

Dermott Lennon

“I am the world champion: but it hasn’t really changed me so much”



A modest man with few words, was how Pamela Young described Dermott Lennon in Horse International magazine. Lennon, thirty three years old, is Ireland's first world show jumping champion, winning the gold medal in Jerez this year. He had just four faults in the final incurred with his 15.2hh mare, Liscalgot. Lennon is originally from Banbridge County Down, and is now based in Arnhem, Holland.

Mr. Khaled Assem, Horse Time's Editor in Chief, traveled all the way to Holland so as to meet with Lennon just to help you know what it takes to be a world champion. How to prepare and train yourself and your horse for it and how it feels afterwards. Also Karim El-Zoghby, an outstanding Egyptian rider now based in the same stables with Lennon and flies our Egyptian flag over there, shared in the discussion.

HORSE Times (H.T): How do you feel after winning the world Championship? How did your life change?

Dermott Lennon (D.T): I have been asked that a lot, I did not really change, only in a sense that I became more functional; I can get into most of the shows now without going through the usual selection process. I didn't want to change, I am happy, I am the world champion: but it hasn't really changed me so much.

H.T: What is the prime element after this kind of success you have reached? Is it purely talent, hard work, or just smart choices of horses and shows?

D.L: I don't think there is one prime element, everything is important. I was lucky enough to have a really good horse, she was capable of jumping the biggest tracks; I have always believed that she is a little bit better than the other horses. This horse I got since she was four and now she is eleven and she won the world championship. I didn't know what it took to be a top jumper but I knew there is something special about it. She always tried to jump higher for me and I believed in her.

El-Zoghby: Dermott had this mare since she was young and he built it up all on his own and people used to tell him that she was not good enough; But Dermott always believed in his horse.

That's what's wrong in our country, because people believe that they always have to buy a ready horse.

No, here is an example for you, a young horse could reach the Top level, and you don't have to buy it at the Top.

H.T: How did you prepare for such a big championship?

D.L: It's very important to have the horse in top shape, have it assigned and confident. In fact, I think to have a goal, have your senses set against fallouts, is all. Early last year I knew I had a big chance to get around in the last year's world championship and I didn't use the mare so much during the summer. I think a lot of the experience I got during the Autumn last year in the European Championships, gave me a good idea of the level of fitness and everything the horse has to have to be good at the championship.

H.T: Who are the prime names that really helped you and gave you a boost?

D.L: Well, in the national show up until 99, I would say I was sort of stealing tips from who ever I could. Paul Darragh helped me a lot in many ways, taught me a lot in riding, picking the shows, and train the horses whenever I was out of stage. I didn't know which shows were good or bad, big or difficult, and he advised me a lot in that category. However, I think you've got to have a picture in your head of what way you want to ride, how you want your horse to go, and little tips along the way, could help you achieve that.

H.T: Is that sport horse-dependent, unless you have a great horse you don't have a chance, or is it still rider-dependent, regarding the smart choices and preparation?

D.L: It's very very horse-dependent, unless you have a quality horse you can't compete. However, to be a winner at the top level is rider-dependent to an extent.

H.T: Why did you choose Holland as a base?

D.L: It was a long meditated choice to come to Holland. I bought a horse from here, and then I came to do a little bit of training. There are a lot of good riders in Holland, and I like to ride amongst good riders and sort of see their systems rather than training with them; just sort of watch and learn. Then I ended up staying in Holland. Moreover, the foot & mouth disease broke out, so I couldn't go back to Ireland or travel through it to England. I then soon realized that it was a lot more realistic regarding traveling to the bigger shows in Europe as it now takes less time, which is healthier for the horses.

H.T: Tell us about the rough road to success?

D.L: I went to England when I was 20 years old, and rode for a breeder there. I won a lot of classes with him. Then I realized that winning the best classes, the championships, and the grand prix, is what people recognized; so winning all of the small classes throughout the year, you are just another name. I wanted to prepare a horse for a championship. So I went home, and had a nice five years old horse. The main championship for him that year was Dublin's horse show and I prepared him towards that and he won it. I guess when you succeed once, you would want to do it again, and then gradually as you achieve your goal, you look up for the next level and develop. It actually took me ten years to break on to the International circle. It took me a while to develop a system with my horse, learn how to ride properly, and then the next stage was to compete internationally. Once I started competing internationally, I wanted to win, get on the Irish team, and go to championships. I think it develops; with me it did anyway.

H.T: Now that you have achieved that target; do you have a plan figured out for the future?

D.L: I would love to go to the Olympics and try to win another medal, but I more and more realize how much horse power-dependent we are. So I will try and look for some nice and younger horses to build a team of horses, I have only really one top horse. That's really my plan; get new horses and try to get them on that level.

H.T: The show jumping sport; will it remain to represent passion and horsemanship or will it be commercialized?

D.L: There are so many different levels of show jumping in Ireland. The national novice level isn't really money oriented. And there is quite a lot of people who have facilities to have a stable and a horse and it is not so expensive. But at the top level it's getting so much like 'money can buy success' for the top riders. I have been an exception, my horse was sold last year and I had some lawyers that I have passed to the syndicate to keep her for me. But a lot of very successful riders have big bank accounts to support them and owners to supply them with great horses.

H.T: As you are definitely an example and an Idole for a lot of young riders or novice riders, what would you advice them?

D.L: I cannot help; it's been a very short time since I came from that level. However, the thing I would advise them is to feel how the horses ride and ride well. At first they will never know it all; I think I just only learned how to ride. Even as a world champion you keep learning everyday, whenever you think you know it all, you will discover there is still a lot to learn. I think it's very important to have good advice in producing your horse, to know when its time to move it up to the next level, or when to wait on it if its quality at the moment is weak. Also try to be as professional as possible; to know when to jump your horse, if the course suits it, when it's on top shape; just horse management as well as competing and riding. But to try and ride at a higher level before developing the horse, then you are asking for trouble.



Dermott Jumping with his horse "Liscalgot" in Jerez



Dermott Lennon and Karim El-Zoghby

H.T: Now that you are situated at the same base with an Egyptian rider, Karim El-Zoghby, did you think that there would be an Egyptian rider at that age riding at the same level as Karim?

D.L: I have never really thought of it, everybody has a chance to ride, if you are talented, there is no reason why you can't compete at the high level. There is a lot of natural talent involved in riding at a higher level or international level. If you have that talent and you have a good horse, it's ok.

H.T: What would your advice to Karim be?

D.L: It's hard to know, I have watched him everyday ride and stopped to give him tips. He can ride a lot of different horses. You know show jumpers, as in horses, are very individualistic. At the top levels there are so many tips and techniques of horses when they are jumping. Unless you have the finances to buy the exact horse that suits you, you have to compromise with what you have and try to make the best out of it. Karim is very good at riding what he has to ride. A lot of horses you try to change them to suit your system, to build on the horse's core base; build on the ground and try to fix what's not working, is a good advice I think.

H.T: If you would give a scale from one to ten, how important is it to have a good coach next to you regularly or at some point?

D.L: I believe it all depends on the individual; I personally can have a lesson from somebody and still may not pick or achieve a lot in that lesson. But give me a few days on my own playing around with a horse and I may achieve a lot. I think you must really have a feeling of what you are trying to do, not just simply say "put your leg and do this", we can all do that but if you don't feel the horse actually moving from it. Maybe I am a little bit slower in getting what feelings are but I actually do get it at the end. Riders that are always trained loose their ability to think for themselves. I think trainers should teach their riders to think for themselves a little bit more rather than depending solely on what they say. I think if I may have been trained at an earlier age, it could have spared me the bad habits through training myself and maybe riding bad horses. Trained riders, like the Americans, have a perfect position over the fence. I have learned bad habits like looking down and trying to do things for the horse rather than the horse do things for me, I think that if I was trained to look up and sit properly it could have been easier for me.

H.T: So you are actually saying that this intense guidance should be at an early stage, to produce the base for a good rider, and then individuality comes along after that?

D.L: Yes, I think at the early stage training is very good to know how to ride properly. Through my early riding years, I lived up to people that I thought were good riders. They give me a lot of advice that I found to be unprofessional after a time. I have learnt that your natural talent and ability can take you so far but when you go to the really tough levels; ride a little bit more mathematically. When I think about Spain now, how this mare could have jumped, it's all extremely new for her from 120's and 130's, I knew I pushed it a little bit too much but she could have done better if I have ridden mathematically more than with my feelings ■



Dermott, third from the right, after receiving his Gold medal