

PEOPLE

DREAM TEAM

Jennifer Gray and Roxette Delores

STORY BY TOM HAKALA



The first time I heard about the local equestrian rider, Jennifer Gray, was at a seminar hosted by Canadian Olympian and show jumping legend Ian Millar in Owen Sound last year. My involvement with horses or show jumping was previously limited to watching equestrian events during the Olympics on TV. As a matter of fact the last time I rode a horse myself was as a teen in the early sixties at the Rainbow Ranch in Michigan when I ended up riding old swayback Sally... but I digress. Throughout Millar's address he kept making reference to a local rider who had done great things at the Canadian Nationals. That rider was Jennifer Gray (who resides just north of Owen Sound in the hamlet of Leith). I started to think, here is someone who lives just down the road from me and 'Captain Canada' is giving her all this praise. I think it's time to tell her story.

Jennifer was born in Toronto, but as a child lived all over North America, because her father's mobile job with a large computer firm. From an early age therefore she was used to traveling across the continent. In later life this would prove to be useful. One summer at camp she took a few riding lessons and immediately fell in love with riding and horses. Luckily her mother agreed to allow Jennifer to pursue her new passion with riding lessons in Richmond Hill. She progressed so quickly that it wasn't long 'til she began teaching other young riders. After graduation, she taught and coached full time for the next eleven years.

Along the way, Jennifer met fellow horse enthusiast, Jim Gray, and soon realized they had more than just a common bond—they married and set out together to raise horses and eventually a family. In the early days they rented a farm in Newmarket, but then found the spread of their dreams when the Rose Hill Farm, just outside of Leith, came up for sale. In 1990 they purchased this former boyhood home of Canadian iconic painter, Tom Thomson, and renamed it Jack Pine Equestrian Center at Rose Hill.

At Jack Pine, Jennifer taught and coached English style equestrian and show jumping, but continued to harbour the dream of finding the perfect horse so she could ride the circuit herself. Eight years ago she and Jim went to Europe horse hunting and in Germany found a beautiful German Oldenberg mare named Roxette Delores. After observing her move about the paddock and then riding her, Jennifer knew her search had ended and her dream was about to come true. The Grays purchased Roxette and shipped her to Leith to begin training.

Roxette settled in well at her new home and after working with Jennifer, it soon became obvious that the horse was a natural for show jumping. Over time the two bonded prompting Jennifer to enter real competition.

Though Roxette's demeanor is quiet and reserved at home, as soon as she walks out in front of a crowd, she becomes another horse. She is strong, agile, and best of all, very competitive. Because of this the two of them have fared very well in the competitive world of show jumping.

A show jumping horse matures much slower than a racehorse. While major horse racing events feature three year olds, jumping horses of that age are considered mere babies. At 15, Roxette is now in her prime for jumping, and if all goes well, will still have a few more competitive years left. Though some equestrian horses are brought into competition at around 8 or 9 years, Roxette had injuries at that time of her life and Jennifer believes this was a blessing in disguise. Now the mare is in top form and has the maturity to perform a complete round without being distracted consequently the only training Jennifer does with Roxette is to ride her daily to keep up her endurance and strength. Jennifer says that a horse has only so many jumps in her and she does not want to waste them outside of a performance. 🐾

Throughout the year, Jennifer and her family spend a great deal of their time traveling to equestrian events across North America. They start the year with a move to Ocala, Florida in February where they stay for five weeks. Jim and Jennifer bring their own horses as well as clients' horses that they are trying to sell, but the main event is the show jumping that Jennifer and Roxette Dolores compete in. After returning to Leith for a brief stint, the Grays go to Virginia in April to compete, then it's back to Canada in May for the weekly Grand Prix tour across Ontario and Quebec. Generally they drive on Tuesdays to events which start mid-week and run through Sunday. The Grand Prix events, which Jennifer and Roxette compete in, usually close the weeklong affair on Sunday afternoons. On Mondays the family is back in Leith to reboot and do household chores. She admits that every year in May she takes a deep breath and thinks, "Well, here we go again." But soon the excitement of the jumping circuit takes over and all she can think of is the thrill of competing.

The fitness of a show jumping horse is the number one priority for achieving the best results. An unhealthy animal can't endure the rigors of all those jumps and landings without hurting themselves. Therefore, Jennifer maintains a strict regime of exercise and preventive medicine with Roxette. The Grand Prix circuit has banned all drugs that could be performance enhancing, so the Grays are not allowed to use any anti-inflammatories on their horses. Instead they rely on other methods to make sure Roxette is at her best. During the performance season, their vet does weekly blood work to assure that the horse is healthy and does not have any undetected ailments. Glucosamine is not a drug but a natural food supplement, so it is acceptable to administer and naturally helps fight joint or arthritic issues. Other natural treatments for horses are electro-magnetic blankets, laser therapy and

massage which all help to relax muscles, tendons and joints.

The hours of hard work have paid off for Jennifer and Roxette. The team has scored top placings in many events. In March of 2008 the team placed 4th at a Grand Prix at Ocala, Florida. In June they were back in Ontario and placed well at events in Caledon and Palgrave. Last fall they hit it big with a 1st place showing at the Coca Cola Grand Prix in Palgrave. Later in September at the John Deere Canada Cup Championship, Jennifer and Roxette placed a very respectable 5th behind the likes of Ian Millar and In Style (1st place) and Jill Henselwood and Black Ice (2nd place). They actually placed two spots higher than Olympic Gold Medalist, Eric Lamaze, at that same event. Ian Millar was very impressed with Jennifer's performance at the Canadian Championship and made mention of it more than once during his speech at the Bayshore.

After meeting Jennifer I could see why she is such an accomplished rider, trainer and coach. She has a naturally open, friendly and inquisitive personality. She is truly excited about her sport and possesses a great amount of patience and enthusiasm in explaining it to an outsider who has not ridden a horse in over 40 years. Jennifer and Roxette truly are a dream team and I am sure that we will hear more about them in the future. 🌞

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