

Emily Melton:

2005 Jonathan Kiser Scholar

by Laurel Scott

In steeplechasing, as in life, success is as much about overcoming obstacles as it is about finishing first. Sometimes, one rider's obstacles are different from another's – calling for an extra measure of determination and, perhaps, a fresh approach.

Case in point: Emily Melton, a 16-year-old aspiring jump jockey from Mt. Airy. A Damascus High School junior with a bubbly voice and a ready smile, she's shown considerable dedication and pluck in the races she rides.

Which is why she was awarded the 2005 Jonathan Kiser Memorial Scholarship. Created in memory of a national champion jump jockey who got his start in Maryland, this award honors a junior race rider whose sportsmanship and talent are deserving of cultivation.

Working to Ride

Melton's background is a bit unusual among Kiser scholars. Not only is she from a non-equestrian family, she uses methods learned in Pony Club and eventing to fine-tune her performances "between

the flags."

Like most horse-crazy females, however, she's adored equines from an early age. "My room has always been decorated with horses. I always wanted a pony, and I got my first pony when I was 7, so that was pretty cool," she said, laughing. Lessons at a Frederick hunter barn soon followed. But riding is a costly hobby. So, in order to keep the expenses down, this enterprising young lady became a working student at Turnabout Farm, an eventing facility in Mt. Airy.

There, she came under the tutelage of Sallie Morris and Colleen Rutledge. "I started working there when I was 12, in return for lessons," Melton explained. "It has definitely been a really awesome experience working over there; I've learned so much. They were the ones who got me involved in Pony Club and everything – I got my C3 rating last summer, and hopefully I will try to go for my B next summer."

Melton's eventing record speaks for itself. She's competed through Training level and schooled

through Intermediate – primarily on her own horse, the 14-year-old Thoroughbred This Buds For Slew (aka "Mikey"). "I've also ridden a variety of horses at Turnabout Farm," she added. "Over there, we kind of do trade-offs and stuff like that; we get horses in for training, and then we either train them to re-sell them for their owners, or train them to go back to their owners."

Last summer, Melton even rode in the United States Pony Clubs' eastern National Championships, placing fifth with the Capital Region team in Novice level eventing. Unfortunately, Nationals coincided with the North American Point-to-Point Association's Junior Steeplechase Camp (*see related story*), for which the Kiser Scholar was entitled to free tuition.

But make no mistake: Melton loves to race.

'Awesome' Opportunity

Four years ago, Sabrina Morris, the sister of Turnabout Farm's Colleen Rutledge, introduced Melton to the fine art of point-to-pointing. "She was racing [her horse], and thought it would be cool if I would go and race somebody," the busy equestrian explained. "So they put me in a pony race! I had never heard of doing the hunt races until I went [to Howard County-Iron Bridge]."

Although she was "super-nervous," Melton finished second with Rutledge's pony Cool Whip – and there was no turning back. "It was awesome. It definitely got me thinking I wanted to be a jockey!" she said.

Since then, Melton has raced her own horse, competing over fences in the NAPPA Field Master Chase format. "My major race year was this past year, when I was a member of the Howard County-Iron Bridge hunt club," she said.

A former flat winner who can go



Robert F. Keller Sr.

Who says eventers can't ride races? Kiser Scholar Emily Melton excels at both.

a distance, Mikey started out as a schooling project Melton undertook for owner Colleen Rutledge. Then, last spring, Rutledge gave the gelding to his hard-working rider.

Mikey is far from "pushbutton," and has certainly tested Melton's mettle. But sometimes, it's horses like this that teach riders the most – and give them the greatest sense of accomplishment.

"I raced him once in 2004, and that was at Howard County. He's very hard to control for the most part, so we didn't really do too well in that race," his fearless rider recalled. "This year, I hunted him a couple of times, but he is not good to hunt! He thinks that everything is a race."

Last spring, Melton had a few minor setbacks – a cut flag here, a missed jump there. But often as not, she finished hot on the heels of Chelsea Secor, herself a former Kiser scholar. "She's an awesome rider, and has an awesome horse, too," she said of Secor and her mount, Soaringoverseattle.

Rivalry between the two reached an all-time high in one of Melton's favorite races, the Alfred J. Smithwick Memorial April 9 at Elkridge-Harford. "It was just Chelsea and me, and it was a photo finish," she said. "The judges had to look at the video several different times to



Elizabeth Fenwick

Emily Melton and This Buds For Slew cruise home a competitive second in the Junior Field Master's Chase for Horses May 1 at the Maryland Junior Hunt Cup.

figure out the winners. That was pretty nerve-racking! I lost by, like, half a nose."

Melton was also a member of the Howard County-Iron Bridge team that won last year's Hunt Club Relay Race Challenge. Riding a borrowed horse, she served as the pivotal hand-off person, a role that came naturally because of her experience in Pony Club games.

This type of competition helped sharpen her skills even further. "It definitely taught me how to be aware of my surroundings while I'm on the track – to know where all the other people are, where you should make your move, things like that," she offered. "The mirror images also helped with a lot of the precision; how to get the job done in a timely fashion ... it's a lot like the jumpers."

Bit and Switch

When it comes to racing, Melton's biggest challenge has been getting Mikey to settle behind the Field Master. Under NAPPA race rules, the Master must not be passed until the field is released for the finish.

"I had to try several different bits on him," she confided. "I had a ring bit on him at one time; it didn't work very well, so I ended up putting an elevator bit on him and using a double rein. The first two times I used that, he was really, really good. And then after that, I think he just kind of gets used to it, becomes a racehorse, and goes!"

"So we definitely have to do a lot of bit-switching ... and if I hadn't been doing a whole bunch of farm work and riding all the time, I probably wouldn't have been strong enough to hold him!"

In between gallops, Melton also does dressage work with Mikey, to "help keep his brain halfway sane." She finds that eventing prevents horses from developing "one-track minds," also encouraging them to "pay attention to the rider's body, and what it's telling the horse to do."

Apparently, the sport also teaches riders skills that translate well to racing. "Her horse is super tough, and she does a very good job at manag-

ing him," said Regina Welsh, executive director of NAPPA. "She is a smart tactician and rides a good finish ... she has the talent and determination to become a welcome addition to the jockey ranks."

Alex Secor, mother of Chelsea, agreed, calling the new Kiser Scholar "terrific competition and a very nice kid" who made her daughter earn every victory.

"She's as game as Dick Tracy, too, because that horse she rode was more than a handful!" she added.

Natural Talent

As part of the Kiser scholarship, Melton spent five days last July with noted trainer Tom Voss, the Monkton professional who helped hone Kiser's career. He and his wife Mimi were wonderful hosts, Melton said. "They were really awesome; I love them," she raved.

While at the Voss' Atlanta Hall, Melton trained daily with the exercise riders, soaking up knowledge with every step. Although no stranger to galloping horses, she found the added experience valuable.

Melton's tasks varied between fitness work in the circular shedrow to breezing on the track. "I rode about six different horses, a couple of them every day," she explained. "My favorite horse there was a pretty big chestnut gelding; I don't remember his name, but I called him 'Skid.'"

"I called him that because the second time I rode him, we were jogging around the outside of the track to warm up, and doing a figure-eight to switch directions," she continued. "And he tried to buck going across the center of the little circle we were making, and fell on his knees and kind of skidded a little bit! He was really cute, and I really liked him. Galloping him felt like galloping my horse, except that he didn't pull as much as my horse did!"

Voss also took Melton to a party at the Secor's house. "That was fun; I got to meet a lot of people, and talk about racing and riding," she said. In addition, the budding jockey was treated

to videos of Jonathan Kiser's races. "It was awesome to watch the ability and talent of such a great rider," she enthused.

Voss – always a keen judge of rider ability – was impressed with the young Kiser Scholar. "She was a very good rider," he said. "A little green, you know, but she adapted very well and has all the natural talent... she certainly has all the ability."

It was also apparent, he said, that Melton was accustomed to tough horses. But if there's one thing she learned at Atlanta Hall, it's that even fit racehorses can be manageable. "We started off with some easy ones, and that was easy for her," he said. "So we put her on some of the tougher ones, and she was fine with them, too. She was probably surprised that our horses were that easy to ride, really."

Charting Her Own Course

Melton considers the NAPPA series a great way to sample racing. Now she's set her sights on the new Young Riders' Timber race April 30 at Shawan Downs. Part of the Maryland Junior Hunt Cup, it's an intermediate step between the junior and adult divisions of steeplechasing – and perfect for her and Mikey.

"With my horse, I want to do a little bit more racing and try to be a little more successful with my racing," she said. "Get more experience, and kind of get my name out there a little bit."

Though Melton hopes to build a career in riding and training, she's not ruling out college, either. In fact, she's taking a consumer math class with an eye to eventually majoring in business math. "So if horses don't work out, that may be something to fall back onto – because I'd be stuck if I didn't," she said.

The future looks bright for Melton, who seems to be charting her own course. "I think it all depends on her now, basically," said Voss. "She has the ability, and she needs to decide what she wants to do with it." ■

The Jonathan Kiser Memorial Scholarship

Awarded to a young rider in the Maryland Governor's Cup series in recognition of his or her race record, horsemanship, sportsmanship, talent and dedication to the sport of steeplechasing

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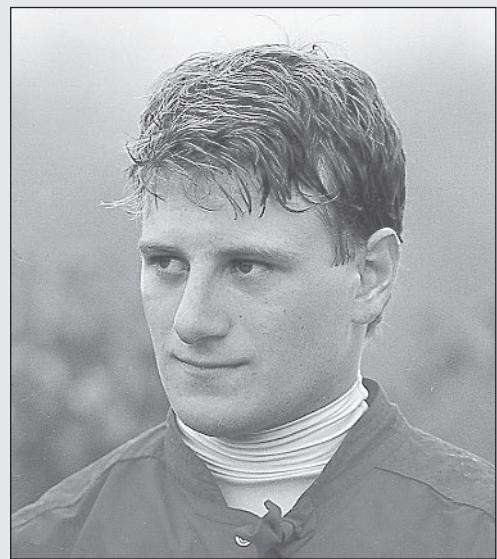
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to support the development of the sport of steeplechase racing by granting scholarships and funding other activities to help ensure education and racing opportunities for young riders in Maryland.

2006 Kiser Scholarship will receive one week of training under the tutelage of Tom Voss and one tuition to attend the 2006 NAPPA Junior Steeplechase Camp.

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Sarah Libbey Greenhalgh

JONATHAN KISER