

CONNEMARA Wins Junior Virginia Gold Cup

Talbotstown & Amelia Eyles Earn Top Honors On VA Junior Field Master Chase

By Lauren R. Giannini

If you haven't run across the name Eyles or Ridgetop Connemaras, now at Greenwood Farm in Middlebrook, VA, here's a little tale about a family whose involvement in the horse world continues to promote the versatility of these incredible equine athletes. At the Upperville Horse Show, progeny of Aladdin's Denver and Landgate Bluebeard won classes and the Connemara championship. They really do 'do it all' – including harvesting first place in the Junior Field Master Chase on the 2008 Virginia Point-to-point circuit.

As soon as Amelia Eyles was old enough, she started riding a pony at her grandparents' Top of the Ridge Farm, just outside Winchester, VA. She was just five or so – genetically programmed from birth to get bitten by the bug. It got her father Billy Eyles back in the saddle after a hiatus of about 20 years. He missed riding and hunting and wanted to share what he loved about growing up with his parents (Marynell and Walter) with Amelia, Isabella and Allegra. Billy's wife Karen goes on occasional trail rides and happily admits that she's a great support crew at competitions.

Amelia and Talbotstown made their triumphant debut last October at the International Gold Cup Races held on the Great Meadow course in The Plains, VA. Three ponies ran with the horses for a field of 11 starters. Isabella and Ridgetop Moya ran second to her older sister in the pony division, and Tinsel, as Talbotstown is affectionately called, finished sixth overall, first of the ponies.

In 2008 Amelia and Tinsel did five Junior Chases. They won at their home hunt, Blue Ridge in early March, and ran second at Orange County at the end of the month. They won the next two weekends at Old Dominion and at Loudoun.

"My mother told me to be safe and smart," recalls Amelia, who positioned her pony well during each race so that he had some run left after the final fence and the race to the finish line. "She told me not to try to keep up with the horses the whole time. Tinsel needed more condition for the Field Masters Chases than he needed for hunting, so we galloped around the field at home and up hills."

She also gave her pony a few days off after a race. But it wasn't just equine fitness. Amelia participates in school sports, including track, and also rides her pony.

"Amelia trained that pony and they were both fit," says Karen. "They did great and the junior chases were well done. All the people, Gregg Ryan and everybody did a great job. They had it safe and all together. Rob Banner at The Chronicle of the Horse was all about making it fun and safe for the Virginia riders. They're the next crop of foxhunters."

Needless to say, with Dad, Amelia and Isabella competing in chases this season, Allegra (10) is chomping at the bit, so to speak, because she wants to get in on the fun.

"I think that twelve is a good age to start – if you have the right pony and the ability," says Karen. "I think my family will be involved again next year. I was nervous in an excited way, but they were well mounted. That's so important – to have the right pony or horse. They have to be good out hunting."

That's the whole premise to the Field Master Chases, senior and junior. You must qualify your horses in the hunt field and get written documentation in order to compete. Riders follow the field master over a flagged course of hunting type fences and, after the last jump, anywhere from 50 to 100 yards from the finish line, the "field" is let loose to race home.

“Talbotstown does it all well – he keeps up with the field, jumps well, and I think he’s as well-behaved as the others, if not better,” says Amelia. “The most important thing to remember is to have fun – and make sure your pony is in shape so they can make it all the way around the course.”

At the Virginia Gold Cup races, a field of five ponies and horses followed Gregg Ryan, top amateur steeplechase jockey and also Master of Foxhounds with Snickersville (Middleburg, VA) around the famed Great Meadow course, modified for the Junior Virginia Gold Cup Field Masters Chase Championship.

In a hotly contested finish, Tinsel and Amelia placed second in the pony division, besting Isabella and Moya in third. Overall, Talbotstown and his rider earned enough points to claim top honors and the Junior Virginia Gold Cup. Even with all the hoopla of trophies and being the cover girl for the May issue of *Middleburg Life*, Amelia stays well grounded.

“The best race of the season was at Blue Ridge, because my dad was there [competing] and the jumps were higher and that was fun,” admits Amelia.

It’s a family affair from start to finish, and the girls ride to hounds with their father. Their grandfather Walter comes up for a day of sport with his progeny and to visit his hunting pals at Blue Ridge. Billy hunts four days a week whenever he can (his business partner is into golf and they accommodate each other’s seasonal interests). Like his own father, Billy takes his children hunting: Amelia and Isabella with Blue Ridge on Saturdays and Allegra with the MOC Beagles on Sunday. He’d like to persuade their grandmother to hunt with them more often.

“It’s more of what I grew up with, and the horse world provides opportunities for us to be involved and have fun,” says Billy. “I’ve hunted the last two and a half years with Blue Ridge. I grew up with MOC Beagles and when I went away to college, I got away from it. At this point, I feel as if I missed about 15 years.”

The whole Eyles family is taking advantage of every opportunity to make up for Billy’s lost time – and having a blast. This summer they’ll do some trail riding and horse shows, the girls will attend Pony Club and camps, but most of all they’ll have fun on horseback.

After all, their Connemaras can do it all.

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