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Making a Name on Horseback

By KERRY HANNON OCT. 22, 2014

Jessica Springsteen's beaming smile said it all. The 22-year-old daughter of Bruce Springsteen had just won the Anglesea Stakes aboard her horse Davendy S at the Dublin Horse Show in August, against a field of 52 international competitors.

Music blasted through the RDS Arena in Ballsbridge, Ireland, and the horse-crazy crowd cheered loudly. Her father and her mother, Patti Scialfa, were tucked into the packed grandstands, virtually unnoticed by those sitting around them. They, too, were grinning and clapping — pure parental pride. Representing the United States, Ms. Springsteen had just defeated some of the top riders in the world and collected a prize of 8,000 euros, about \$10,200.

“It was cool showing in Dublin, where my parents had played two years before there in the same arena,” Ms. Springsteen said in an interview with the United Equestrian Federation Network. “My parents have been able to come to so many shows with me. They get a kick out of it.”

Ms. Springsteen started riding when she was 5, after her family moved to the 300-acre Stone Hill Farm in Colts Neck, N.J. She is among the offspring of prominent parents who are competing successfully at elite AA-rated hunter-jumper shows across the country, and in some cases vying for winning ribbons on the international scene. In hunter-jumper shows, which have their roots in fox hunting, horses are ridden English style and jump over a series of obstacles.

Riders with well-known parents in the top ranks of competitive horse jumping include Georgina Bloomberg, 31, a daughter of former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg; Katie Dinan, 21, whose parents are the billionaire James G. Dinan, who founded York Capital Management, and his wife, Elizabeth R. Miller; and Paige Johnson, 29, the daughter of Robert L. and Sheila C. Johnson, founders of Black Entertainment Television.

Ms. Bloomberg rode her mare Jovina to win the inaugural \$210,000 Central Park Grand Prix held at the Trump Rink in mid-September, against 23 of the world's best horses and riders. The Grand Prix is considered to be the highest level of show jumping. It requires that the horse jump a challenging course of 12 to 18 obstacles, with heights up to 5 feet 3 inches and spreads of up to six feet.

Others who compete on the AA-rated show circuit, which often offers the most prize money, include Destry Spielberg, 17, whose parents are Steven Spielberg and Kate Capshaw; Jennifer Gates, 18, daughter of Bill and Melinda Gates; and Hannah Selleck, 25, daughter of the actors Tom Selleck and Jillie Mack.

Hillary Dobbs, 26, daughter of Lou Dobbs, the Fox Business host, has more than two dozen Grand Prix wins in professional riding, becoming the youngest rider ever to win over \$1 million in prize money. A 2010 Harvard graduate, she was hired this summer by the University of South Carolina to coach the equestrian team.

Not surprisingly, competing comes at a price. At its highest level, the sport requires horses that can cost upward of \$100,000 (even leasing a top-quality show horse for a year can cost nearly as much when extras are factored in.)

Of course, sales prices can stretch into the millions to purchase a Grand Prix mount like Ms. Springsteen's Vindicat W, a horse that won the gold medal at the London 2012 Olympics and was bought afterward by the Springsteens' Stone Hill Farm. In September, Ms. Springsteen won her first Grand Prix on the horse at the \$200,000 2014 American Gold Cup held in North Salem, N.Y.

The sales price, however, is just part of the cost of competing in horse sports at this level. An annual equine insurance premium with full mortality coverage for a show hunter or jumper is generally 3.6 percent of the animal's value, according to equine insurance experts. A rider for major medical coverage is extra.

The show circuit for many of these equestrians begins in early January in Florida at the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center, a show ground of more than 500 acres in Wellington, 17 miles west of Palm Beach. Its 12-week Winter Equestrian Festival, which draws elite riders from around the world, awards over \$8 million in prize money.

As the year rolls on, the circuit continues through prominent shows like August's Hampton Classic in Bridgehampton, N.Y.; the Washington International

Horse Show, taking place this week at the Verizon Center in Washington; and the National Horse Show at the end of this month at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington.

The tab to compete can be hefty: Competing even for a few weeks at the Winter Equestrian Festival can easily top \$30,000 for entry fees, board and training for a single horse, and most riders have more than one.

Then there is the rider's attire. A pair of custom-made E. Vogel black leather dress boots run around \$1,500. A British-made Charles Owen protective riding helmet, one that meets the safety standards of the United States Equestrian Federation for horse jumping events, can cost from around \$200 to more than \$500. Breeches from Tailored Sportsman sell for around \$250 a pair. A Butet saddle handmade in France costs around \$5,000.

And when riders head back north after the season in Wellington, the monthly board for stabling at a full-service barn, operated by a leading trainer in, say, Virginia horse country, generally starts around \$1,500 per stall and may include lessons. Board varies by location and level of care.

"It is an expensive sport on any terms, I'm not going to deny that," said Susan B. Schoellkopf, who runs SBS Farms, based in Buffalo, one of the foremost show hunter training operations in the country.

But you don't have to be rich to succeed in it. "I don't like that riding is thought of as such an elitist sport," Ms. Bloomberg said. "The top riders in the country right now — Kent Farrington and Beezie Madden, for example — didn't come from wealth. They worked hard to get to the top. They've been able to prove to wealthy people who have money that they should invest in horses for them. It's like any other sport. You don't have to be able to own a football team to play professional football."

Certainly one appeal of this sport is that it allows these young women to build confidence and succeed on their own away from the limelight of their parents. This is one time when Mr. Springsteen is simply Jessica Springsteen's father, rather than Jessica being viewed as Bruce's daughter, Ms. Schoellkopf said.

"Kids of famous parents who develop a passion for riding can build self-esteem and pride in their own autonomous accomplishment in a domain separate from their parents' fame," said Olivia Mellan, a Washington psychotherapist who specializes in money psychology. "Girls especially benefit

from this opportunity to shine.”

Ms. Bloomberg said: “For me, there were a couple of important lessons I learned growing up riding. For kids, just being around an animal and the horse, you learn patience and how to build a relationship and build trust. You learn social skills and self-control.

“From a competition point of view, you learn to work hard and are rewarded for it. But even more important is that you learn to lose. You learn how to deal with failure and loss. It’s very different from any other sport. You are only 50 percent of the equation.”

As for Ms. Springsteen, Ms. Schoellkopf said: “Her dad can be at the shows and no one really pays attention, or bothers him. There’s no paparazzi. All eyes are on the ring watching and rooting for Jessica. She’s a really good rider.”

For the most part, it’s the mothers who seem to take an active part in supporting their daughters’ love for the sport. (There are boys who compete at this level, but not many with such prominent parents.) “My mother came to horse shows and was very supportive,” said Ms. Bloomberg, who started riding at 4 and competing at 6. “She was not the typical horse show mother, though. She didn’t care if I won a class or not; she wanted me to be safe.” Her mother, Susan Brown, and Mr. Bloomberg divorced in 1993, when Ms. Bloomberg was 10.

Ms. Johnson’s mother, Sheila, fell in love with the sport, too, and has been a fixture at the shows since her daughter started taking riding lessons as a child. She was president of the Washington International Horse Show for five years. She bought a farm in Middleburg, Va., and turned the 340-acre estate into the Salamander Resort & Spa, a 168-guest room horse country resort that includes a 22-stall stable.

Sheila Johnson, who divorced Mr. Johnson in 2002 and has since remarried, and her daughter declined to be interviewed for this article.

Trainers like Ms. Schoellkopf watch the children mature from a different vantage point than their parents. They observe them removed from their public life as children of celebrities.

“I can clearly see how riding and showing gives them a focus, dedication and organization that translates to their education and ability to succeed in college and beyond,” Ms. Schoellkopf said.

Ms. Springsteen, in fact, is to graduate from Duke University in December,

and Ms. Dinan is a junior at Harvard.

Yet something about horseback riding seems to transcend privilege, as popular culture attests to in books and movies like “Black Beauty” and “National Velvet.”

“There’s a pure magic in the connection and communication between a horse and a kid,” Ms. Schoellkopf said.

Money does help to pair the young riders with the right equine partner — that is, a safe horse with training and experience to help riders through mistakes — “but even then, you still have to be able to ride,” said a trainer, Don Stewart.

Mr. Stewart has trained some of the country’s best young riders at his Don Stewart Stables in Ocala, Fla., for more than three decades.

“Showing teaches your child finesse, style, control, smoothness and patience,” he said. “It’s a discipline that rewards practice, but it should also be fun. You’ve got to have a sense of humor and learn to laugh at yourself.

“That’s a life lesson they will use the rest of their lives.”

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