our school horses were really, really great horses, but they were a little older,” she said. “I had done a couple of novice events, but really, to go on, it was time to get a horse.”

California trainer Wendy Wergeles, whom the Coudrays credited in addition to Wilson for Tiana’s strong foundation, also suggested that the talented teen get a partner of her own.

“It got to a point where Wendy came to us and said, ‘You know, this kid is on a mission in life, and she can only go so far on a borrowed horse,’ ” said Ellen.

Enter King Street, a then 8-year-old

“I’ve tried to consciously continue to improve my riding because I know how generous King Street was with me,” said Tiana Coudray of the horse who took her from novice to the Rolex Kentucky CCI****.



(Sara Liseser Photo)

Irish Sport Horse gelding who took Coudray from novice to the Rolex Kentucky CCI****.

"I kept him at the school and rode through the school and did a lot of clinics, bless my mother," said Tiana with a laugh. "I think nearly every single weekend we were at a clinic or a lesson or an event. Pretty much every weekend she was taking me somewhere."

Ellen didn't mind one bit, though. "We very happily made the commitment," she said of taking on the role of chauffeur, groom and occasional psychologist. "When we allowed Tiana to move forward in this endeavor at a very young age, about 14, it was definitely with eyes wide open. We were aware, as much as non-horse people can be aware of anything. We had definitely calculated the financial commitment and the time commitment."

Although she credited OVS for much of her riding prowess, Tiana was forced to travel for upper-level training, a result of her living in an eventing "dead zone," California's Ojai Valley.

"I started going out and doing lots of clinics and outside work beyond what I was just doing at school. I was working a bit with [Wergeles], who was 2½ hours away from me, and that was pretty much the closest of anybody," she noted. "Somewhat after that I started working with Bea and Derek di Grazia, who were really, really great, but they were still six hours away from me."

But thanks to the patience of her mother and the sacrifices Tiana made of nearly every weekend and free hour, she advanced to the Fair Hill CCI*** (Md.) in 2007, where she qualified for her first four-star.

"I got to go to Rolex when I was 18, which was just incredible. The horse was ninth after dressage, which was pretty exciting," she said. "We ended up having a fall on course, but that didn't take anything away from the trip. I was just so in awe that I was even there,

and before our fall he was going so well. It felt really good to be there and feel like I belonged there."

And belong there she did. But the humble teen was faced with a setback that forced her to reevaluate her riding career and make some tough, painful decisions.

"[King Street] ended up with soundness issues, but not because of Rolex as per popular belief," said Tiana. "Later that year, he developed lameness problems, and we retired him, so that was it."



(Sara Lieser Photo)

Tiana Coudray has found that Ringwood Magister is well on the way to filling the shoes left from her first advanced-level partner, King Street.

In a bittersweet turn of events, the stage was set for change. Enter, Ringwood Magister.

New Beginnings

The striking steel-gray gelding was found as a leggy, muddy 4-year-old in Ireland. But despite his modest beginnings, the now 8-year-old Irish Sport Horse has proven to be a talented com-

petitor. And while "Finian" may not be the most seasoned horse in the field, what he lacks in experience he makes up for in talent and heart.

"He's got it all—he moves well, he's a fabulous jumper and I think probably the best thing about him, and what makes him difficult, is that he's really playful and likes to show off," said Tiana, wryly. "When it works against me, he does things like jump out of the start box and gallop back to the barn!"

But the sprightly gelding isn't all trouble.

"It can be difficult, but at the same time I think he's really performed. He has a fabulous mind. He's not easy by any means, but when it all gets tailed in the right direction he just has something extra that I've never seen in another horse," she said, adding that she has high hopes for her youngster.

"Maybe I'm just kennel blind and missing something, but I just think that he's the real deal and could be a team horse," she said. "My hope is just to take care of him and be able to have him to do some major team stuff for as long as possible."

Their future does indeed look bright. The pair was named to the USEF Developing Riders List this winter under the guidance of U.S. Eventing Chef d'Equipe Capt. Mark Phillips and won team gold at the 2008 North American Junior And Young Rider Championships. They also claimed the 2008 USEF Young Horse Eventing Championship, an accomplishment most horsemen would consider a favorable start to a

brilliant career.

Tiana doesn't want to take her early successes for granted, however, noting that some control issues have marred their progress.

"Right now I'm just trying to improve all the fine little details, all the things in dressage you can make better and just trying to make everything a little bit better," she said. "I'm really happy with how everything's

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And while Tiana's young age might earn her a label as inexperienced in the eyes of older horsemen, her attitude and approach toward riding reveal wisdom beyond her years.

"The horse has to always understand what you're wanting, and then you have to leave it to him to make the decision," she explained earnestly. "You can make things happen to a certain point and then as you move up the levels, if the horse doesn't truly

understand it, if it's not their idea, it's not going to work anymore. So I think you've got to give them the time to make the choice themselves. If I make a mistake, I want him to figure out how to get out of it. I don't want to ever be in a situation where the horse won't figure out how to get out of trouble."

Tiana does admit that she "got away with murder" with King Street, a much more experienced horse, but she savors each and every lesson learned along the way.

"The generosity of King Street to take every mistake I could make and keep coming back, offering everything he could, was just incredible," she said. "I think that that's a goal as a person to live a little more that way.

"Also, just to appreciate that horses give us so much, and when they have that sort of a personality you have to respect that, because at that point when they don't give you that much, there's got to be something wrong," she continued. "For a horse that gives you that much, you just have to respect that."

Tiana said King Street was overly generous. "He just had the mindset of, 'Well, if you just sit in the middle it would be a lot easier for me, and I could just get my job done. If you don't, I'll still take care of it, but just make it a little easier on me.'" she said. "I've tried to consciously continue to improve my riding because I know how generous King Street was with me."

For now, Tiana is focusing on the small details in the belief that they'll ultimately coalesce into a smooth finished product. Ringwood Magister seems to be well on his way to filling the big shoes left behind by King Street.

And although Tiana is on her own, Ellen and the rest of the Coudray family still stand behind their star rider.

"It's still very much a family commitment in that we set her up initially, and we're part and parcel through her life's endeavors," said Ellen. "But she's on her own. She left home when she was 17 to work for [the di Grazias], and she hasn't been home since. She came home for 36 hours at Christmas this year. The only way we see her is if we travel to competitions!"



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