

# Living Out Her Dream

By Heide Middlebrook

*Dressager rider and trainer Michelle Gibson's resume includes accomplishments such as the German Golden Rider award and a team bronze medal in the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. She is the head trainer at Dick and Terri Kane's Diamante Farm in Wellington; but her career began almost by accident. "My two older sisters got me interested in horses when I was young. They would grab me and we would ride around bareback with only a halter and a lead rope on our two horses, racing each other on the farm in Maryland," she said. Years later, Michelle's career took a life-changing turn when she went to Germany to train with two legendary trainers, Willie Schultheis, with whom she learned the Schultheis system, and Rudolf Zeilinger. Sidelines caught up with Michelle at Diamante Farm, to talk about life, dressage and horses.*

## **What is it about dressage that makes it the right discipline for you?**

When we moved to Atlanta I didn't have access to horses anymore so I kept asking my mother to ride again, again and again. After wearing her down my mom finally agreed and then I started taking serious lessons. My initial instructor was an eventer who also did some dressage. After taking those beginning lessons I tried some jumping and smaller eventing; but it was dressage that I was attracted to more and more as time went on. It was and is the combination of the discipline and seeing the horses evolve, learn and grow to become confident with each day.

## **When did you know you wanted to be a professional?**

At a very young age, I was 12 years old – I have known my whole life this is what I have wanted to do and have stuck to it.

## **What is one of the hardest things you have ever done?**

Going to Germany when I was 19 and not speaking the language. It was very difficult to be in a strange place and not know the customs or the language. I am very proud to this day



Michelle, as a young horse fan, with Princess.

Photo Courtesy of Michelle Gibson



Michelle and Santiago look forward to the future.

Photo By Heide Middlebrook

that I did that and that I stuck with it. It was really hard to be away from my family and I missed them very much. I lived in Germany for seven years.

## **How long did it take you to learn German?**

After being in Germany the first year and speaking mostly English I decided to stay on. It was then decided I had to learn the language. It took me about a year-and-a-half and I was able to speak it well, not just to use a word or two but speak it really well.

## **What are your plans for the future?**

One of my client's, Jody Stoudenmier, owns a fabulous seven-year-old Swedish stallion named Santiago. I am excited about the future with him. I am really looking forward to showing after several years away from the show ring. I am hoping to show in the small tour in Prix St. Georges and Intermediaire this season at the Wellington Classic Dressage and The Global Dressage series. Another thing that I also always find joy with is working with my students. Watching them doing well, whether it is at home or in the show ring, gives me a lot of satisfaction, always.

## **What personality traits do you possess that serves you best in training?**

I would have to say it would be my combination of patience, determination, and being able to give part of yourself to the horse.

## **What attribute do you find most appealing when training a stallion?**

Their willingness and their heart. I have mares that I am learning a lot from; but I would have to say I am more of a stallion gal.

## **What do you like best about South Florida?**

The weather in the winter, beautiful!

## **What is the craziest food you have ever tried?**

While visiting Denmark I tasted this strange fish named mullet. I am sure some people love it but one taste and I decided it was not for me.

## **What is your favorite food?**

That would have to be schnitzel with mushroom crême sauce, a wonderful German flavor.

*About the writer: Heide Middlebrook resides in South Florida and has extensive equestrian experience specializing in the fields of dressage and show jumping.*