

# Ashley Herman-Griffin: The Young Gun



*During its very first season, Ashley-Herman Griffin (above) delivered a fully sponsored grand prix series at the Sonoma Horse Park, attracting riders such as World Cup Finalist Mandy Porter (above right) from as far away as San Diego*

Photo by Deb Dawson

## By Erin Gilmore

All season long, she barely sat still. Wine glasses in the VIP tent were checked and turned just so. Ribbons at the in gate needed counting, there were riders to greet and banners to straighten. With her long brown hair swinging under a logo cap and her hand constantly flickering down to the two-way radio on her belt, 29-year-old Ashley Herman-Griffin was impossible to miss. She is manager et al of the Sonoma Horse Park, which debuted to the Northern California hunter/jumper industry with a bang last year, its first full season.

By the end of 2010 the Sonoma Horse Park was the talk of the West Coast A circuit. Thirty miles north of downtown San Francisco and at the tail end of the Napa Valley Wine Region, its location is prime for any market. And with \$350,000 in hunter and jumper prize money, featured amateur classics and a fresh new swing on things, the facility quickly became a popular destination on the horse show circuit.

It was a fast rise for a brand new competition venue, and despite some initial setbacks, the Sonoma Horse Park deftly showed how a horse show facility can attract - and keep- business in a fickle industry.

## Event Lover

After living abroad during her college years, Ashley signed on as an event management specialist with Goldman Sachs in New York City. The former junior rider who had grown up with horses spent ten years very far

removed from the equestrian world; in New York she met the man she would marry and enjoyed a busy, glamorous career in global event management.

Despite her success in New York, Ashley felt a void. Her parents owned a boarding facility back in California, and her father had always promised Ashley that if she returned home one day, they would become partners and renovate the old facility into a show venue.

In 2009, that's exactly what happened, and the Sonoma Horse Park was born.

"I love horses and they are my background, but I love an event," says Ashley. "I wanted to make every show we had special. We built it from scratch and we didn't cut any corners."

The region's hunter/jumper trainers can choose from several A-circuit shows at well-established facilities each week during competition season. Ashley knew that to attract them, the SHP had to put its best foot forward. At first, trainers were skeptical of an unproven new facility that was being run by a young woman with no prior show management experience. To silence her doubters, Ashley spent much of the winter before the SHP's first season visiting barns in Northern California, meeting personally with trainers and hearing their input on what makes an ideal show facility.

Five competition rings were built, including a large grand prix ring with GGT footing and a grand hunter ring. A lush VIP area, onsite farmers market, and a vendor row that reflects the area's posh culinary and wine scene were welcome new amenities for horse show exhibitors.

Footing troubles at the beginning of the season (due to the

unexpected consequences of building on a floodplain) were quickly addressed and fixed, and by mid season every ring on the property was up and running.

Ashley solicited sponsors to support end of circuit jumper, hunter and amateur awards. She partnered with competition manager Sally Hudson, who brought show dates formerly held over 150 miles to the south, in chilly Pebble Beach. Full grand prix and professional hunter challenge series aimed to build spectator numbers.

It worked. In 2010, every single hunter and jumper classic and every grand prix was sponsored. Ashley spend copious amounts of time and effort making sure that every sponsor received as much exposure and promotion as possible. During the Giant Steps Charity Classic Grand Prix and Gala last August, over 1,000 spectators filled the VIP area and lined the berm opposite the grand prix ring. The largest equitation class of the season, the Hudson & Company Medal Finals, held in September, attracted 53 entries and the largest hunter classic, the \$10,000 Purina Mills Hunter Classic, drew 34.

### A New Perspective

As 2010 wrapped, Ashley took a "life-changing" trip to Europe, where she spent three weeks working at CSI 5\* shows. With the SHP's upcoming season in mind, she worked with a European team running the VIP area at the Audi Masters in Brussels and the Gucci Masters in Paris, absorbing the atmosphere of two of the world's most prestigious shows.

"From the moment you walk onto the grounds you feel privileged to be there," she describes. "There's always someone there to help you and pay attention to you. Every square foot is carpeted, there's a pianist playing in the food area, and there's so much detail put into every single inch of it. It's an event. When you win a class – it doesn't matter if it's the grand prix or a 1.15m class, it's a huge production."

While American shows have a long way to go before they can replicate the grandeur of a European indoor competition, Ashley is aiming to bridge the gap by adding more showmanship to her season; making each show, and each grand prix an event experience.

"It's good for the sport to wow people more. I think this sport needs more innovation," Ashley says. "It needs to keep pushing itself to try new things. Sometimes it gets a little stagnant, and there's not a lot of difference from one show to another. It's got to constantly evolve."

Adding more entertainment for non-exhibitors is high on her list. She attests that the farmers market was a good first step, and this year Ashley plans to add facepainters, weekly wine tastings and even an arrangement with the San Francisco Ballet to the roster. While attracting those outside the industry is a significant –and rare– sign of success in the United States, in Europe it's almost common. Ashley recalls a taxi driver whom she met in Brussels, who had tickets to that Saturday's grand prix, with envy.

### The Sky's The Limit

"We're building on last season in a big way," says Ashley. "Now that we've had a year and looked at what works and doesn't work, we can spent a lot of time on bringing new experiences to the show. Tapping into the community, attracting better and better sponsorship, holding more open money classes..."

And so it goes. To prove they have staying power, the Sonoma Horse Park will have to maintain and improve upon the standard they set in 2010. But Ashley's youth belies her ability to accomplish lofty goals, and she is dead set on seeing that season two eclipses the success of season one. Being the young gun has its advantages.

YOU HAVE TO BE GROUNDED IF YOU

# EXPECT TO FLY



*Candice King & Corsani*  
CHAMPION SHOW JUMPERS



*Show jumping is more than a sport. It's about how well you treat your fellow competitors and how well you treat your horse. In the arena, you cheer your opponents on. At home you give your horse the best nutrition, care and training so he can give you his best in return.*



- Mental focus & manageability
- Quick recovery & muscle repair for faster "bounce back"
- Less digestive upset
- Sustained energy from healthy fats & fiber
- Muscle-building nutrients for a strong topline

**WHAT IT TAKES<sup>®</sup>**

AVAILABLE EXCLUSIVELY AT CERTIFIED PURINA DEALERS.  
CALL 1-888-ULTIUM1 OR VISIT ULTIUM.COM TO LEARN MORE.

©2011 Purina Mills, LLC