

Jumping *for* JOY

This young Olympic equestrian has achieved show jumping stardom since relocating to the Horse Capital of the World

By Alexandra Beckstett | Photos by Kirk Schlea

When Reed Kessler rode into the arena at the 2012 U.S. Olympic Show Jumping Trials, she simply hoped to have a positive experience. The then 17-year-old had been eligible to compete at the highest levels of the sport — at which point the jumps are up to 1.60 meters, or 5 feet, 3 inches tall — for less than three months, and she was facing a field of her riding idols.

Reed defied the odds by co-winning the selection trials and securing her spot on the Olympic show jumping squad, becoming the youngest such rider ever to represent the United States. A year later the Lexington resident has catapulted from rookie to heavy hitter, anchoring the U.S. team's victory in the 2013 Furusiyya Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) Nations Cup, finishing 10th in her first Rolex FEI World Cup, and sitting





At 18, Reed Kessler has garnered more show jumping accolades than many veteran riders twice her age.

atop the country's show jumping rankings.

"It's all happened really fast," she said. "It's amazing to look around at these [riders] I idolize and now be one of them."

To help get her to where she is today, Reed's supportive parents, Teri and Murray Kessler, relocated from New York to a parcel of Lexington's Cobra Farm in May 2012. They were drawn naturally to the Bluegrass, not only because it's home to the sport horse hub Kentucky Horse Park but also because of the community's *lingua franca*: the horse.

But Lexington residents might be hard-pressed to spot the Kesslers around town if the Horse Park isn't hosting a large event. The tight-knit equestrian trio embraces a fast-paced lifestyle, traveling with their horses from competition to competition around North America and Europe and wintering in Wellington, Fla. While Reed is riding (and winning) at the highest levels in her quest to become the best of the best, Teri rides and competes for pleasure as an amateur jumper. Murray Kessler, meanwhile, enjoys the business side of the game and, of course, cheering on his only daughter.

Reed's remarkable talent in the saddle didn't fall upon her by chance. Her mother grew up a horse-crazy child who learned to ride from Pony Club manual drawings. Her father was born into a fox-hunting family and eventually transitioned to show jumping.

"He's a great rider," Teri Kessler said. "That's where Reed gets her natural ability."

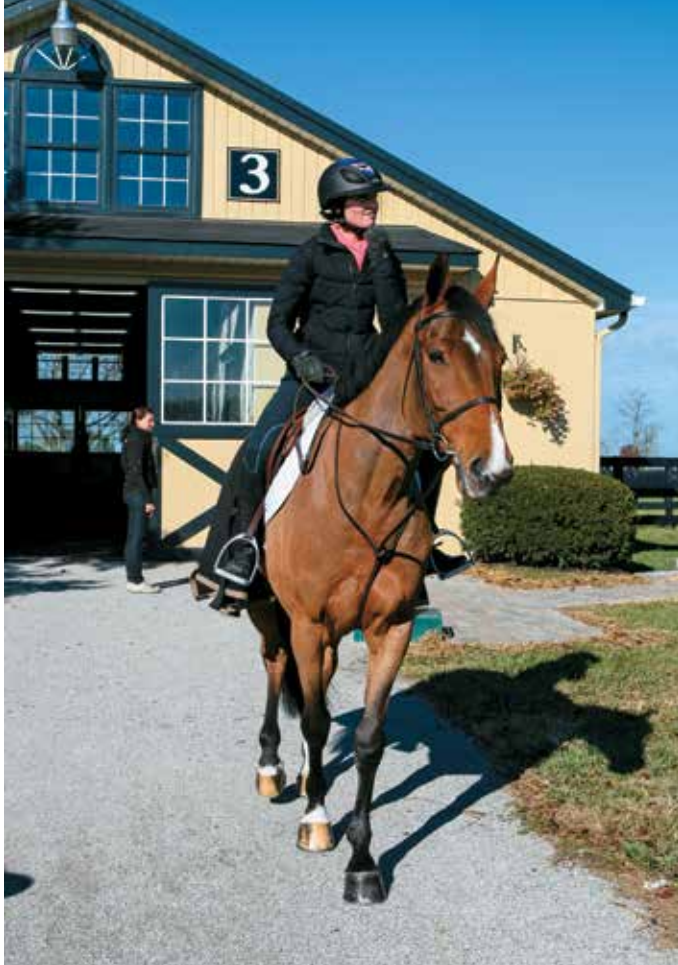
Murray Kessler was also one of the first students of decorated show jumper Katie Monahan Prudent, Reed's Middleburg, Va.-based trainer and godmother.

"So it's always been horses for me," said Reed, who is cheerful and easygoing around the barn but all business as soon as she's on horseback. "I've always known [being a professional show jumper] is what I wanted to do."

Growing Up on the A-Circuit

Most riders spend years trying to qualify for the historic National Horse Show, which took place at New York City's Madison Square Garden until moving to the Kentucky Horse Park in 2011. But Reed was on course at the National before she was even born — Teri Kessler was two months pregnant while competing there in 1993.

From that point on it was all horses. At home, Teri Kessler would plop her infant daughter in a Pack 'n Play near the arena while she rode and installed a Fisher-Price play set in the barn so Reed



In a typical day at Kessler Show Stables, Reed exercises as many as six horses, including Ligist, pictured here.

could entertain herself while her pony looked on.

"I was about 6 months old the first time I rode," Reed said. "My parents put me in a basket on my first pony."

When she was 3, her parents tied stuffed animals in the trees to teach her to steer her pony — if she wanted her Winnie the Pooh doll, she had to ride to it.

So not surprisingly, Reed's childhood has been a bit unconventional. Born in New Jersey, she and her family relocated as often as her father's job as head of a large tobacco company required. At different points in her life, Reed has called Texas, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New York, and now Kentucky home. Thus, her friends and social circles became the fellow equestrians she went head to head with at horse shows nationwide.

"I was never that attached to friends at school," she said. "I was always that horse-crazy girl who was off at a horse show every week."

To balance her riding career with her academics, Reed enrolled at the Professional Children's School for grades six through 12, in New York City — essentially, a school for kids with jobs.

"Everyone there had something they're really passionate about that draws them away from school. You never had the feeling that you missed out on that prom

Teri, Murray, and Reed Kessler have fully embraced the equine lifestyle in Lexington.

that everyone else went to," Reed explained. "I could pop in anytime I wanted, and when I was away, I just sent my work in. I would not have made it through high school and been as successful as I am this early if they (the Professional Children's School) hadn't supported me the way they had."

Now that she's graduated, Reed's peak season routine includes exercising six horses a day, riding without stirrups for strength and balance, and keeping up with her personal fitness regimen. As for the mental side of the game, she works on being less hard on herself, as she admits to being her own biggest critic.

"It can be a good thing and a bad thing," Reed said. "I'm not someone who likes to make mistakes, especially the same mistake twice. But mistakes make you a better person and a better rider."

A Kentucky Dream

At the end of 2011, the Kesslers looked back on their year and realized that between travels they had spent only about nine days at their New York farm. "Living there was sort of unrealistic," Reed noted.

Add to the picture tight zoning restrictions and a need for more space, and they knew it was time for a change. "We knew eventually we needed a bigger place that was more horse-friendly," Teri Kessler said. "And I immediately thought of Lexington because of the Kentucky Horse Park."

The Kesslers had been traveling to the Bluegrass to compete for nearly 12 years and were no strangers to the horse-centric city.

"Having driven down Iron Works quite a bit, it was kind of my dream road," Teri Kessler explained. "In the past I had driven down this road and thought, 'What could it possibly be like to live on one of these farms?' So when we started seriously entertaining the idea of moving to Lexington, right away this area came to mind."

While attending the Alltech National Horse Show in the fall of 2011, the Kesslers were enticed by a real-estate stand with farm listings that included two parcels of Cobra Farm, birthplace of 1977 Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew. They took a jaunt down the road with the real estate agent to view the properties, but neither was exactly what they were looking for in a future sport





Last year Reed became the youngest show jumper ever to represent the United States at the Olympics.

horse facility. Instead, Murray Kessler kept eyeballing the land, home, and barns on the other side of the fence — the section of Cobra Farm owners Gary and Betty Bisantz were not selling — asking, “What about that?” But the real estate agent assured him there was no way that parcel was for sale. The Kesslers were discouraged.

“The problem with seeing what you think you want is that nothing else ever measures up,” Teri Kessler said with a laugh. “We looked and looked, but nothing was going to measure up to the other side of the fence.”

So their real estate agent gave it one last shot and approached the Bisantzes about selling their tract. To everyone’s surprise they agreed to move onto one of the other parcels. “In a funny way, I feel like when things fall into place like that, they’re meant to be,” said Teri Kessler.

As picture-perfect as the 125-acre property was, the Kesslers still had to modify some features to turn the former Thoroughbred farm into a more sport horse-friendly facility for their 14 warmbloods. These modifications included installing a large all-weather riding arena, putting rubber pavers in the barn aisles, replacing barn and stall doors and gates, renovating the tack room, and adding an irrigated derby jump field to practice for the turf classes popular in Europe and Canada.

“We haven’t changed a single thing about the house — it was perfect and impeccably decorated,” Reed explained. “The barns were beautiful already, but they were a bit more ‘racehorse,’ so we changed a little bit there.”

Reed believes their Lexington farm feels more like home than any other place she has lived. Between morning hacks and Grand Prix night classes, she has also been able to explore the city. She listed a few downtown boutiques and dining mainstays such as Table 310 and Dudley’s On Short that she has already starred as her favorites. And in what little free time she finds, Reed is reminiscent of any

REED’S RIDES

Behind Kessler Show Stables’ barn doors live nearly a dozen world-class caliber show jumpers. The crème de la crème of this group are Reed’s top two mounts, Mika and Cylana. She credits her trainer, Katie Monahan Prudent, with having the keen eye to pick out these “superstars” while they were still relatively unproven.

Reed’s Olympic mount is Cylana, a buxom 10-year-old Belgian Warmblood, notorious for her sassy attitude around the barn but a true competitor in the ring. When Prudent discovered her in Europe, Cylana “had never competed above 4 foot, 3 inches and was very fat and very unfit,” said Reed. But recognizing the mare had heart and talent, the Kesslers bought her for their daughter to bring up the ranks. Similarly, Mika, a 13-year-old Selle Français, was a nervous horse upon purchase who needed a few more years experience under his belt. Now the bay gelding has hit his stride at the highest levels and frequently hams it up for the cameras and press.

“Our success wasn’t instant, and that’s what’s special,” Reed said. “What’s fun is the journey — getting somewhere and being able to look back and say, ‘Look what we did.’ ”



This year aboard her Olympic mount, Cylana, Reed anchored the U.S. team’s victory in the 2013 Nation’s Cup.

other teenage girl — shopping, sleeping, getting her nails done, and hitting the gym.

In the Spotlight

Over the past two years Reed has catapulted into the public eye, not only as a rider but also as a role model. A mass of young equestrians admire her and follow her every Twitter status update and horseback Instagram photo.

“I never really imagined that could happen,” she admitted. “Sometimes it’s tough being a role model because

I'm still a teenager myself, but it's amazing that I can inspire young people and riders in general."

She handles the media and fan attention with an aplomb well beyond her years and has embraced her local celebrity status around Lexington. The well-spoken teen says she has learned from her father's public speaking prowess how to navigate press conferences and magazine interviews. In November, for instance, Reed was the keynote speaker at the University of Kentucky Ag Equine Programs' Distinguished Industry Lecture Series. Also around that time she spoke to nearly 150 students at The Lexington School about her Olympic journey and the Alltech National Horse Show.

"I've never seen such a large group of kids that were so interested in the sport and so knowledgeable about horses," she said. "But I guess that's just the Lexington area, and I love that."

When asked what they enjoy most about Lexington, Reed and her mother unanimously agree it's the equine culture. "There's just something about it that everywhere you look there are horses," Teri Kessler said. "If I'm riding in the fields, I can look across the street at the young horses at the breeding operation at Mulholland Springs, then I can ride down the lane and see over the fence to Castleton Lyons. You go to Keeneland

and everybody there loves the horses — it doesn't matter if it's your kind of horses, it's all about the sport."

Now equipped with the facilities to support her show jumping career, Reed can focus on her next mission: qualifying for the 2016 Olympic Games — and this time bringing home some hardware. 🏆



Reed's next goal? Return to the Olympics and bring home a medal.

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