

Grice Rides A Unicorn To The Top Of Country Heir National Derby

She finds just the right animal for a favorite client.

BY ANN GLAVAN
PHOTOS BY THIRD SHUTTER FROM
THE SUN PHOTOGRAPHY

Young trainer Dani Grice desperately wanted to find the perfect horse for her perfect customer, Allison Reichenbach.

"She wanted something young and really talented, so it was a lot of pressure in my first year in the business," said Grice, 31.

Grice took over as the professional rider at David Wright's Hunters Court Stables in Murfreesboro, Tenn., in December of 2014, six months after Wright passed away from a brain tumor.

So when Grice topped a field of 42 competitors in the \$2,500 USHJA National Hunter Derby at Country Heir January #1, held Jan. 28-31, with High Life, the horse they settled on after months of searching, she could breathe a big sigh of relief.

Reichenbach was in no rush to commit to anything on their quest for the next great hunter prospect. After looking high and low, they headed to The Plains, Va., to peruse a large group of horses represented by hunter professional Chad Keenum.

"He showed us nine or 10 really nice horses, but when [Allison] saw that horse, it was a done deal," Grice said. "She was completely head over heels in

love with him."

High Life, or "Doobie," has a laidback, low-key personality paired with a flashy exterior, making the 7-year-old German Sport Horse gelding (Quarterback—Parma, Ornat), the perfect mount for Reichenbach.

"Dani was laughing; we told everybody we were looking for a unicorn," Reichenbach said with a chuckle. "We really weren't in a hurry. I have another horse I do in the amateur-owners, so we had time to be picky, and we found one!"

Grice can back Reichenbach up on Doobie's mythological creature status and his popularity among the horse show crowd.

"He's a giant dapple gray with stockings and a blaze, a big wide forehead, goldfish eyes, so everywhere you go people are like, 'Oh my gosh, he's so cute,'" Grice said. "He loves it; he just eats it up."

Take that last part of Grice's statement literally.

"He's a little too loved. We had to put a no treat sign on his door at home," Reichenbach said with a laugh. "Because the kids at the barn love him, and he's kind of prone to ulcers, and he can't have 10 pounds of candy a week and every kind of treat known to man.

"He always has his head out, and he's always got his little ears up, so he was getting way too many goodies," Reichenbach continued. "I don't think he's thrilled that he has the no treats sign."

Grice allowed Doobie some healthy alternatives to treats (lots of apples!) after his top-notch performance in the National Derby. Coming back in fourth after their classic round, Grice knew she had to do something to differentiate herself from the cluster of close scores at the top of the pack.

"He's a super handy horse; he's a really good follower, so the inside turns are never a problem with him," Grice said.

She described a tight S-turn she made, weaving in and out of the combination to approach and turn away from the trot fence.

"One of the early horses in the handy stopped; the first girl who tried to do the inside turn had a refusal, but my biggest concern was just making sure I could get the trot," Grice said. "I knew he would jump it if his nose was on it. And he was a little late to trot, but he turned on the backside the best, no stumble, no losing his footing, just really smooth and galloped right to the last jump, so it was



Dani Grice wanted to find the perfect horse for Allison Reichenbach, and Country Heir \$2,500 USHJA National Hunter Derby winner High Time turned out to be just the ticket.

a lot of fun."

This was Grice's first trip to the Country Heir show held in the Roberts Arena in Wilmington, Ohio.

"Really the only person who I know that was in the class is Michael Burnett, and we hung out the night before and got pumped up for [the derby], but this is my first time in this area, so I really don't know anybody," Grice said. "But now, getting a little attention and starting to meet people, that was really good for me."

Grice worked for more than a decade as an assistant trainer with Holly Shepherd's Accolade Farm in Grand Bay, Ala., beginning as a working student when she was 18. Wright's partner, amateur rider Linda Seay, inherited his barn when he died, and she brought Grice in to take over the business.

Reichenbach is over the moon with Doobie and with the work Grice has done at Hunters Court.

"She's been doing an amazing job taking over things and getting all the horses back up and running," Reichenbach said. "It's been amazing having her."

"It's a really exciting opportunity, definitely kind of a dream come true," Grice said. "I was chatting with Richard Rinehart after my first round on Sunday, and he referred to David as a magician. It's true. David passed away in July 2014, and he was showing and judging at shows through June."

"I feel so lucky to have the opportunity to continue his business," she added.

Brown Sisters Go Blue

When the Brown sisters swing a leg over their equitation horses in the morning at a horse show, it will be after they've fed, watered and mucked the stalls of their equine partners. The braids they push their knuckles into as they practice their crest release in the warm-up arena will have been carefully sewn in during the wee hours of the morning by their mother, Angela Brown. When the two girls hop off, those braids will likely be pulled out by their father, Dale.

When the show is over, the whole family will load up the trailer to haul

their horses home to Zionsville, Ind., and in the case of the Country Heir show, a couple of big blue equitation ribbons went home with the Browns, too.

Lauren Brown took first out of 14 in the ASPCA Maclay, and her younger sister, Emily, came out on top of 27 in the THIS National Children's Medal, 14 and under.

"As a mom, I was super proud,

because it was a lot of hard work that's gone into that, and it's just kind of fun when it all comes together," said Angela.

She woke up at 3 a.m. to braid her daughters' horses, scolding herself for not having time to put tails in before the girls had to hack in the morning.

"She works so hard for us," said Emily, 13.

Emily dutifully answered ques-



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