



IN-DEPTH WITH

# ILONA HANNICH

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ILONA HANNICH, A HIGHLY ACCOMPLISHED EQUESTRIAN VAULTING RIDER FROM SWITZERLAND AND HAS BECOME A PROMINENT FIGURE IN THE WORLD OF VAULTING.

BORN WITH A DEEP PASSION FOR HORSES AND A LOVE FOR ACROBATICS, ILONA DISCOVERED EQUESTRIAN VAULTING AT A YOUNG AGE AND KNEW SHE HAD FOUND HER CALLING. QUALIFYING FOR HER FIRST WORLD CUP SEASON, COMPETING AT THE WORLD EQUESTRIAN GAMES, AND WINNING MULTIPLE MEDALS AT THE EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP ARE AMONG THE HIGHLIGHTS THAT HAVE PROPELLED HER CAREER TO

NEW HEIGHTS.

**HOW DID YOU FIRST BECOME INTERESTED IN EQUESTRIAN VAULTING? CAN YOU SHARE THE STORY OF WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS SPORT AND HOW AND WHEN YOU GOT STARTED?**

As a kid, I always wanted to ride and dreamed about doing something with horses in the future. I could occasionally ride during holidays, but my parents weren't that into it. I also did gymnastics when I was little and loved all things related to acrobatics and the circus. When I read about vaulting in a horse magazine, I instantly knew that this was it. It was the perfect combination of those worlds. I went to my mum and told her I had to try this. I was eight years old back then.

**WHAT WERE SOME OF THE INITIAL CHALLENGES YOU FACED WHEN YOU BEGAN YOUR VAULTING JOURNEY?**

For many years, my training was at a basic level and not structured very well. Additionally, I learned some technical exercises in completely the wrong way. It would have been easier if I had learned things correctly from the beginning and started off with more intensity.

**DID YOU HAVE ANY ROLE MODELS OR MENTORS WHO INSPIRED AND GUIDED YOU ALONG THE WAY?**

I could name at least 20 athletes who served as role models for me. But I also drew a lot of inspiration from people outside of our sport. My family has been one of the biggest sources of support and inspiration throughout the years.

**Can you share a particularly memorable or significant moment from your early vaulting career?**

I remember a moment when I trained with one of my biggest idols, I had just lost my father, and it was not the easiest time for me. We trained together, and not only did he tell me he saw one of the best vaulters in the world in me – which already blew my mind – but he also asked me what was going on because he saw the sadness. He then told me, *"It is okay to be weak sometimes."* This sentence moved me deeply.



**WERE THERE ANY SPECIFIC COMPETITIONS OR ACHIEVEMENTS THAT MARKED MILESTONES IN YOUR JOURNEY?**

One big milestone was qualifying for my first World Cup season in **2017/18**. Also, competing at the World Equestrian Games in Tryon **2018**. At the end of **2021**, I was asked to join the Lütisburg team. Winning my first championship medal in Herning 2022 with the squad was the next big milestone for me. And then, of course, the European Championship **2023**, where I won four medals.

**EQUESTRIAN VAULTING INVOLVES WORKING CLOSELY WITH A HORSE. HOW DID YOU DEVELOP A BOND AND ESTABLISH A PARTNERSHIP WITH YOUR EQUINE PARTNER?**

Building a bond with the horse is one of the most important things in our sport. The feeling of trust is especially important to me. It is also important to learn how a horse reacts and what each horse needs, and what I need to be mindful of.

**HAVE YOU FACED ANY SETBACKS OR OBSTACLES IN YOUR VAULTING JOURNEY?**

I qualified for the Championship at least twice after a hard start to the qualification series.

Those were only the sports-related hardships. What has truly shaken me was losing my father to suicide in 2017. It happened right before my first World Cup season, just a few months before the qualification competitions for Tryon.

**Looking back on your journey, what advice or words of wisdom would you give to aspiring equestrian vaulting riders who are just starting out?**

Learn to love hard work, strength training, and conditioning. 🐾