

Emilee Libby Has Embraced Eventing All Over Again

From top young rider to horseless Starbucks barista, she's come full circle back to the thing she was meant to do.

BY KRISTIN CARPENTER



Emilee Libby enjoyed a story-book young rider career. She did her first two-star at 15 years old, campaigned multiple horses to the three-star level by 17, and went around her first four-star at Rolex Kentucky at 19 with a horse she produced herself. She was consistent at the upper levels and was an undisputable rising star amongst the ranks of U.S. eventing. And then she disappeared.

If you wanted to find Libby three years after her last ride at Rolex Kentucky, you would've had to check a Starbucks in San Diego. There she was working as a barista. She'd sold all her horses and equipment, left her home in New Jersey for California, and enrolled in the local community college. Her overnight disappearance from a sport in which she seemed destined for greatness led to plenty

of tack room chatter, but the questions quieted as the years passed. The young rider with so much promise was largely forgotten and replaced with the newest prodigies.

But at the end of 2011 Libby's name began appearing in the results again at the preliminary level with a new horse. Four years after the start of that partnership, she planned to make her return to Rolex Kentucky. While



SHANNON BRINKMAN PHOTO

Libby, 27, had to scratch just two weeks before the event due to a splint on Nonsensical's right front leg, she's still enjoyed the path she's taken back to the top of the sport.

Riding In A Past Life

Horses weren't a Libby family tradition, but they somehow took hold in both Emilee and her sister, Jennifer.

"I must have ridden horses in a past

life," Emilee said with a laugh.

Her mother, Linda Libby, recalled, "Her life took over with the horses from 5 or 6 years old on."

Emilee and Jennifer took lessons at a local barn, but it wasn't long before Emilee wanted more.

"I don't know from where, but one day she said she wanted to be taking lessons and wanted to be jumping," said Linda.

"She has been on a horse ever since, always," she continued. "When you talk about high school, everyone else is talking about boys and girls, but her focus was always riding."

And that focus paid off. Emilee went to the FEI North American Junior and Young Rider Championships in 2003, 2004 and 2006. All three of her appearances were at the two-star level, on three different horses she'd produced herself, and at three different venues.

She found her top mount, Cahir, somewhat accidentally.

"We were looking for a horse for her, and we went down to Phyllis Dawson's place to look at horses," recalled Linda. "The several that were the reason we went down there, Emilee just did not care for or felt something was not right. I don't even remember how many horses she tried that day. Then Phyllis said she had another horse for her to try, and it was Cahir, who was 5 years old. The first thing I said was that I did not want her to have a young horse, but Phyllis said to just let her try it. She got on and was riding around, and Phyllis just said, 'She has soft hands.' And I guess the rest is history. They hit it off, we said OK, and it was great, the two of them."

With the two-star ranks conquered, Emilee waited impatiently to be old enough to ride at advanced. At 17, she made the move up, and she did so with two horses at the same show. Her first season at advanced and three-star she

“Her life took over with the horses from 5 or 6 years old on.”

—LINDA LIBBY

campaigned both Cahir and Special Excursion.

"It was a little crazy, but I didn't think anything of it at the time; I was just a kid," Emilee recalled. "But looking back on it, I'm like, 'Wow, I did a lot. I was kind of a crazy kid!'"

It all seemed natural to Emilee, and when she graduated from high school, she never contemplated another path.

"By the time my senior year was rolling around, I wasn't really thinking about college," she said. "I was just thinking, 'I want to keep doing this.' Luckily my parents are very supportive, and they were willing to think of the training and riding as my college. As soon as I graduated high school in 2005, I was like, 'No more school.'"

Her mother agreed, "Riding was her college."

And in that respect, Emilee did very well with her education. In 2006, she was the top-ranked young rider in the United States overall, as well as the top-ranked young rider at advanced and intermediate. Two years after graduating high school she headed down centerline on Cahir at the Rolex Kentucky CCI****. They had an incredible event and finished 21st in their debut at the level.

But while Emilee's riding



Although Emilee Libby's family wasn't horsey, as soon as she took her first riding lesson, she was hooked, and she spent most of her childhood and adolescence on the back of a horse.

PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILEE LIBBY

career unfolded like a fairytale, her private life began to experience turmoil that culminated in her parents' divorce in 2008.

Emilee tried to seek solace in her riding and returned to Rolex Kentucky in 2008 on Cahir. That trip ended in a retirement on cross-country, one of only a handful of times they didn't finish.

When she walked off that course, Emilee effectively walked out of eventing. Over the following months, she sold her horses and her equipment. Her retirement at Rolex wasn't the cause for her disappearance from the sport, but rather a symptom of a larger problem.

One of the downsides of being a child prodigy in anything is that the sport then becomes everything. For Emilee, the breakdown of her family left her questioning the self-contained world of eventing in which she'd grown up.

"I tried to make myself think and

believe I was burnt out a little bit, but I think it was more just because I did not want to hassle my parents with helping or supporting me," Emilee said.

She stayed in New Jersey for a long-term relationship, but when that dissolved in 2010, she decided to move west.

"Moving out to California actually had nothing to do with the horses, that was more a personal change," she said. "It was me trying to get away from a lot of the things going on back in New Jersey. I was also telling myself, 'Let me work with people. Let me see if there is anything else I wanted to do.'"

"The last Rolex she ended up retiring, and I think it was because she wasn't focused with everything going on at that point," Linda said. "I think she wanted to hit the reset button in her brain, so resetting was going away from that. [Going to California] was a period of reflection, emptying the brain of all that was going on with her on a personal level."

Once in California, Emilee tried to create a normal life for a 23-year-old.

"I signed up for college classes and really almost had to start over, and I was just going to do it to get my asso-

"I tried to make myself think and believe I was burnt out a little bit."

—EMILEE LIBBY

ciate's degree," she said. "During the whole thing I realized, 'This isn't what I want to do. This isn't what I should be doing. I think I should be riding.' But at the time it just wasn't going to happen for the riding."

Without horses, equipment or funding, Emilee understood the financial demands of supporting even a pleasure horse were outside of her reach.

For her mother, watching her daughter leave the sport she loved was difficult. Linda hoped Emilee would find her way back to horses.

"Emilee has a kind soul that somehow horses seem to be drawn to, and they're OK with her," she said. "She just has a way with being around them, as if she was a horse in a past life."

The Comeback Horse

Emilee had moved to California with few contacts in the eventing world. As she began to debate riding again, she reached out to Hawley Bennett-Awad.

"She was going to the Pan Ams and [the Burghley CCI**** (England)] and was going to be gone a lot," Emilee said. "I asked her if she needed help with the horses that would stay at home, as I was more than happy to help. I was an hour away, but I was willing to drive there a few times a week just for me to be able to sit back in a saddle."

As Emilee investigated options in the area, she decided to audit a nearby Buck Davidson clinic.

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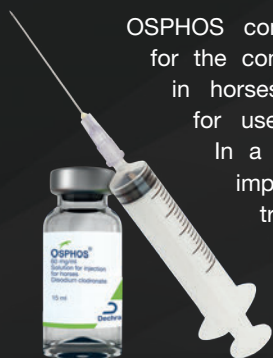
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“He saw me and said, ‘You should be riding,’ ” Emilee remembered. “I told him that I didn’t have my helmet or my half chaps or anything. The next day I returned and rode, and I hadn’t ridden for 3½ years, and I hop on a horse I don’t know and jump in a Buck Davidson clinic.

“I think from that moment on I knew I should be doing this,” Emilee continued. “Buck told me, ‘You haven’t missed a beat; you should be doing this.’ ”

But Emilee wasn’t certain she could find a horse or afford to compete. Enter an off-the-track Thoroughbred who was also trying to find his way in the sport. Nonsensical (Point Given—On The Brink, Cox’s Ridge) sold for \$230,000 as a 2-year-old and had a successful racing career until he fractured a sesamoid and had to have a pin surgically installed. Bennett-Awad ended up with the ride on “Nonny,” and she’d campaigned the horse at training level.

“He was for sale, and Buck had taken him around a training level, so he knew what the horse was like,” Emilee said. “I remember Buck pointing to him at the clinic and telling me, ‘This should be your comeback horse.’ ”

“At the time I was not really looking to buy a horse or anything, as I didn’t know how serious I was,” she continued. “But I never forgot that comment.”

Over the following months Emilee kept riding for Bennett-Awad when she could, and she spent increasingly more time on Nonny, even though it didn’t always go to plan.

“He wasn’t easy,” she said. “He kind of had this grouchy and grumpy ‘I don’t want to do this’ side, but I could feel that he was a cool horse. Hawley started to come back, and I slowly started to ride him more and have lessons on him. I remember me being rusty, and if I made my turn too sharp he would stop on me. The two clinics I did on him with Buck, one right before I bought him and one right after, I fell off in both. Between me just coming back and him being green, it wasn’t perfect.”

But a last-minute catch-ride on the



Emilee Libbee enjoyed an impressive young rider career, competing at the North American Junior and Young Rider Championships three times aboard three different horses that she developed herself. *BETH RASIN PHOTO*

gelding made it clear to Emilee that she wanted her re-entry into the sport to be aboard Nonny.

"I did my first show on him in November of 2011, when Hawley was supposed to ride him, and we ended up just switching him to me," said Emilee. "Doing that cross-country, it being my first cross-country back and doing it on him was incredible. He is so game cross-country and so easy to gallop, and he was a Thoroughbred that just had to go in a snaffle! That was something I was not used to!"

And so she completed the purchase and officially was back as a rider, but she wasn't sure it would amount to more than a hobby.

"I didn't think anything at all about starting my own business," Emilee said. "I knew it would take a lot of dedication, and I would need that one horse to get me back out there and be recognized."

To others around her, her purchase of Nonny seemed nonsensical indeed. One of her current owners, Bill Olson, also met Emilee at that fateful Buck Davidson clinic.

"When I first saw Nonny, he was a skinny, angry Thoroughbred covered in hives," Olson recalled. "And I remember thinking, 'Why would anyone ever buy this horse?'"

But Emilee knew Nonny needed her as much as she needed him.

"I could tell Nonny needed one person," she said. "After the first month, I could just tell he started to change because it was just me riding him. He started to become happier and was enjoying the job more because he just had one person. All horses need a person."

Emilee did a couple of preliminary runs on Nonny, and she was so impressed she moved him up to intermediate. She kept her hopes contained, enjoyed her competitions, and boarded at a big barn.

The transformation in Nonny was apparent as their bond grew. "He's an impressive horse when you stand in his presence [now]," said Olson. "And that can be attributed to her loving him and giving him a routine and earning his trust. It's pretty amazing to see [their bond], and I don't think it

"I could tell Nonny needed one person."

—EMILEE LIBBY

happens enough these days."

Emilee and Nonny won the Rebecca Farm CIC** (Mont.) in 2012, less than a year into their partnership. That show was a defining moment for Emilee.

"Going there was the biggest question I ever asked of him and me," she said. "I remember going around that course, and he was just on it; every question he understood."



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Emilee Libby first rode around Rolex Kentucky in 2007 at 19 years old, but the following year she pulled up on course and walked out of eventing for almost four years.

JOSH WALKER PHOTO

He understands what he has to do out there. And he's fast.

"It wasn't a huge division, but it was good for me," Emilee continued. "It was the first FEI event I ever won. When people see that, it helps you grow a bit. It definitely helps with your business, and getting horses in training with me, and people wanting to take lessons with me."

Emilee and Nonny moved up to advanced in 2013 and capped their year with a fourth-placed finish at the Galway Downs CCI*** (Calif.). In 2014, they jumped double clear around the Jersey Fresh CCI*** (N.J.) in May, but a small injury kept Nonny from show jumping the final day. Nevertheless, Emilee and everyone else realized she was on a serious four-star candidate.

I'm Back

With a barn of her own now at Galway Downs full of client horses, Emilee

acknowledges that in a strange way, losing everything is what gave her everything to be successful.

"I ended up pretty much running that [Starbucks]," Emilee said, "so even working there has helped me run my business now. I don't know if I believe that everything happens for a reason, but maybe I was supposed to take a break and work with people so that I could be doing what I'm doing now. It's not just working with horses like when I was a kid. Now I'm riding horses and teaching people and running my business and organizing my money."

The communication and client skills she learned at Starbucks are one of the main reasons her clients love her.

"She's one of the kindest, most genuine and open-hearted people I have ever met," said Olson. "One of the things I love the most about Emilee is that she communicates with me, and that's very important to me as an owner. And she puts the horse's welfare in front of goals."

While her return to the sport and building of her business hasn't been easy, Emilee has no doubts this time



around that the eventing world is where she belongs.

"You always have downs and question, 'Why do we do this?'" Emilee said. "The fact that I did take a break already, and I'm back here and am actually doing more than I was before the break, and am completely on my own and have my own barn and business and horses in training and students...I don't want to give it up. I'll have a day off, and by the end of the day, I want to see my horses and ride. And that tells me something. This is what I should be doing."

Her competitive goals have returned as well.

"I want to eventually be on a team," Emilee said. "When I was on young riders I liked being on a team, working with other riders, trying to do well as a team, and that is helping me strive to get better. I want to go to Kentucky and go overseas and prove that I can do that."

Linda is also thrilled to see her daughter back at the top of the sport.

"With other people I see, their focus is just to win or just to





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Seven years after she left the sport of eventing, Emilee Libby is now a full-time professional and had planned to compete at Rolex Kentucky with Nonsensical.

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compete or whatever, but for her it is just who she is," Linda explained. "As a mom, I'm excited just to have it be her greatest moment. I want that all the time for everything in her life, but just to see that really big smile on her face when she goes through the finish flags."

"I think I've gotten really lucky and fortunate to meet the people that I have and to have us cross paths in our lives," Emilee said. "Especially for Bill Olson and [owner and supporter] Jordan Taylor, as well as Pam Duffy and Don Trotter of Sunsprite Warmbloods. They have been so supportive. It almost makes me cry, because how do I have such supportive people? And why? What have I done that's so good?"

She hopes she'll be back at Rolex

Kentucky again, even if it couldn't be this year. She'll give Nonny the time he needs to recover first.

"He's a little tender now and probably would be fine [to go to Rolex], but he's going to be missing a good portion of his conditioning, and it's not worth it," she said. "I'll probably aim to do Rebecca Farm [CIC*** (Mont.) in July] and then something overseas—Blenheim [CCI*** (England)], maybe Burghley [CCI*** (England)]."

"I'm definitely bummed," she added. "I was really looking forward to going back [to Rolex] and running the course, but I'll go to Plan B and get excited for what's next and aim for next year." 🐾

"I don't know if I believe that everything happens for a reason, but maybe I was supposed to take a break and work with people so that I could be doing what I'm doing now," said Emilee Libby, who last jumped around Rolex Kentucky in 2008 with Cahir.

CLIX PHOTO

