

Hilda Donahue:

A Flair for the Extravagant

By
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Hamilton

Originally from Dublin, Hilda Hick Donahue moved to Florida after college to be a working student for an Olympic rider, Ann Sutton-Hardaway (now Ann Taylor and a Selector for the U.S. Three-Day Eventing Team for the Alltech Games). Not long after, Hilda returned to school and earned an MBA at Stetson University. Now an accomplished equestrian and businesswoman, Hilda, and her fiancé, Andre Merlet, own and operate Ashmore Equestrian Center in Apopka, Florida, near Orlando.

A typical day during a year full of selection trials is full of preparation, on top of the normal routine, which leaves very little time for “non-horsey” activities. Hilda is up by 5:00 every morning and starts her day by checking emails. By 6:30 she is at the barn, where she will spend the next 12 to 14 hours riding, teaching, managing horses and students, planning events, making schedules and meeting with horse owners.

Although Hilda can usually be found competing two to seven horses at horse shows, this year she has focused mainly on Extravagance, the horse with which she qualified for the Alltech Games. Extravagance

is an Australian Thoroughbred, one of the last few by Waajib, who was shipped from Ireland to Australia to breed and has since died. Extravagance was started as an event horse in Australia and went

on to the United States, where Hilda and Andre, along with a generous supporter, bought him. She and the horse have been a team ever since.

“Extravagance has talent in all three phases,” said Hilda at an interview



during this year's Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event, where she won the Best-Dressed Rider award. "In dressage he is calm, obedient and elegant. He is very steady. In cross-country he is bold, brave and honest, although he can be an unorthodox jumper. He has his own unique style that suits him. Show jumping is his weakest phase simply because he is still learning to be more careful. He is a very sound and very sane horse."

Ireland has an extremely strong pool of Alltech Games contenders (14 qualified horses and riders). To date Hilda and Extravagance's accomplishments include CCI** 4th, CIC*** 6th, and CCI*** 8th, 14th.

Lexington would be the first time either of them would represent Ireland's team, although Hilda

said. "It is especially exciting for me because Alltech is an Irish company, and being from Ireland

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with Squire's Cap represented her homeland as an individual in 2004 at the World Cup Final in Pau, France.

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Hilda has been very involved with the U.S. Area III Young Rider program, serving as a selector and instructor for the past five years. When asked who she most admires, Hilda, without hesitation, rattled off a list including Karen O'Connor, Bruce Davidson, Ian Miller, Chuckie Waters, Richard Sanders, and Ann Gribbons – all of whom, she said, "have forgotten more than I know" and have contributed in many ways to her success.

Now she is striving to do the same for the young riders she coaches, three of whom stand out as potential future Alltech Games competitors: Grace Carpenter, age 12, who hopes to become the first rider to compete for Bosnia; Charlotte Collier, a Florida teen who has schooled under top trainers; and Ashley Allen, a college student from Tennessee with numerous wins at the preliminary level on an Irish horse purchased from Hilda.



Hilda Donahue won the Zeppa International Award for the best-dressed horse and rider pair at Rolex Kentucky.

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