MICHAEL MATZ

One of today's hottest jumper riders talks about the ups and downs of grandprix competition and (surprise!) why he'd like to give it all up someday to train racehorses.

BY KATE O'HARE

Michael Matz is not a happy man. Under overcast skies on a hot June day at the IBM/USET Festival of Champions at Gladstone, NJ, Matz leaves the show ring and settles in for a quick chat, obviously agitated at what has just happened. He's just had to withdraw on a troublesome horse named Felix, his second mount in the class. Matz won the day before and—although he doesn't yet know it—is destined to win his sixth $100,000 USET Show Jumping Championship aboard Rhum IV the very next day, but right now he's a bit disappointed in himself.

"Well, I had four faults with the one, and the other one had four faults, and now he's a little strong. I just can't seem to figure him out right now. I pulled him out; he was just getting strong. I don't need that right now, a horse running off with me with these kind of fences."

Matz had ridden five mounts in the class the day before and came out first and second with the stallion Olisco and the trouble-plagued Selle Francais gelding, Rhum IV. Today, he rode Meant to Be and Felix. Tomorrow, he will again be riding Olisco and Rhum. Why so many mounts?

"I've always had a lot of horses," says Matz, a quick smile creasing his tanned, square face. "Everybody likes a good horse, and we have a lot of young horses. Actually, I have to sort of start...we did cut down." At this moment, Matz's blue eyes get serious and he turns from rider to businessman. "We took 29 horses to Florida, and we've cut that down by ten now. We're only taking about seventeen, eighteen, on the road because it's just too much work.

"Unfortunately, with the way it works now, with the workman's compensation and the insurance, the taxes for the vans, the salaries you have to pay people, it's very, very hard to run a big stable. The work you put in with a big stable, the return is....About the most satisfaction you get is when you go good in a class, and your horse goes good. It's not the most profitable business in the world."

Does he train as well as ride? "Oh yeah, I do all of that. I do everything for all of them." Is he very tired? Matz smiles. "Well, let's put it this way," he says. "At night, I don't have a problem [getting] to sleep."

A resident of Collegeville, PA, Matz is one of show jumping's winningest riders. He was the individual gold medalist at the 1995 Pan American Games in Argentina and a member of the U.S. bronze-medal show-jumping team. He has competed in two Olympics, in 1976 and again in 1992, that time aboard the great Heisman. Unfortunately for Heisman, says Matz, "The footing over there in Barcelona was really abrasive, and it took its toll on his feet." Matz has high hopes for the 1996 Games in Atlanta with the twelve-year-old Rhum IV. Matz has been riding Rhum since the bay gelding was five, but the last couple of years have been tough for the horse. Rhum has survived a bad lung infection, another infection that almost cost him his eye, and bruised heels. In the meantime, Matz took a fall on Olisco and broke his collarbone.

Says Matz: "The good times are when you think you have everything right, and it's the satisfaction that you did it right. The bad times are when you think you have it right, and you're trying to do well for your owners because they supported you so well, and it just doesn't work out."



Michael Matz relaxes after winning his sixth USET Show Jumping Championship. Photo by Karen Preston.

Matz recently had a chance to take two horses to Europe for six weeks, but commitments kept him home. "It would be nice to go to Europe, but also, I've got a mortgage, I've got to pay for my children." Isn't he rich by now, though? "I wish I was!" Matz exclaims.

A bona fide hero

There's a lot more to Matz than what you see in the show-jumping world. For one, he's a bona fide hero. Matz was aboard United Airlines Flight 232 when it crashed near Sioux City, IA, in July 1989. He helped several other people, including children, to escape the wreckage and was named "ABC News Person of the Week." Now, the 44-year-old father of two (Mikey and Michelle) has his sights set on another aspect of the equine world—Thoroughbred racing. In partnership with his wife D.D. Alexander Matz (a show-jumper rider herself), F. Eugene Dixon (owner of Rhum IV), and Edwin C. Andrews, Matz is in charge of a growing stable of racehorses. He has two two-year-old fillies by Private Account, one in training at Monmouth and the other at Belmont; a four-year-old Alysheba mare (who has won $200,000) at Monmouth; a Lost Code filly at Belmont; and, at Fair Hills, MD, a colt named Coast Call that Matz and his wife have raised themselves, by Phone Trick out of a Coastal mare named Tukwila. Still at home are a yearling by Storm Cat and a weanling filly by Devil's Bag.

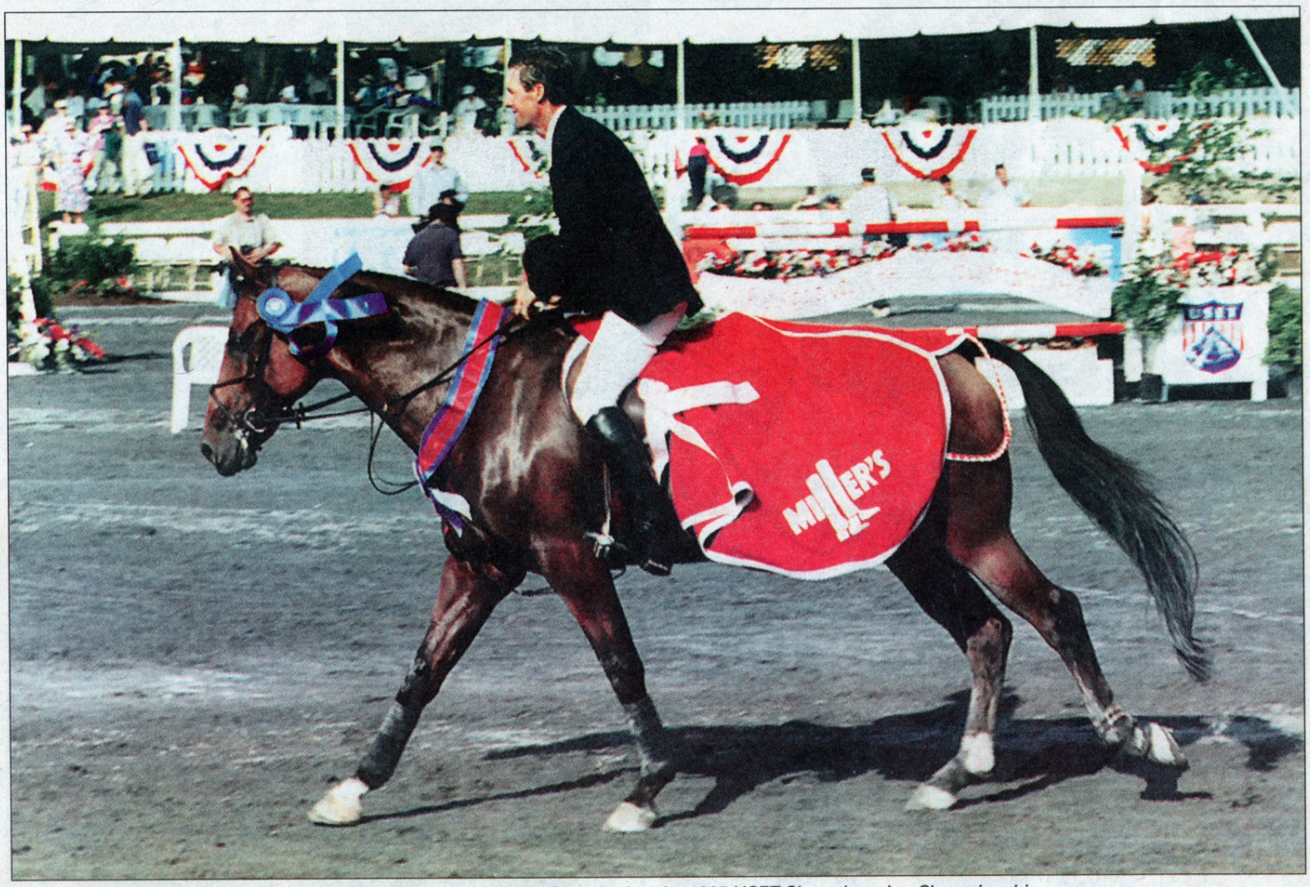
"I've always been interested in racing," says Matz. "My wife's family has been very big into racing. Conditioning a show horse is the same as conditioning a racehorse. It's all horsemanship, in sort of a different manner. A lot of people have gone from this business to the track and done very well. I enjoy working with horses and conditioning them, whether it be a jumper or a racehorse."

Matz hears his name and excuses himself to go down to the ring and win "a very small award." Asked when he will be a full-time Thoroughbred trainer, he smiles ruefully and replies, "The way it's going, maybe sooner than later."

After his big win the next day, Matz is asked again about his transition to Thoroughbred trainer. "Well," he says, "I'm putting a lot into 1996 to make it work. I've never got a medal in an Olympic Games. I'd sure like to try it. I think this [Rhum IV] is a horse that can do it for me. But if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. I'm not getting any younger, and I think I still ride well enough, and I still think I have some good horses; but when I feel like I'm not riding well enough and I'm not getting good horses, that will be the answer. But when I stop riding, I'm not going to be teaching for eight hours a day. I'd like to be working with the young horses, the racehorses. I really enjoy that."

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Karen Preston

Michael Matz and Rhum IV take a well-deserved victory gallop after winning the 1995 USET Show Jumping Championship.