

Hard work, talent and a pinch of good fortune put young rider in the Grand Prix spotlight.

by Kim F. Miller

Zazou Hoffman still has to pinch herself.

Even after a junior career dominated by catch-riding, working student gigs and winning the 2009 Maclay Finals, having two solid Grand Prix horses and four significant wins already seems surreal.



“It’s kind of amazing,” says Zazou. The 25-year-old is an assistant trainer at the top hunter/jumper program, Meadow Grove. Her most recent wins include the August 5th \$40,000 Wells Fargo Private Bank Grand Prix at the Sonoma Horse Park with Samson II, and the 1.5M AON Cup at Spruce Meadows in early July on W Zermie.

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Grand Prix horses to ride. I knew it would be more about getting back into riding regularly and learning about the business.” The Sonoma victory and her first three Grand Prix wins are icing on a cake she didn’t even fantasize about enjoying so early in her career. Above all, it’s a privilege Zazou is keenly grateful for on a daily basis.

Fulfilling the dream – realistic or not – held by many young professionals of getting quickly into the big jumper ring came complements of longtime Meadow Grove client Saree Kayne, an accomplished amateur jumper rider.

Saree and Zazou got acquainted while Zazou worked part-time at Meadow Grove while attending UCLA. In 2015, Zazou entered Saree’s Woodpecker in a Blenheim EquiSports Grand Prix to help work through some issues the pair were having. For the next year or so, she had a few more chances in the big ring aboard sale horses and another of Saree’s mounts, W Zermie. Now married and expecting her first child, Saree decided to take on an owner’s role for Zazou. Saree purchased Samson from a Meadow Grove barnmate right before Spruce Meadows earlier this summer, so Zazou now has two horses to compete for the foreseeable future.

Zazou and her new string are focused on the Longines FEI World Cup™ West league. At presstime, the Meadow Grove crew was headed to Langley, BC, where the first leg of that seven-qualifier series was set for Aug. 27.

Along with her coaches Dick and Francie Carvin and Susie Schroer, Zazou sees the World Cup effort as a great new challenge more than a quest for making the Finals in Paris next spring.

“We haven’t jumped any World Cup qualifiers before, and we all think this will be a nice next step,” Zazou explains. “It’s a really nice series of classes in California throughout the fall.”

Samson and Zermie are very different rides. Samson is a 13 year old Swedish Warmblood by Cartento. “He’s small, a little lazy and kind of unassuming. You wouldn’t think much to look at him,” Zazou shares. “When we came home from Spruce Meadows, we took him over a 1.2M course and he made it look like that was about all he could jump.” But when the pressure is on over the bigger tracks, “He finds he’s scope. He’s very cool!”

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Zermie is a 14-year-old Dutch mare who jumped the 2015 Pan Am Games with a rider from Puerto Rico. She's is strong-minded and "will try really hard for you when she wants to."

"I'm lucky to being doing the Grand Prix for my first time on horses that have this kind of experience," Zazou notes. "That doesn't happen very often for young riders and it gives me a lot of confidence."



All About That Balance

The Grand Prix wins put Zazou in the headlines, but the majority of her days, at home and at shows, are more typical of a young professional's. As an assistant trainer, Zazou oversees two other young women who have rider/barn manager roles. They all saddle up between 7 and 8 a.m. and Zazou typically rides about six horses a day, then teaches a lesson or two. She's been pleasantly surprised how much she enjoys teaching Meadow Grove's mostly amateur clients and how the process of teaching others enhances her own skills. Afternoons are usually spent in the office working on the considerable logistics involved in maintaining a show stable: travel, hotel, stabling arrangements, etc.

Most of Meadow Grove's riders have ambitious jumping goals and Zazou appreciates that. "We hear a lot about junior riders working really hard for the Medal finals," she observes. "It's just the same for amateurs: it's not like their riding careers are over when they turn 18. We really enjoy working with these clients who are so focused on jumper and, in some cases, Grand Prix goals."

Zazou appreciates that Meadow Grove is adequately staffed to meet all clients' needs, even

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though that means the training staff is often split up. They typically take anywhere from six to 30 horses to a show. This summer, for example, 26 enjoyed the Sonoma Horse Park competitions, and earlier, a handful of horses went to Spruce Meadows in Calgary, Canada, and another group was at a Blenheim EquiSports show in San Juan Capistrano.

Whatever the day calls for, Zazou makes a priority of carving out time to work with her own jumpers. "There's no point in going in to the ring unless you are prepared."

An emphasis on life balance is another thing Zazou is grateful for at Meadow Grove. "They are great about taking steps away from the sport and they seem to have very happy lives," she says of Dick, Francie and Susie.

Although Zazou's laser-focused junior career prepared her to make the most of the opportunities she's earned as a young professional, she reflects that a bit more balance might have been good.

"By the end of my junior years, I was really burned out," she acknowledges. "I didn't see then how I could sustain a lifestyle doing this and I think maybe I was over invested in the sport at the time. Now I have a more balanced life and it makes sense to do this as a professional. When I was young, I didn't think about keeping it balanced."

Hindsight, of course, is 20/20, and Zazou's junior years were driven by a work ethic and desire for horsemanship knowledge that many veteran professionals consider to be in short supply these days.

With her mother and outgoing horsewoman Winter Hoffman helping open doors along the way, Zazou made the most of a relatively modest equestrian budget. She had plenty of encouragement from early coach Meredith Bullock, who taught her at a public arena in West Los Angeles where Zazou kept and cared for her own horses. She catch rode ponies and hunters and earned working student summers with top East Coast hunter/jumper coach Missy Clark and John Brennan at North Run.

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Winning the 2009 ASPCA Maclay Finals was a dream come true and a prestigious victory that's "become kind of a calling card" today.

Making The Most of What You've Got

Asked if she'd be where she is now had her junior career been funded by an unrestricted budget, Zazou says she's not sure. But she has no doubt that the path she took has had big pay-offs, especially apprenticing with North Run. "There's no way to learn about barn management and horsemanship without doing it hands-on. As a professional now, that was an invaluable experience and something I use every day."

Earning catch rides as a kid, including for Susie at Meadow Grove when she was a pre-teen, involved "putting myself out there. That's not my nature and that was perhaps the hardest part for me." She credits her mom's encouragement in that department and counts it as another earned character trait that's been very helpful.

Susie was another key player throughout Zazou's early years. The Hoffmans stayed in touch over the years and "Susie was always super helpful, friendly and generous."

Zazou had planned to take a break from riding during college. While she loved life at UCLA, she didn't get past the first quarter without changing her mind. It turned out Meadow Grove was in need of a part-time rider and that satisfied Zazou's equestrian itch through the next three years earning a degree in urban planning and geography.

While she hasn't had to do any urban planning or geographical endeavors as a trainer, Zazou has no regrets about attending college. "It was really good to step away from the sport and see what else is out there. Also, it sounds so basic, but having the skills to speak and interact with other professionals is really important."

Looking ahead, Zazou hopes to add the development of a young horse to her goal sheet. She was grateful to win the North American Riders Group's \$15,000 grant in 2016. It's the start of her young horse fund and she's added to it by partnering in a sale horse recently.

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She's also found ways to give back to the sport. At the HITS Coachella circuit the last two years, she has orchestrated efforts to promote and provide safe rides home from the venue at night for those who may have over indulged. She was happy to lead the effort on Meadow Grove's behalf and joins the barn's partners in hoping that the concept will spread to other show circuits, as has already happened in Florida.

Whatever the future holds for this bright, talented rider, there's no doubt Zazou will always make a priority of bettering her horsemanship. As she wrote in her final On Course With Zazou column for this magazine, in June of 2010, "One thing I've learned in this sport is that you never stop learning."