

Augusta Spandler

2005 FOXCHASING SCHOLAR

by Laurel Scott

Several years ago, the Maryland Steeplechasing Association created the Junior Foxchasing Scholarship to foster the link between foxhunting and steeplechasing, and to support up-and-comers in both disciplines. In keeping with its origins, the recipients of that scholarship have traditionally been Maryland-based youngsters.

But this year, a 13-year-old Pennsylvanian named Augusta Spandler galloped into the spotlight. Tiny but tough, she's a pistol of a girl, with a sparkling smile and masses of dark tresses barely contained by her helmet. And she earned her scholarship the hard way – not by sweeping race after race at the local point-to-points, but by demonstrating talent, determination and good sportsmanship week after week.

Nothing about Augusta's race days are easy. From her home in Mechanicsburg, it's about a two-hour drive to most Maryland meets. But she chooses to ride here because the Maryland circuit starts earlier than its Pennsylvania counterpart.

Augusta's mounts are often "works in progress" that jig like Thoroughbreds on the muscle. Yet she amazes spectators with

an ability to "sit chilly" that puts professional jockeys to shame.

And whereas most junior jockeys have someone to coach them, Augusta goes it pretty much alone. Her only real assistance comes from trainer Regina Welsh, whose junior racing clinics she attends. "Augusta is one of the most driven and dedicated kids I have seen in awhile," Regina said. "She is always the first to call when a racing clinic is advertised, and her mom brings her down to ride with me from time to time, so she can get more racing tips."

Oh, and by the way, Augusta suffers from a moderate to severe hearing loss. As far as she's concerned, however, that's just one more thing that ISN'T going to stop her. "I think Augusta just considers her hearing loss a minor inconvenience at times," reflected her mother, Jeanine Osman.



Elizabeth Fenwick

Imagine That crosses the wire in the Junior Hunt Cup. Staged at Shawan Downs, this is one of his rider Augusta's favorite meets.

Augusta's passion for riding began at age six, when a friend introduced her to Shasta Charles' Signal Hill Farm. Located right around the corner from Augusta's house, this facility soon became her home away from home. She took lessons there, helping out with the barn work and grabbing "outside" rides when she could.

Soon, her knack for working with problem ponies became apparent. "Some of them just needed training – they needed to be worked with," she explained.

Although Augusta had her own horse by age 8, it suffered a stroke and had to be retired. So, through a Signal Hill program that allowed her to "adopt" training projects, she befriended a small pony nicknamed "Dilly." "He needed a lot of training; he was very skittish, and scared of almost everything," she recalled.

Once she outgrew Dilly, Augusta moved on to another adoptee named Chance Encounter, who became her first racing mount in 2004. Until then, she'd been doing a lot of jumping in preparation for eventing. But, as Augusta soon discovered, "Chance" – a 14.1

hand mare – was a little speed-ball. "And I'd always wanted to race," she said.

A Season of Challenges

In 2005, Augusta tried her luck with Imagine That, a large 7-year-old palomino pony who "gets very excited and nervous at the same time – he likes to hop everywhere!" Another Signal Hill project, "Image" is a flashy hunter/jumper type who got fired up after competing in mounted games.

Because of Image's antics at the races, unknowing spectators sometimes feared for Augusta's safety. But she remained unflappable. "I don't really think I have a chance of falling off of Image; it might look kind of scary, but it just feels like he's hopping up and down a bit!" she insisted.

Still, her season was full of challenges. "Image knew that if he was in the front of the pack, all he needed to do was put on a tiny burst of speed to pass the field master. And you can't do that!" she said, referring to North American Point-to-Point Association (NAPPA) Field Master's Chase rules, in

(continued)



Bob Keller

Augusta and her mother, Jeanine Osman, circle the Howard County-Iron Bridge paddock with Imagine That.

Foxchasing Scholar, cont'd.

which the contestants must wait for the master's signal to race for the finish.

Unfortunately, rating Image resulted in a worked-up pony that quickly started tiring. So Augusta struggled all season to find some middle ground, competing at Howard County-Iron Bridge, Elkridge-Harford, the Grand National, and the Junior Hunt Cup.

The Grand National contest was especially eventful. After overjumping the first fence, Image landed almost parallel to it, causing Augusta to lose a stirrup. Then, while she circled to regain her stirrup, fellow jockey Emma Warden started having problems at the second fence. Good sport that she is, Augusta said, "OK, Emma, just follow me."

At the third fence, outrider John Tabachka volunteered to give the girls a lead. "But his horse went to jump, and then stopped, and he fell off onto the jump!" Augusta said. "And Emma and I just stared at each other like, 'Oh no!'"

By the time he'd remounted, the field was on its way back, and Image was antsy-er than ever. "We got really far behind Emma," Augusta related. "But it was like Emma and I were having our own little private race. She was just landing after the last when I was landing over the second-last, so I let Image fly over the last and use all his speed to try to catch up with Emma. It was like a photo finish for us!"

One of Augusta's favorite Maryland races occurred at Howard County last March. "Image did really good," she said. "It was his second race; I had started him in fall, 2004 at the Pennsylvania Hunt Cup Races, where he was third out of six.

"At Howard County, I held him back over the jumps, and it wasn't a long race. After the last jump, I just inched him up, and the field master released us. He was in the front the whole time until we got to a little gully, and he kind of tripped there; and we got passed. So we were second."

As far as courses go, Augusta prefers Elkridge-Harford's layout at Monkton's Atlanta Hall.

"They have a variety of jumps at different heights," she noted. She also likes the Junior Hunt Cup, she said.

One thing's for sure: The lessons learned last season will stay with Augusta forever. "Image really taught me to have a lot of patience," she noted. "And I've really enjoyed all the different horses and ponies I've ridden; each of them has taught me so much."

Cubbing Camp and Future Plans

Although Augusta had schooled cross-country and competed in starter horse trials, she had never hunted before winning the Foxchaser Scholarship.

But last August, she got to participate in Green Spring Valley's cubhunting camp. "I offered her a horse and a bed for the camp, since she's from the Harrisburg area," said Green Spring Master of Foxhounds Sheila Jackson Brown. "It's a great intro to the sport, and I encourage anyone who's thinking about trying it to start off this way."

The camp started with a kennel tour and a cross-country ride, which afforded participants an opportunity to work on control, hunting terms, etiquette and other issues in the field. That evening, there was a potluck supper and a staff seminar, followed by hunting on Monday and Tuesday, with breakfast and a question/answer session afterwards. "It was a lot of fun!" Augusta proclaimed.

For the cross-country ride, she brought her own 4-year-old, 15.3-hand greenie, a buckskin named Pantalaimon ("Panda") whom she acquired two years ago. "Our barn goes down to Assateague Island twice in the winter and once in the spring with the horses," she explained. "Normally, on the second winter beach trip, we take some of the babies that are ready to be broken. And Panda happened to be in that crop of foals...we were looking at him to buy, because I really needed a horse that I wouldn't outgrow, and I really liked him. So I was the first one on him - I broke him right there on the beach, [with the sand there] in case I happened to fall off."

Panda was nervous on the

cross-country ride. "So I kind of hung back with him," Augusta related. "I'm considering racing him, because my horse is actually very fast; but I'm not sure if he's ready for it, because sometimes when horses come up from behind, he gets really scared and kicks out at them. So I have to get him over that."

The next day, she climbed aboard Brown's veteran Cahoots for a bit of sport. "It was a lot of fun, because he was a different horse...it was a little nerve-racking at first, but I got used to him by the end!" she said.

On the camp's final day, Augusta rode Emma Warden's Rootbeer, and a good time was had by all. "She couldn't be nicer, and is quite smart," Brown said of Augusta. "I hope she tries it again - she certainly had two beautiful, fun days with good footing!"

Though she'd like to hunt some more, Augusta's dance card is rather full at the moment. "I have shows, and I feed all 69 horses at my barn on Saturday mornings, and I clean stalls on Sundays. Plus riding my horse, if I have time!" she explained.

Her dedication extends to other pursuits, as well. A ninth grader at the Harrisburg Academy, she plays both the clarinet and the piano, and was selected to play 1st clarinet on a summer school trip to Germany. In addition, she was recently accepted into the Wednesday Club, a prestigious Harrisburg performance group. "I also play field hockey!" she added. "And polocrosse."

What next? With help from instructor Devon Miller, Augusta hopes to event Panda at Training level next fall. She also aims to qualify for the 2006 Pennsylvania National Horse Show - probably in the junior jumpers. And if all goes well, and Panda learns to settle, she might race him, too.

In the meantime, she has her eye on a 2-year-old turbo-speed pony at her barn. Though he has some issues, "He is extremely small, and I'd probably be the only one who could ride him," she confided.

His name is Surprise Victory, which suits Augusta just fine. ■