

SPORTS

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Not just horsing around

MacInnis determined to make it on grand prix circuit

By Steve LeBlanc
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

With an abundance of energy and an immeasurable love for horses, Heather MacInnis seldom ever questions if the struggles en route to a career in professional show jumping are worth it.

And on those rare occasions when she does, the 26-year-old Milton native need look no further than her longtime employer/mentor for newfound resolve.

"Mike had to come up the hard way like I'm doing now, and that's kept me going over the years," said the barn manager of Campbellville's Michael Grinyer Stables. "He and (wife) Stephanie have built such a successful business and great reputation, and that gives me hope that maybe I can do it too."

While her bid to break onto the sport's grand prix circuit is still very much in its infancy, MacInnis — who spent her entire life in town before just recently moving to Burlington after getting married — is the furthest thing from a newcomer to the world of horses and riding.

She recalled, "I wanted to be around horses pretty much as long as I can remember — going to the fall fair and wanting to pet them. Then when I was eight I begged my mom to take riding lessons, and the rest is history."

That's an awfully succinct way to describe it, given how much she's put into the industry since first coming into contact with Grinyer more than a decade ago.

Progressing from a youth competitor to groom and finally to a teacher and one of the cornerstones of the nearby facility, MacInnis has a hand in just about every facet of the business — and more often than not finds herself working from dawn to dusk.

But that's hardly unique for those without the financial means to buy top-level horses right away, and certainly hasn't been a deterrent for the local rider.

"Her perseverance is unbelievable. She's the hardest-working person I've ever been

associated with," stressed Grinyer, an accomplished grand prix competitor. "That's so important. If she works hard and long enough eventually she'll come across the right horse."

For right now, MacInnis is hoping 12-year-old Holstein mare Celebrity fits that bill. Purchasing the horse about four years ago — after helping it through a number of health problems since it was turned over to Grinyer — she rode her to an encouraging fourth-place finish in early-April at the Royal Manitoba Winter Fair's \$35,000 Kubota Cup Grand Prix.

Delivering a clean round and making a five-horse jump-off would have been credible under any circumstance, but was especially so since it was the pair's official grand prix debut.

"It was great to do well right away. I would never have imagined she'd go clean the first time out," said MacInnis. "She's a big horse with lots of power, and certainly has potential. She makes the jumps look small."

That same week she landed a major sponsor for 2008 — Best Western Milton — something that can quite difficult to do so early in one's career.

"Signing with Best Western Inn has made the biggest difference. Entering grand prix competitions costs a lot of money, but Celebrity and I need to get the experience so we can get better and better."

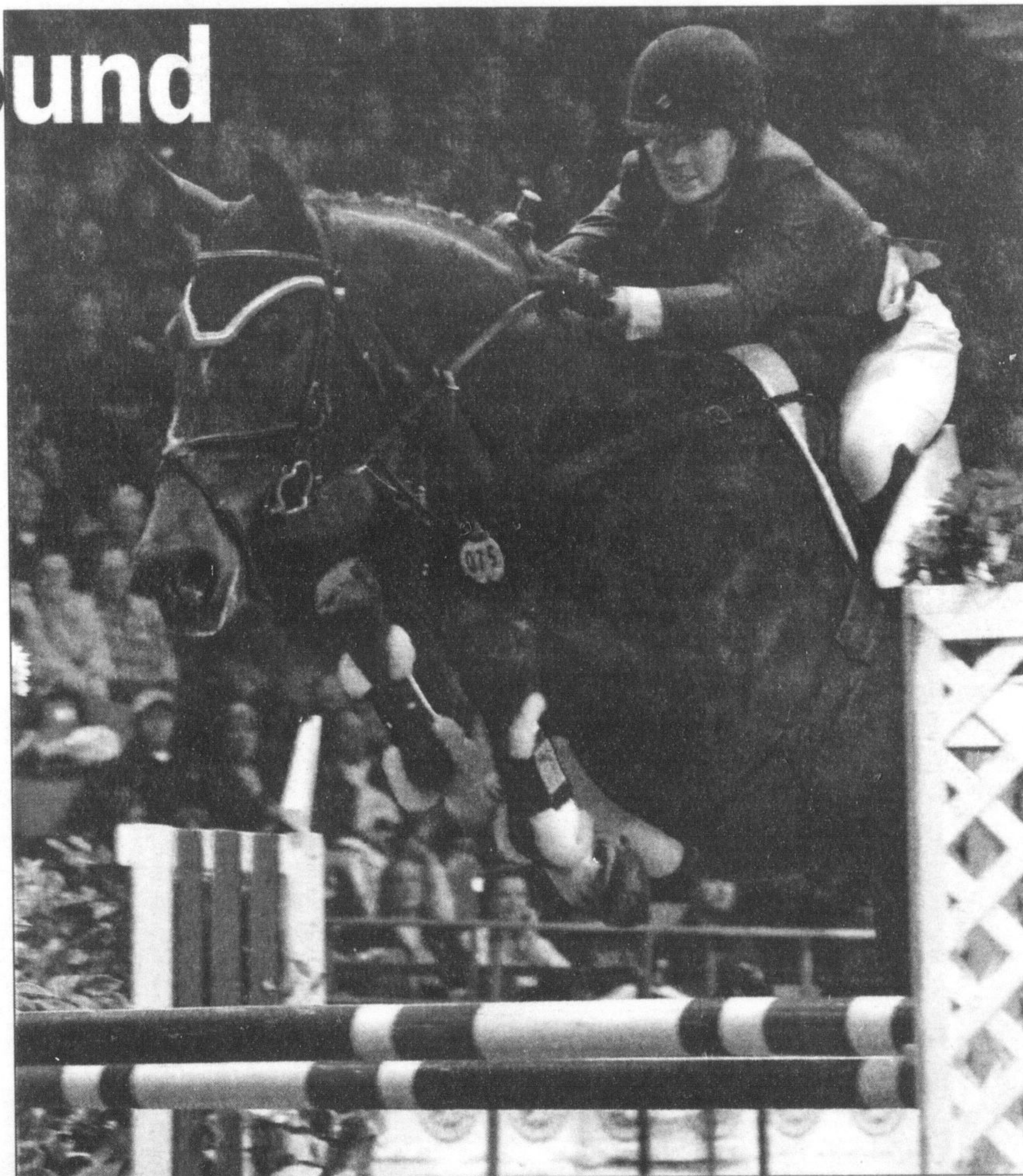
Recently MacInnis got a harsh reminder of just how tough show jumping can be, as Celebrity came up lame after a solid May stretch and missed a couple of qualifying events for Toronto's Royal Winter Fair — her primary goal for this year.

"There's four qualifiers left but we're going to have to get a lot of points to make it now. But that's the thing when you've got all your eggs in one basket," she said, referring to the serious setbacks inherent with having just one grand prix horse. "At some point I hope to get a second horse, but that'll probably take getting a syndicate together to buy one."

With competition now focused on small-



Heather MacInnis



YAVUZ PHOTOGRAPHY / SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION

UP AND OVER: Heather MacInnis and Celebrity clear a jump in the Kubota Cup Grand Prix.

er events with her four-year-old hunter, Tori, MacInnis looks to have Celebrity back in action by the end of the month in Palgrave.

"Hopefully she'll be ready to go by then. It can take a long time to develop the mares, although having looked after her for so long I think we've got the trust thing more than if I just rode her once a week. In this sport the rider and horse have to trust each other completely."

Much like Grinyer, the grand prix newcomer knows she may have years ahead of her riding cast-off horses and slowly trading up before a blue-chipper comes her way.

But in a sport where many of the top stars are 40 or older, time is still on her side.

"That's the great thing about show jump-

ing; the more experience you get the more success you usually enjoy," she said. "It's very much a mental sport as opposed to physical."

And no matter how long the road to success may be, MacInnis seems to have more than enough desire to sustain her.

"I want it so badly — one way or another I'm going to get there."

Of course being married to a fellow sports enthusiast is bound to make that journey a little smoother.

"That certainly helps. Ian's family is into horses and he's big into rugby, so he understands how much goes into this and how important it is to me," said MacInnis.

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