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COVER STORY

VIOLET TATUM

McMillen '23
On her diligent practice
and why kindness
matters most

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VIOLET TATUM

The standout junior rider on her diligent practice, show ring milestones—and why kindness matters most

WORDS: RENNIE DYBALL



Tatum and Valedictorian after their 2022 Junior Hunter Finals win



Competing in the Junior Jumpers with Tango

“It’s Important to Be Kind”

IT'S HARD NOT TO NOTICE VIOLET TATUM.

Just 15 years old, the California junior rider excels in all three rings. She's won tricolors at Indoors and Junior Hunter Finals, and she piloted For Fun to USEF HOTY Grand Champion honors. Her winter circuit at the Desert International Horse Park is punctuated by wins and championships week in and week out, on both her own horses and catch rides.

But on social media, you'll see her fall. And you'll see her celebrating not only her own wins, but her fellow junior riders' victories as well.

"It's important to support one another and celebrate not only your own wins but also your friends' wins," Tatum tells *The Plaid Horse*.

As for those less than perfect moments she shares on TikTok, "I think social media creates a false sense of perfection. That could not be further from the truth so why not celebrate learning moments and show the reality of the struggles?" says Tatum. "Nobody is perfect and everyone makes mistakes. Mistakes are how we learn and move forward in this sport and they are going to happen. No one round defines you."

What does define Tatum, says her longtime trainer Archie Cox, is the hard work she puts into improving in the sport she loves. "Violet has a very strong work ethic. She drops her stirrups daily by herself," says Cox. "One day I looked in the ring and started to say, 'You lost your...' and then I realized it was planned."

Of course, it's not just her hard work in the tack. Cox says the foundation of Tatum's success is, unsurprisingly, her horsemanship. "She knows her horses inside and out. The most important thing in riding and partnerships is knowing your horses, their likes and dislikes. You have to know what's wrong to know what's right," he says.

"Whether it is a little swelling on a leg, a little tenderness on their side, knowing what's normal or what might be an issue is by handling the horses, working with the horses, grooming them, playing with them, endlessly being with the horse. That's something Violet does from sunup to sundown."

KINDNESS COUNTS

It's no secret that unkind commentary can float around any horse show, at any time. But for Tatum, it's the obvious choice to combat the stigma and spread

kindness. "Why not make an effort to be nice and supportive? What do people gain from being mean and talking negatively?" she says.

"I think it's important to be kind. I am on the quieter side so some people mistake me as not always being nice, but once they talk to me they realize I am just shy. If I can help someone feel better about themselves and offer advice I'm happy to."

Her fellow exhibitors and spectators at the horse show are taking notice, too. Violet's mother, Jenny Tatum, says her daughter has even been approached for her autograph.

One young fan "drew a picture of me and my horse jumping. It was really cute," says Tatum. "It recently happened again and I just sort of freeze and get embarrassed. I don't really know if I am a role model but I try my best to stay grateful, humble and appreciative, and



"Why not make an effort to be nice and supportive? What do people gain from being mean and talking negatively?"

—VIOLET TATUM



FROM TOP LEFT: Showing Evermore for the mare's first time in the 3'6" hunters; Signing an autograph for a young fan; A winning weekend on the Desert Circuit with catch rides Tokota Fuji owned by Ingenium Farms (left), and Beatrise, owned by Julie Henderson; Accepting Junior Hunter Finals honors in 2023



RECENT HORSE SHOW HIGHLIGHTS

- Junior Hunter Finals Champion, Small Junior Hunters 15 and Under 3'6"—two years in a row on Valedictorian
- Reserve Champion at Washington International Horse Show and Pennsylvania National Horse Show on Evermore
- Reserve Champion, Capital Challenge Equitation Week on Congrato
- Top 15 WIHS Equitation Finals 2023 on Ironman van de Kalevalle
- Champion CPHA Foundation Medal Final, 14 and Under on Ironman van de Kalevalle
- USEF HOTY National Grand Champion Junior Hunter with For Fun

emulate good sportsmanship.”

Fellow West Coast junior rider Paige Walkenbach recently introduced Tatum to The Kindness Movement—a group that encourages equestrians to stand up to bullying and spread kindness. Tatum applied this year to their ambassador program. “I love the message and the purpose it stands for,” she says.

AN ASTRONOMICAL RISE

When *The Plaid Horse* featured Tatum in 2022, she had only been riding for five years, quickly moving up the ranks from the 2’6” divisions to the junior hunters, and she was looking for an equitation horse. Less than two years later, she’s found success in all three rings.

Indoors last year was a big milestone for Tatum, who says she managed her nerves much better than she did the prior two years. Her mental toughness was reflected in her riding, and she was successful at all the Indoors stops last year. Among the highlights: She and her newest hunter partner Evermore (“Ellie”) were reserve champion in the Small Junior Hunters at both WIHS and Harrisburg. (See more horse show highlights in the sidebar.)

Competing in the junior jumpers “is so much fun and I trust my partner Tango so much every time I step into the ring,” says Tatum. “My favorite thing about competing in equitation is that it is challenging and it’s something that takes hard work and desire. After years of not having a steady equitation horse I now have two incredible equitation horses that have helped me immensely.”

As for her favorite ring, “the hunters have always come more naturally to me, but it’s also where I put the most pressure and expectations on myself,” says Tatum. Showing hunters is “the most rewarding,” she adds. “It is also more fun now that I have Ellie because she is always so much fun to show.”



VIOLET TATUM'S PARTNERSHIPS

- **Evermore “Ellie”** (BELOW RIGHT)
Small Junior Hunter
- **Valedictorian “Brooks”** (RIGHT)
Small Junior Hunter, Derbies
- **Ironman van de Kalevallei “Tony”** (FAR RIGHT)
Equitation, owned by Archie Cox
- **For Keeps “Keeps”** (BELOW LEFT)
Equitation
- **Tango** (ABOVE)
Jumper, International Derbies



“You get to know your horse by handling them, working with them, and playing with them. Endlessly being with the horse. Violet does that from sunup to sundown.”

—ARCHIE COX, TRAINER



Tatum with her Large Junior Hunter star, For Fun

A STANDOUT HORSE

After a few years of great success with her hunters For Fun and Valedictorian, Tatum got paired up with Ellie in a rather serendipitous manner. "Archie saw her in a warm up ring," says mom Jenny Tatum. "She had never done this job and came from a jumper barn. She was seven when we got her in March, 2023. She is really blossoming quickly considering how green she is."

Photos of the gray mare with the stunning jump tell part of the story, but Tatum says she's actually easier to ride than she looks with her knees-to-nose bascule. "She is so much fun to ride and, although she jumps like a freak, her jump is very soft and easy to stay with," says Tatum.

"When I first tried her, I didn't realize she jumped that way until I watched the videos and my mouth dropped. Her personality is very sassy but sweet and she always has a happy expression and tries 110% for me in the ring," she adds. "I'm very proud of her because she did her first-ever 3'6" only in April and was very green and then was Grand Champion at junior hunter finals three months later with Eleanor Rudnicki and had two tricolors in a very competitive field at Pennsylvania National and the Washington Horse Show with me. This was a huge accomplishment for TeamEllie!"

LOOKING AHEAD

No matter how many accolades Tatum racks up, she's always looking forward to the next challenge. Not to mention the balancing act of attending ninth grade while horse showing at such a high level, week in and week out.

"She has learned how to maintain top grades by staying organized and ahead in school," says mom Jenny. "Communicating with her teachers allows her more freedom to miss days at school while on the show circuit. I'm just so proud of her and in awe of how she manages all she does."

At home, Tatum usually focuses on long flat lessons and no-stirrup work to save her horses for the show rings. She tries to get to the horse shows on

Wednesday or Thursday to have time to practice.

"I typically get to the show early to ride my horse in the morning and watch/study the rounds before I show," says Tatum. "I also want to know what I can do better, how I can fix the details and what needs improvement—always asking my trainers or clinic instructors what needs to change for those pieces to fall into place. I think it's important to not be afraid to hear or ask how I can be better and what I can change."

In addition to training with Cox, Tatum also rides with John Bragg. "I primarily catch ride for John now since my horse with him, For Fun, is retiring. John gives me a lot of opportunities and helps me succeed by giving me small tweaks and details I can do to that make my riding better," she notes.

As for Cox, "he always believes in me and my ability and makes me believe I can achieve anything I set out to do. Both trainers offer a different perspective which has made me a better, more well-rounded rider, something I appreciate so much."

The hard work, of course, pays off.

"Riders and horses feed off each other in terms of improving. The softer a rider is, the softer a horse is, and the softer a horse is, the softer a rider becomes," says Cox. "Violet is very gentle and she's sympathetic to the horses. Whether it's how she pats the horse, or how she uses her hand and her leg, it is all about asking the horses and waiting for the answer before asking in a stronger way."

"It is a unique quality and it is one of the things that separate the top riders anywhere." ∞

"Violet is very gentle and sympathetic to the horses...it's a unique quality and one of the things that separates the top riders anywhere." —TRAINER ARCHIE COX



Tatum "knows her horses inside and out," says trainer Archie Cox (above, with catch ride Beatrise, owned by Julie Henderson)