

At the risk of insulting many fine local horse men and women, I must confess that to my untrained eye, watching horses go round and round in a show ring is as exciting as watching paint dry. I remember as a child being dragged to more local horse shows than I care to remember. "Ho Hum," I visibly and audibly yawned.

Then in the mid-1970s, Waverly Farm built a cross country course, and I witnessed my first competition. I was hooked, literally overnight.

A three-day event tests the full range of versatility in a sport horse, from the artistic and ballet-like precision of dressage the first day, to the strenuous and sometimes horrific cross country obstacle course the second day, to the technical intricacies of show jumping the third day. Something of an "equestrian triathlon," this is exciting stuff for horse, rider and spectator. Others agree. At the Rolex competition in Kentucky, 90,000 fans will show up to watch Will Coleman and others ride.

Will is an international four-star Event rider. "The greater the number of stars the greater the difficulty," he explains. Being a four-star rider means he is part of an elite circle of riders who have qualified and earned the right to compete at four-star Events. There are only five such Events in the world. Two in England (Burghley and Badminton): one in Germany (Luhmulhen), one in Australia (Adelaide) and one in the United States—the fearsome Rolex in Kentucky. Will has already competed in three of these Events, including his first Rolex in 2004, when he came in 19th overall. Not bad for a 21-year-old.

Some of Will's comments on this level of competition:

Dressage: "It has become very competitive for me. The standard has risen astronomically even since I began Eventing...On that first day, that dressage day, you need to be a dressage rider and not an Eventer doing dressage."

Show jumping: "more technical, more related distances; it's a test of ride-ability and carefulness of the horse jumping... Fences can be 4'3."

Cross Country: "still the meat and potatoes of our sport." This is where horse and

rider tackle a 6,000 to 7,000 meter (3.6 to 4.2 miles) "cross country" course that includes banks, water, and what one respected horsewoman calls "humorous" jumps four feet high and sometimes seven feet broad at 570 meters per minute (average 20 mph) over a 12 to 13-

The three-day event



Above, Will Coleman takes a hurdle at a Derbycross competition near The Plains earlier this summer.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Left series, at a "drop" in cross country, a horse must jump over an obstacle and land below in water. In four star competitions, this "drop," can be as much as nine feet!

Photos by Susie Audibert

minute time span. Drops, where the horse jumps over a fence and then drops down into water can be seven or eight feet, "sometimes nine," says Will nonchalantly. He summarizes a four-star cross country course: "Big and very scopey... but they're also incredibly technical. They usually have a lot of terrain and things that make balance more difficult for horse and rider. It takes all the questions and intensifies them."

It's interesting that he and others in the know use the word "questions," as opposed to obstacles, fences or "oh my God are you really going to jump that?" He patiently explains, "There's a mental computation for the horse as well. An obstacle implies more that there is this physical act of bravery and that's it; you're

just throwing yourself over something."

But it's more than that. "The sport now has evolved a lot. What we see on cross country courses and show jumping courses is by nature more technical... even on the cross country now, which, in the past, was this big, galloping, more of a bravery test than anything else; now you're starting to see the course designers getting very creative in the way they design jumps and the way they present jumps, the combinations and the succession of fences they put together for the rider and horse. It's about having ride-ability but also the big ditches and waters and things where the horse has to be quite bold and brave. There are things in there that require some sort of mental acumen from horse and rider." So, they're called questions, and it's up to the horse and the rider to come up with not just the same answer but also the correct answer.

The people who design these "questions," are a breed of their own; some make a fulltime career out of it. Will says many courses are works of art. "That piece of land is their canvas," he marvels. But one also can't help wondering if these guys have a diabolical streak in them. A nine-foot drop...Jeesh! That's a one story building!

Asked if he's ever been injured, Will admits to a few childhood broken bones, adding that his UVa degree is something of an insurance policy if he ever has a debilitating accident.

The star system focuses on safety first, serving as a clearinghouse for riders and horses alike. Among many other requirements, a rider must negotiate a cross country course with no penalties before moving up. "It's a tall ladder to climb," says Will of this process, adding, "It has to be in place because we have to insure as much as possible the people out there competing can handle the courses and the job safely."

Does he ever worry about an accident? "All horse sports are high-risk," he responds realistically. "Hopefully you've prepared yourself well enough and prepared your horse well enough that you're not doing anything that's more dangerous than it needs to be...Driving a car, in my opinion, is more dangerous than riding."

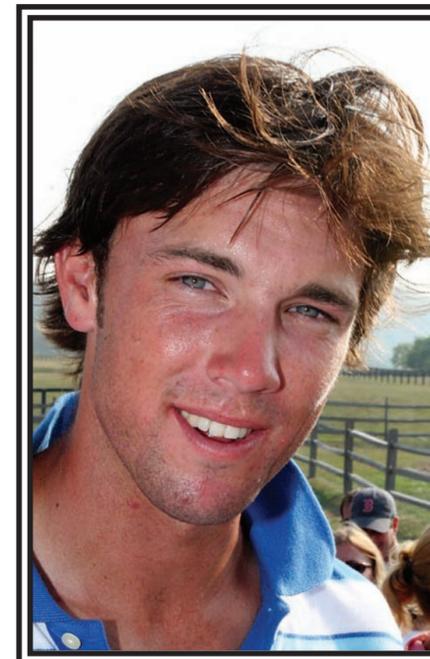


The event rider

"It's pretty up in the air," says Will Coleman cautiously. "It's really about having a sound horse at the right time." Seated on a mounting block in the shade of a giant black maple, just off the cobble-stoned courtyard at the stable near Somerset, Will is talking about his chances for the 2008 summer Olympics. There is a good chance that this local young man, a graduate of both Woodberry and UVa, will represent his country on the U.S. Equestrian Team in Beijing and Hong Kong next summer.

Then there's a good chance he won't. He'll be the first to tell you that.

"More than just yourself"



Above, Will Coleman aboard Toga gallops towards the next "question," on a cross country course.

At left, Will Coleman has been riding ever since he was five years old.

A graduate of Woodberry Forest and the University of Virginia, he hopes to be selected for the U.S. Equestrian Team to compete in the Olympics in Beijing next summer.

Photos by Phil Audibert

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Will is no stranger to numbing disappointment. "I had a horse that was short-listed for the Athens Olympics and then he got hurt before Kentucky that year. It was a small injury but it was enough that it kept him out of it, and that eliminated that dream a little bit." He stares down at the manicured lawn, and then says something truly astonishing, considering that it is coming from the mouth of a 24-year-old.

"Maybe in the end (that disappointment) was a great thing that happened, because I went to college; I kind of took a step back from competing so much and just focused on training myself and bringing along some young horses. I think I really improved as a horseman in those years while I was in school." He pauses. "I'm almost appreciative of having missed that opportunity."

Articulate, focused, mature beyond his years, Will Coleman is also a phenomenally talented show jumper and three-day event rider and trainer. It also doesn't hurt that his good looks set hearts aflutter in ladies both young and old alike.

But he downplays that, preferring to focus on his goals. Ask him about his future, he unhesitatingly answers, "For the immediate future, I think building up a base of support that allows me to do this." He gestures vaguely in the direction of the riding arena. "I would like to be short-listed for every Olympics from now on if possible until I stop riding, which is obviously a long ways off."

The Olympics: just recently, Will was oh-so-close. He was working with a great horse, but then, as with any athlete, injury sidelined the mount...a bone cyst in its shoulder. "Now he's way too behind the game to be a real contender for a spot," says Will realistically. "He was a super horse but that's just how things shake out sometimes." He stares down at his feet adding that he has now turned his attention to two other horses that have "a really good chance of going." He pauses again. "If you've done your job and put yourself in a position to be recognized and selected then really a lot of it is luck."

Sometimes, it's bad luck. "I'd say for every good story that I have or any rider has, we probably have five or six equally heart-breaking stories. There are more downs than ups in the sport of horses. You better really, really, really love horses because if you don't enjoy the day-to-day stuff and are just in it for the big international competitions and the Olympics that everyone dreams about..." He lets the sentence drop, adding simply, "You have to



Left, Will Coleman puts a horse through his paces. He also works out in a gym three days a week to keep in shape for grueling three-day events. Right, Coleman of Somerset had a clean round at a recent competition called a Derbycross, a relatively new equestrian sport that combines the precision of show jumping with the speed and bravery of a cross country course.

Photos by Phil Audibert



really like the day-to-day grind or nobody would be happy doing what we do."

A typical day for Will Coleman: "We start early," he says succinctly. Although he lives in Charlottesville, Will shows up for work between 6 and 7 a.m. at the ivy-covered, brick stable near Gordonsville. There he

acre former hayfield that was converted into a cross country course, complete with stone walls, brush jumps, embankments and water features. Ten to 12 weeks out from a three-day event he'll go to a nearby racetrack and do sprints, "at 700 meters per minute, which is a pretty good click."

Giving the horses an education is what he enjoys most. "For me the training of the horses is obviously what gets me out of bed every day...I really love bringing young horses along. I find that very satisfying, seeing them grow up and mature and knowing that I put the physical tools there that they need."

And it's not just the equine side of the team that needs conditioning; Will himself works out at a gym three days a week. "It's surprisingly more taxing on the rider than you would think. You go around a 10, 12-minute cross country course, your adrenaline is up. There's not a lot of brute strength

It was not long after the Coleman family moved back to Virginia from New York that Will's dad saw something special in his eldest son... a natural athleticism coupled with what can only be described as a "way with horses."

involved, but you do need to be very strong through your legs and through your center of balance. Your core needs to be strong. Across the board, all good riders are very fit people by nature. Riders could do better to think of themselves more as athletes and not just riders."

He points to his father, also named Will, and an accomplished, experienced and respected show

jumping competitor in his own right. "My dad is a very good example of an older guy who has turned his riding around not just from riding but from getting in a gym and really making himself a fitter person."

It was not long after the Coleman family moved back to Virginia from New York that Will's dad saw something special in his eldest son...a natural athleticism coupled with what can only be described as a "way with horses." Young Will remembers a Shetland pony in particular. "Foxhunting, that's where it really took off," he smiles. It wasn't long before Will was competing in show jumping and three-day events.

And here's a bit of trivia. Although Will Coleman wanted to play baseball and basketball at Woodberry, his real athletic success story, other than horses, was on the squash court. His senior year, Will Coleman was runner up state champion and ranked 19th nationally.

But he never strayed far from horses. "I guess as I got more into the jumping, riding kind of took off for me. And then, I was always around it...I was just around good riding and good people." He mentions four-time Olympian, Anne Kursinki for one, and he credits his father, who never pushed him into the sport, for another.

"He's a very knowledgeable horseman; I've always looked to him for advice with certain horses or certain training tactics. He's been really wise in how he's guided me towards riding with certain people and getting good training...putting me in the hands of the right people, pointing me towards the right people." His father is not his daily coach, however. "He wouldn't want to be," shudders Will. "For his own son, that's tricky."

Even before he graduated from Woodberry, Will was earning a reputation as an accomplished young rider. In 2001, he won first place in the North American Young Rider Championships. "I decided after high school that I would take a few years and

really kind of throw myself into the lifestyle and see if I liked it. It's not an easy life...you don't become a millionaire working with horses. There are not that many material rewards for doing what we do. I just wanted to see if I liked it enough to try to be exceptional at it for one, but also to love it enough that I wanted to do it every day."

He moved to the Middleburg area and became a fulltime "working student," for Olympic medalists David and Karen O'Connor, who are arguably America's royal family of eventing. "They were the ones who brought me into the sport and then obviously gave me a firm foundation for eventing. I owe them a lot," says Will reverently. "David was my primary coach and to this day is a wonderful friend and mentor."

During those years and since, Will Coleman has traveled to Canada, England, and Germany to compete. On flying horses overseas, he says, "they ship better in an airplane than they do in

a tractor-trailer. It's very smooth...It's amazing. A lot of times you're on these combination flights, where there's people in the front of the airplane who have no idea there're five or six horses in the back." He remembers going back to check on horses in the middle of a Toronto to London flight, "and we'd come back with hay and shavings all over us," to the astonishment of other passengers.

After three years with the O'Connors and the disappointment of not being able to go to Athens in 2004, Will Coleman came home to Somerset and enrolled at UVa. He graduated last December with a degree in history. With just a few more credits he'll be able to claim a minor in economics. It was also in 2004 that he was named both the U.S. Eventing Young Rider and Advanced Rider of the year.

Now he is outgrowing the barn in Orange County and will soon move to the Atlanta area. "It's a wonderful facility that I've been offered to base myself, to train out of...a place for me to have my business...I am at that stage in my career where I need to recruit some support and try to build up a little bit of a clientele and business." He jokingly adds his dad will get his stable back... and his peace of mind.

Will's competition schedule looks like a touring rock band's. By late summer and early fall he'll have gone to New York, Michigan, North Carolina, Canada, Virginia, and this fall, the national three-star championship at Fair Hill in Maryland.

And then there's the biggie...Rolex in Lexington, Kentucky, in late April, the only four-star three-day event in the nation. And, if he does well there and he has the right horse and the horse is sound and the vets approve and the selectors select and the U.S. Team coach Captain Mark Phillips agrees, maybe, just maybe Will Coleman will be flying to Beijing next summer, with a great horse riding in the back of the plane.

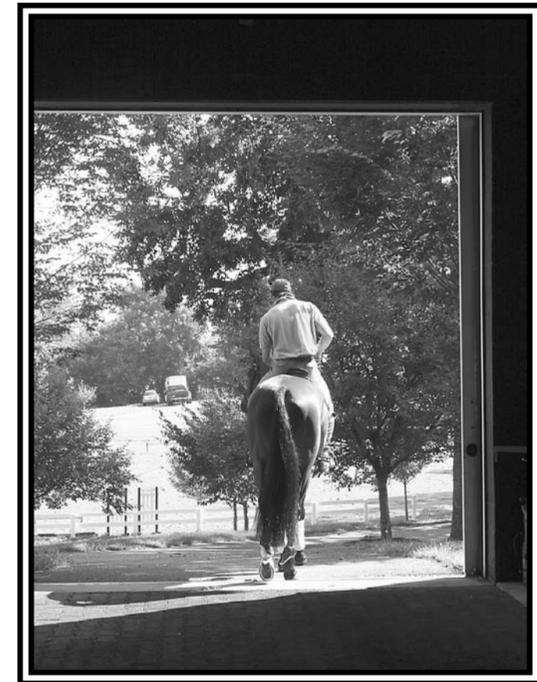
"To represent the U.S. in a foreign country you have to be selected...because you're representing more than just yourself," he says responsibly. It's a safe bet that Will Coleman will do a splendid job representing the United States...anywhere.



It did not take Will Coleman long to compete in Three Day Events. Here, at the age of 14, he sails over a typical cross country "question."
Contributed photo

will exercise and train seven to eight horses of varying ages and experience daily. With the young ones, he concentrates on flatwork in the arena and strength training on a long hill on the farm.

More experienced horses he'll take out on the 33-



Headed for the ring to do some flatwork, Will Coleman, trains as many as eight horses a day at his father's stable between Somerset and Gordonsville.

Photo by Phil Audibert