





Horse Of A Lifetime: Eros

Anne Kursinski's partnership with her Thoroughbred superstar was "meant to be."

BY CATIE STASZAK

Anne Kursinski paused to admire a small chestnut Thoroughbred jumping in the indoor arena at George Morris' Hunterdon facility in New Jersey.

Adam Wooten's 6-foot frame made the 16.1-hand gelding look even smaller than he was that afternoon of Nov. 26, 1992, but the wiry horse jumped the fences with a quickness and ease that caught Kursinski's attention.

"I remember saying to George, 'Who is that?'" Kursinski recalled. "And he said to me, 'That's Eros. You have to try him.'"

Wooten had brought the 5-year-old ex-race horse (Family Ties—Tudor Success, Mambrino) from Australia to sell. "He was a real duffer [on the track]," Kursinski said. The gelding was in the same barn as Kursinski's horses all summer, but the Olympic veteran, returning from the Barcelona Games and an extended period abroad, hadn't noticed him before.

"He was just flying like a bird over these little jumps," Kursinski said. "He jumped very high with his head up, ewe-necked."

That day 24 years ago was the beginning of a partnership that Kursinski calls "magical." The two would go on to represent the United States at countless Nations Cups as well as the World Cup Finals, World Equestrian Games and Olympic Games, where, in 1996, they

"That was one of those moments where afterward I thought, 'Wow, that couldn't have gone any better,'" said Anne Kursinski of her win with Eros in the 1998 \$450,000 Pulsar Grand Prix in Monterrey. ARND BRONKHORST PHOTO

earned a team silver medal in Atlanta.

"I'm so thankful that Eros showed up in my life," said Kursinski. "I really always felt it was one of those 'meant to be' kind of things."

Seated on the outdoor patio overlooking the sand arena at Spring Hill Farm in Wellington, Fla., Kursinski had to momentarily pause as she choked up when recounting her journey with the Thoroughbred.

"I still get teary about it, looking back and thinking about having grown with him through all the stages of life," she said. "He's been such a teacher."

The Ninth Time's The Charm

Kursinski very well could have missed out on Eros, as she was the ninth rider to try him at Hunterdon.

"Beezie Madden tried him, George Lindemann tried him, Peter Leone passed on him, and so did Linda Hough for another student of hers," Kursinski recalled. "There were eight high-profile riders, but for one reason or another, no one bought him."

"Because of his style and because of questions some people had about the vetting since he had been on the race-track, he didn't sell," Morris explained. "He really had an unusual style, and professionals questioned that. He jumped George Lindemann off after the first cross rail."

But Kursinski and Eros clicked immediately.

"I rode him and jumped him with George in the indoor, and I thought, 'I have to have this horse. I think he's going to go to the Olympics,'" she said. "It was love at first ride."

"She had the sophistication and tact to work with the horse, and she saw, with such wisdom, the potential and the enormous scope this horse had," Morris added.

The timing was right. After the Barcelona Games, in which the U.S. team finished fifth, Kursinski needed a new prospect.

"I remember sitting on the plane on the way home from Barcelona and hand-writing letters to ask people for money," Kursinski said. "After I rode Eros, I thought, 'How can I do this?' I got on the phone and put a syndicate together."

The process took about a month, but in the end, the Eros Group of 10 owners and 14 shares acquired the gelding. The original group consisted of Kursinski, her partner Carol Hoffman, Fran Steinwedell, Carlene Blunt, Allan Shore, Robin Parsky, Terry Regan, Murray Goodman, Dean Edwards, and Rod and Nancy Lindsay.

"[The owners] were always great," Kursinski said. "Early on, other people tried to buy him, and they could have sold him and made money, but they let us live this Olympic dream."

Kursinski envisioned that dream from the moment she sat on the gelding, not just because of his ability but also because of his attitude.

"He's a big character, but like a top athlete," Kursinski said. "He was really full of himself and walked around like he knew he was great. He would bite and kick a little bit. He would always go to the ring with a red ribbon in his tail, because he could definitely kick out, and even to this day, if

“On some level, he could read my mind, and I could read his.”

—ANNE KURSINSKI

he's not a little bit biting and kicking, then I'm wondering if he's OK. He might have bitten or kicked certain grooms, but he was telling them they had to raise their level around him to meet that greatness. He always demanded respect. That was Eros.

“He was fast, and he was light as a feather,” she continued. “The biggest aid you needed was sort of a cluck or a ‘whoa.’ He required almost no leg and no hands, because he was such a Thoroughbred, and you just don't see that anymore. The Europeans would be shocked at how we did it. George would tell me that they would say to him, ‘How does she do that?’ I would just go on a loose rein and let him gallop and jump.”

“At Luxembourg, I was sitting behind Ludger Beerbaum and Franke Sloothaak and Otto Becker during the Nations Cup,” Morris recalled. “Of course, Anne and Eros jumped double clear. [The German riders] couldn't relate well to her forward seat, because they ride in a very deep seat or, as we call it, behind the movement of the horse. They were scratching their heads and saying, ‘How do they do it?’ I said, ‘That's the way we ride.’”

Confidence

When Eros arrived at Kursinski's barn in 1993, he was not well broke on the flat, which resulted in weak stifles. To strengthen them, Kursinski focused on improving the Thoroughbred's fitness through dressage schooling.

“He couldn't stand it,” Kursinski recalled. “He was not a fan of dressage. In the end, his flatwork got better, but it was always a give and take. Because he was such a Thoroughbred, it was always a compromise with him. You could never force Eros to do anything.”

Jumping was another story. In their first recorded grand prix together,

Eros and Kursinski were runners-up at the Cincinnati Classic. They would place third at Devon (Pa.) and second at Lake Placid (N.Y.) before winning the prestigious American Gold Cup (Pa.), then an \$85,000 class, in 1994.

“The biggest thing for me was just staying out of his way,” Kursinski said. “You didn't have to help him much; I just had to point and show him [the jump], and he'd do his thing. I was always in a half seat, a light seat, and I just didn't interfere with him.”

It was tempting to do more with the horse, but Kursinski carefully managed his schedule. In 1994, she and Eros contested the selection trials for the World Equestrian Games, but, despite a top performance, she chose to go no further than the first round.

“He won the first [trial] at Gladstone [N.J.], but we withdrew him because he was really too young to do the whole competition,” Kursinski said. “We did the speed round just for the experience, but already, at 7, he was just a genius. He was always way ahead of himself.”

That left Kursinski brimming with confidence. Before long, she stopped showing Eros in schooling classes because she knew he would give her his best effort every time he entered the arena.

“I was very confident with him to where I didn't feel like we needed to practice,” she said. “We never jumped in the warm-up classes. We'd canter around the ring, and the first time we'd go in, it counted. To really have that much confidence was an incredible feeling.”

“You knew going to the ring that you always had a chance at winning, and



Anne Kursinski has “a really deep connection” with Eros, who has been retired for almost a decade now but is still a part of her life. “If I'm having a rough day or I want to reflect on life's lessons, I go talk to Eros,” she said. MARGARET FREEMAN PHOTO

the bigger the class, the better,” she continued. “He just rose to the occasion.”

In The Spotlight

In 1995, Eros won a Saturday class at the Winter Equestrian Festival (Fla.) and the \$25,000 open stake at the National Horse Show (N.J.) and finished second in the American Gold Cup (which Kursinski won aboard Dynamite). Then he entered 1996 primed for his Olympic run.

“Getting ready to go to the Games, he just kept jumping clear round after clear round,” Kursinski said. “He was one of the leading horses in terms of points heading into Atlanta.”

At the Olympic Games, however, Eros' sensitivity, typically an advantage when it came to responding to Kursinski's aids, would work against him. Kursinski and the gelding were part of the silver medal winning team that included Peter Leone, Leslie Burr-Howard and Michael Matz (it was Kursinski's second team silver medal), but Eros didn't produce his best performances. The Thoroughbred jumped



“You knew going to the ring that you always had a chance at winning, and the bigger the class, the better,” said Anne Kursinski of her horse of a lifetime, Eros. *JAN GYLLENSTEN PHOTO*

two clear rounds to open the individual competition but didn't reach the podium a second time.

“He was great in Atlanta, and we won the team silver medal, but the stadium there affected him,” she explained. “It was a very vertical stadium, and the crowds were so loud that the noise got to him a little bit. He'd been all over the world, but the noise made him sensitive. I put him on eggshells. He was saying, ‘Let me at them!’”

“After the Olympics, I finally started putting earplugs and an [ear bonnet] on him,” she continued. “I had never really done that with any of my other horses, but that helped a little bit.”

The 1998 World Equestrian Games (Rome) would also prove disappointing for Kursinski. The U.S. show jumping team didn't make the podium, and Kursinski and Eros failed to qualify for the third round of individual competition.

“We were one of the favorites going in, but we didn't do so great,” Kursinski recalled. “At the end of the competition, he had some stomach issues, and we treated him for colic. For whatever reason, Rome just wasn't his show.”

But two weeks later, Kursinski and Eros found redemption, winning the \$450,000 Pulsar Grand Prix in Monterrey (Mexico) and defeating many of the same combinations that had competed in Rome. Kursinski not only became the first American to win the prestigious class, but also the first woman to do so.

“I always loved Monterrey; it was one of my favorite shows to go to,” Kursinski said. “It was just a beautiful place. It gave me the opportunity to just enjoy my horse, and everything went perfectly. That was one of those moments where afterward I thought, ‘Wow, that couldn't have gone any better.’”

“We went fast in the jump-off, and he twisted and did whatever he could to keep the jumps up, and no one could catch us,” she continued. “To win the prize money for that—the richest class at the time—and to be the first American and the first woman to do it was for sure a thrill.”

Mind Reading

Eros wasn't the first (or second) horse to take Kursinski to the Olympic Games. She rode Starman to a team silver medal in 1988 in Seoul and

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contested the 1992 Barcelona Games with Cannonball. But among a group of exceptional mounts, Kursinski said Eros stands out.

"Somehow the emotional connection separated him from my other horses," she explained. "On some level, he could read my mind, and I could read his.

"In the moment, I was closer with him than almost any person," she continued. "Just knowing how he felt, what he wanted. We had a really deep connection. The really great ones, every little thing, they sense."

Kursinski tapped into that mental

connection early on in Eros' career. Following the 1995 National Horse Show at the Meadowlands (N.J.), when Eros was still just 7, she had an interesting conversation with her horse, with the help of a middleman.

"We crashed at that show," Kursinski said. "I wanted to know what had happened, why he had crashed through this jump. Had his stifles locked up? [Late show jumper] Carol Thompson said, 'You have to talk to the animal communicator.'

"So I talked with an animal communicator, Marlene Sandler," she continued.

"She said Eros was having a migraine that day, and the wildest thing was that I had had a migraine that day. That was the first thing. She also said that he was experiencing some TMJ, so we arranged for him to ship to New Jersey to get adjusted by a chiropractor named Dr. Jim Kenney."

Sandler's report would end up having a level of credibility that surprised Kursinski.

"I went to the barn and was telling the grooms about what the psychic had said," she recalled. "She had also mentioned that Eros had been given a pear and that he had loved it. As I'm telling the story, the grooms are looking at me like I have six heads. I asked, 'Did somebody give him a pear?' [Groom] Stacy Falco's eyes got really big. She said, 'I did, and he loved it.'

"So from then on, pears were always Eros' favorite treat, discovered by this animal communicator," Kursinski continued. "If you have a pear, more than a carrot or an apple, he goes crazy, even today. During his career, Hermès would always send him Harry & David pears. After that, [everyone] believed the animal communicator. We got Eros checked out, and everything the psychic said was true. He had a tooth that was bothering him, and that was why he was having the migraine. He had some issues with his atlas and TMJ, and we had to work with that his entire career."

Dr. Kenney, who still practices equine acupuncture and chiropractic therapy in New Jersey, recalls Eros being stiff and cocking his head. "And then he did have some imbalance through his pelvis, and that can be connected," he said. "Everything is sort of connected throughout the body, but that's a strong connection. When he had that issue, it would bother him, and as hard as he tried, he couldn't be quite straight for [Kursinski] like she needed him to be, so that may be the reason she had me look at him at first. I think I was helpful in helping him deal with that [issue] and recovering and bouncing back."

Dr. Kenney flew to Atlanta to evaluate

"It has been a wonderful, wonderful journey," said Anne Kursinski of her partnership with Eros. JOHN STRASSBURGER PHOTO



Eros at the Olympics, and he continued to work on the gelding even into retirement.

“He was just such an effort guy that he would make himself sore,” he said. “He just tried so hard. After he retired, I hardly ever found soreness. I think he was an athletic guy, but his heart was so big, he would try so hard and make himself sore just because he extended himself so much.

“Anne did an incredible job with him,” he added. “She was so in tune with him. It’s almost like they had some sort of psychic bond.”

Longevity

Eros would show at the top levels of the sport through his late teens and early 20s. He and Kursinski were on winning Nations Cup teams at Rome and St. Gallen, and they won two of the three legs of the Pulsar Triple Crown, a precursor to today’s Rolex Grand Slam of Show Jumping, finishing second in the final leg at Aachen (Germany).

At 15, Eros won the 2002 Garden State Grand Prix (N.J.), and at 16, he finished second in the \$100,000 U.S. Open Championship CSIO**** (Fla.) and third in the \$200,000 American Invitational (Fla.). At 18, he was second in the \$75,000 HITS Grand Prix (N.Y.), but after making a successful return to competition following a torn ligament a few years later, he officially retired in 2007.

“He had already done enough and didn’t owe anybody anything,” Kursinski said.

“I credit his longevity to his management,” she explained. “It’s interesting, because I didn’t show him too much. Today, with the Global Champions Tour and all these classes, it’s easy to get carried away, but I was always one to be picky and choosy. He was a Thoroughbred, and he was also very light on himself, but I never over-showed him to keep him fresh and keep him happy and eager to show.

“It really is all about the management, and that’s something that George taught me and that I try to teach my students today,” she added. “He was 5 years old [when we got him], and to have a real

“It’s almost like they had some sort of psychic bond.”

—DR. JIM KENNEY

program and a real plan—and of course, it doesn’t always work—but he did become an Olympic horse like I thought.”

At the age of 20, Eros had a retirement ceremony in the International Ring at the Winter Equestrian Festival. Fourteen years had passed since his grand prix debut, but he still bounded around the arena full of exuberance.

“He was eager to get in the ring,” Kursinski said. “His ears were up, and I cantered him around. He was proud

and still biting and kicking. Some retire and are too old to do that, but I never thought about not riding him [in the ceremony]. The whole team was there, and it was a very sad day, but he was very proud to be in there. It was great to have him recognized for all that he had done.

“The song they played was Celine Dion’s ‘Because You Loved Me,’” she continued.

“The lyrics, ‘For every dream you made come true...you’re the one who held me up/Never let me fall,’ that really was Eros.

“He was, for sure, a horse of a lifetime,” Kursinski added.

Nostalgic Conversations

Today, Eros is retired at Kursinski’s Market Street facility in Frenchtown, N.J. Early in his retirement, the gelding was periodically pleasure ridden, but now his days are quieter.

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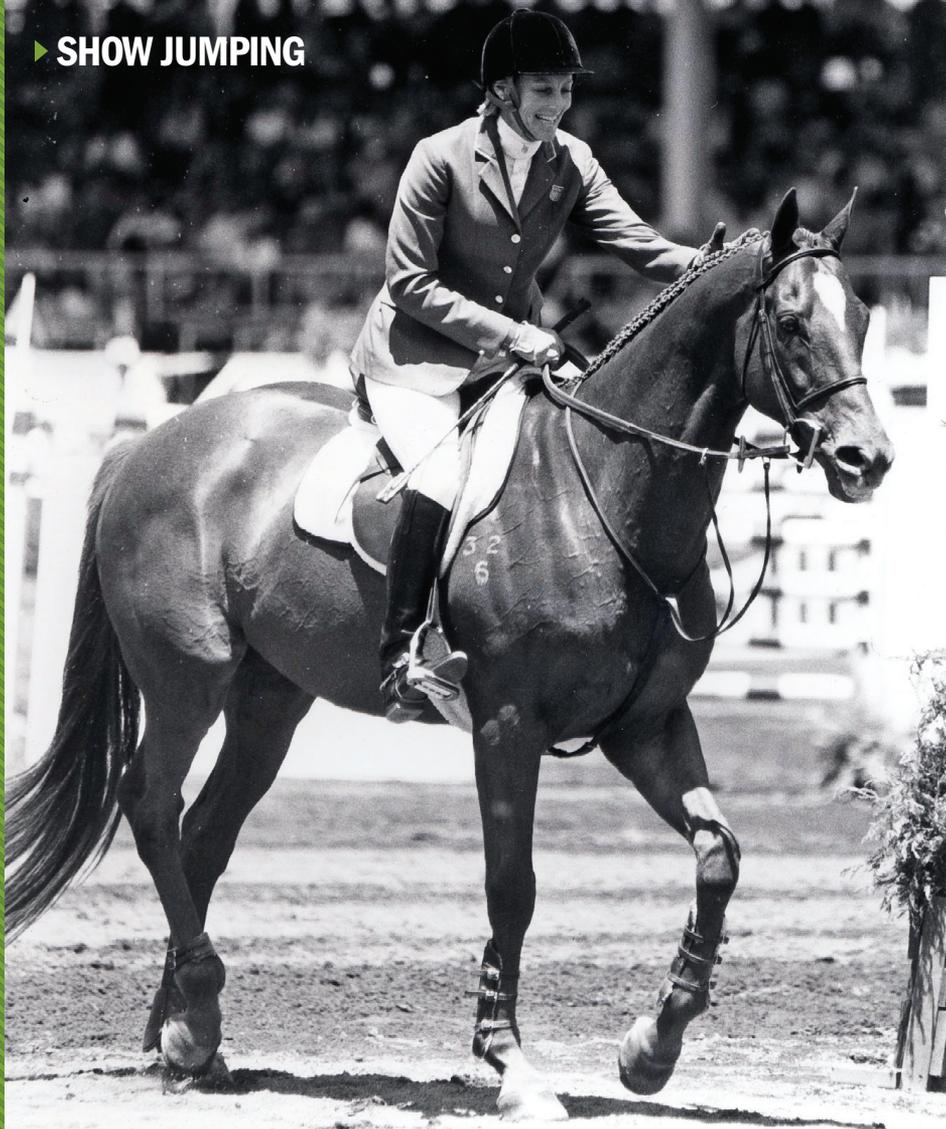
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"I still get teary about it, looking back and thinking about having grown with him through all the stages of life," said Anne Kursinski of Eros. JOHN STRASSBURGER PHOTO

"He's turned out in the snow," Kursinski said. "For several years after he stopped showing, he would still ship down with us to Florida in the winter, but at his age now, the shipping would be hard on him.

"It's cute," she added. "Sometimes people come for a lesson or a clinic, and they want to see Eros. It's so sweet that people remember him. He's part of the family for sure."

Two decades after their Olympic run, Kursinski has had time to reflect and appreciate all that she and Eros accomplished together. "As I get older, I do appreciate it more, the fighting it took to get there," she said. "I've learned to stop and enjoy what we did and appreciate it and be thankful."

The gelding turned 29 last September, celebrating with several indulgent pears.

"Even seeing him today, I do go talk to him," Kursinski said. "We still have a nice bond. If I'm having a rough day or I want to reflect on life's lessons, I go talk to Eros. We have that kind of relationship.

"It was really like a Disney story in that all these famous riders had tried him, and I ended up with him and went to the Olympics," she said. "It has been a wonderful, wonderful journey." 🍷

► The Glory Days Of The Thoroughbred

Eros fits right in the legendary group of great Thoroughbreds of show jumping, including Gem Twist, Jet Run and Snowbound.

"I just love the Thoroughbred," Anne Kursinski said. "They're just so light, and they give you such a totally different feeling.

"I'm lucky, because I grew up on Thoroughbreds," she continued. "I grew up in California and at the Flintridge Riding Club, and they got loads of horses from Santa Anita Park and Caliente Racetrack. I understood the Thoroughbred very, very well."

There are fewer and fewer Thoroughbreds competing in today's upper-level grand prix classes, and Kursinski understands that her horse may be one of the last of a bygone era. But she still seeks out others of his breed. She and her partner Carol Hoffman currently campaign a 12-year-old gray Thoroughbred gelding named Only One in the performance hunter and amateur-owner hunter divisions.

"I'm always looking for them, always hoping to find another one," Kursinski said. "Whether [Eros] is sort of one of the last of the very great ones, like a Gem Twist or the horses that [William] Steinkraus and George [Morris] rode, it's an honor for him to be in that club, to be an Olympic champion Thoroughbred. There's just nothing like that to ride. I can't even fully explain the lightness.

"But for [today's] market, because [Thoroughbreds] don't put up with so many mistakes from juniors and amateurs, they're not as marketable," she continued. "A lot of them sort of get lost at the racetrack."

"The Thoroughbred horse is still out there," said George Morris, who rode the Thoroughbred Sinjon to a team silver medal in the 1960 Rome Olympics. "There are still good ones, and there are still great ones. It's just so unwieldy now to try to find them. That's the problem. They're not breeding quite the same types as they used to, but they're still out there."