

***Headed to this month's Thoroughbred Makeover, 14-year-old is already an inspiring ambassador for re-purposing racehorses.***

*by Kim F. Miller*

As Amanda Gomez heads to the Retired Thoroughbred Project's Thoroughbred Makeover this month in Lexington, KY, the 14-year-old probably feels like a pretty normal horse crazy kid. It's likely she'll leave the competition understanding that she is anything but.



The daughter of the late two-time Eclipse Award winning jockey Garrett Gomez and his wife Pamela, Amanda began riding very young at the family's Norco ranch, Restin Farms. "My dad threw me up on a pony, gave it a whack on the rear and said, 'Off you go!'" she recalls.

Since then she has developed several off-the-track Thoroughbreds. Initially it was under the careful supervision of her mother, who had trained horses at the track and now makes a business of readying ex-racers for second careers and operates the small hunter/jumper training program, Rising Star Equestrians.

This was the first year Amanda heard about the Thoroughbred Makeover, which marks its fourth year Oct. 5-8. Presented by Thoroughbred Charities of America, it is a showcase for "how much

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Thursday, 28 September 2017 23:56

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life these horses have left once they leave the track.” The Makeover features trainers competing in various disciplines with OTTBs that have had less than 10 months of re-training.

Learning about the Makeover was an “OMG” moment for Amanda as she’s been working with and riding the breed all her life. “I started out on ponies, but from about 8 or 9 I had horses that were straight off the track. My mom has always ridden and worked with Thoroughbreds, so she taught me how to work with all their little knicks and knacks.”

Racehorses don’t deserve their bad rap, Amanda reports. They don’t have any ground manners or under-saddle training at the track and that can translate to bad behavior when they arrive at a “regular” barn. “They’re not trying to be bad,” Amanda explains. “When they come off the track, you have to ease them out of that life and into their new one. They are used to being on a track with 30 other horses and suddenly you’re riding them in an arena all by themselves.”



She has fond memories of jumping the \$800,000 track winner Georgie Boy around at home. “They trust you and they can be completely fine. People don’t understand that.”

The re-training process requires patience, persistence and skilled horsemanship, Amanda acknowledges, and the rewards are equal to that effort. “Thoroughbreds want to behave. Once they understand what you want of them, they trust you and they’ll do whatever you ask of them.” Although she does own two Warmbloods, Amanda swears “there is nothing like the feeling of jumping a Thoroughbred.” She was not alive during the breed’s sporthorse heyday, (think Ann Kursinski’s Eros, Michael Matz’ Jet Run, Greg Best’s Gem Twist, Hilda Gurney’s Keen, etc.), but Amanda is well versed in their history. Athletic ability and heart were their trademarks then and they still are, she asserts.

As with any breed, some steeds are feistier than others and the training process is not all

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smooth sailing. “At this point, I’ve ridden the bucks and the rears and I know to just ride them through it. I’m not scared because I’m doing what I love and I know that once these horses figure things out, they’ll start behaving.”

Amanda’s Makeover entry is Quick Louder, a 4-year-old by Woody Be Quick and out of Whisper Louder by Salt Lake. Because he had some issues with his feet when he came off the track, he had almost four months off before beginning his training. “So, I’m that much behind everybody else, but luckily this horse is very smart and he caught on very quickly,” Amanda says.

She’ll be competing him in the Show Jumping division, in which trainers choose a gymnastic test and course set at 2’6”, 3’ or 3’3”. (Dressage, Eventing and Field Hunter are among 10 Makeover divisions.)

Amanda looks forward to seeing what the approximately 340 horses brought from 46 states and three countries can do at the Makeover. She’s opted in for the Makeover Horse Sale as a win-win. “My horse is super cool, but if he goes to a great home, I’d be super excited about that. If not, I’d be super excited to keep him!”

### **Familiar Turf**

Show jumping is familiar turf for Amanda, who campaigns one of her two Warmbloods in the 1.2M division on the hunter/jumper circuit. With Dahlia, Amanda was a USHJA Zone 10 team alternate in the FEI Childrens Jumper Championships that debuted in July as part of the Adequan/FEI North American Junior/Young Riders Championships in Saugerties, NY. The mare is 9, relatively inexperienced and a little spooky, so Amanda was thrilled to finish fourth in the individual farewell round and to be part of the whole experience. The fence heights for the FEI Childrens division were “a very solid” 1.25M, she reports. “It was really great to know we could do it, and if we feel like we’re ready to do the 1.4M next year (the Juniors), it’s great that Dahlia has been there before.”

A home-schooled student through the Excelsior Charter School, Amanda has never been distracted from her devotion to horses. She plans to continue in the jumper ring, while working alongside her mother to prepare OTTBs for sale and second lives. The program averages 25 horses and, along with Amanda, a few young students contribute to their preparation. Dressage, eventing and the hunter/jumper world have been primary markets for their re-trained OTTBs, “but we’ve sold some to barrel racers and ropers,” Amanda explains. “People love the breed.”

Whatever Amanda goes on to accomplish in the jumper arena, she's sure that she owes it all to what she's learned from the Thoroughbreds all these years. "They've taught me everything."

She's happy that the Retired Racehorse Project's Thoroughbred Makeover and other programs around the country are promoting the breed as sporthorses and helping them find loving homes. At the Thoroughbred Classic Horse Show this past April, sponsored by the California Retirement Management Account (CARMA), she rode Snapchat to first place in the \$1,500 Jumper Stakes.

This month's Thoroughbred Makeover offers \$100,000 in prize money, including \$5,000 to the trainers of each discipline champion. The competition also features an RRP Ambassador Award, voted on by participants for the trainer "who most inspires in them an appreciation for the talent and trainability of the off-track Thoroughbred." Whether Amanda gets that nod or not, she is already an impressive ambassador for the breed.

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*For more information on the Thoroughbred Makeover, visit [www.retiredracehorseproject.org](http://www.retiredracehorseproject.org), where you can tune in for the live stream of the finale, the America's Most Wanted Thoroughbred rounds.*

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### **Four Californians Headed to Thoroughbred Makeover**

Amanda Gomez is one of four California trainers taking an OTTB to the Makeover. Madison Sigmon, 17, of West Hills will compete Charlie Monkey, a CANTER-owned horse, in the Show Hunter and Freestyle divisions.

Savannah Ranes, 16, of Murrieta, will ride Afternoon Ghost in dressage, a discipline in which the Pony Clubber and Temecula Valley CDS chapter member has many accomplishments. And, Jessica Pierce, 23, of Ramona will show Learoyal in the Show Hunter and Dressage divisions. She's a Greater San Diego Hunter Jumper Association year-end champion. Best wishes and kudos to all!

Check out the action Oct. 5-8 on [www.retiredracehorseproject.org](http://www.retiredracehorseproject.org) .