

# PERISCOPE ON NINA LIGON

**By Khaled Assem**

COUNTRY: THAILAND

DATE OF BIRTH: OCTOBER 8 1991

STAR SIGN: LIBRA

PROFESSION: EVENTING & FULL-TIME STUDENT AT  
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ALTHOUGH NINA LIGON HAS BEEN A DEDICATED HORSEWOMAN ALL HER LIFE, THE ROAD FROM FRESH MORNING GALLOPS ON THE BEACH IN HUA HIN, THAILAND, AS A CHILD TO PARTICIPATING IN THE EVENTING COMPETITION AT LONDON 2012 WAS COMPLEX AND DEMANDING. FROM THE AGE OF FIVE WHEN HER FAMILY MOVED TO VIRGINIA, USA, SHE KNEW WHERE SHE WAS HEADED AND WITH HER FAMILY'S SUPPORT SHE FOCUSSED ON GETTING THERE, BUILDING HER HORSES, IDENTIFYING THE APPROPRIATE OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS, CHASING POINTS AROUND THE WORLD. AND SHE SUCCEEDED IN BECOMING BOTH THE YOUNGEST PERSON IN THIS YEAR'S OLYMPIC EVENTING AND THE FIRST ASIAN WOMAN TO COMPETE IN EVENTING IN THE OLYMPICS. WITH THIS KIND OF DETERMINATION, WE'RE BOUND TO SEE A LOT MORE OF HER IN HIGH-LEVEL COMPETITION IN THE YEARS TO COME.





Federation were incredibly supportive.

Muang Thai Insurance in Thailand offered financial support. They also generously made team shirts for my cheering squad who came out in full force to support me at the Games. It was so inspiring to look up into the stands after my Dressage Test and see a sea of bright pink screaming and cheering me on.

Point Two has provided me with their state of the art protective air vests, which have upped the standard of safety in Equestrian sports.

I had 4 horses qualified to compete at London:

-Butts Leon I rode at the Games. Though we had less than a year to get to know each other, things really came together in London and I felt like we made a great team.

-Jazz King is an incredible, safe jumping horse. He is so consistent and reliable and we never had a XC jump penalty at the 3\* level. He gave me so much XC confidence.

-Tipperary Liadhnan is a very experienced eventer. He gave me some very solid 3\* mileage.

-Fernhill Fearless moved me up from the 1\* to 3\* level. He is without doubt, fearless, when it comes to XC yet in hand, is the gentlest horse I've ever met.

### **What's it been like since you got back from the Olympics?**

After the Games, my horses got some well-deserved down time, and I got a chance to stay in London with my family to watch other events and get the full "Olympic Experience." After the Games were over, I only had a month to pack everything up and move out to California for university. Butts Leon has returned to Andreas Dibowski in Germany, Jazz King and Tipperary Liadhnan have gone to riders in the US to help them reach their goals, just as they helped me. Fernhill Fearless was injured in January, and though he is sound, I am giving him the next year to ensure a full recovery.

### **Were you pleased with your performance in London and what was it like for you when you arrived there?**

### **Why did you decide to solely ride for Thailand?**

There were a couple reasons. Though I grew up in the US, I was born in Thailand. I spent most of my childhood summers there, but between school and competition, I couldn't go back as often once I got older. Riding for Thailand was a chance to reconnect with my heritage. The US has plenty of good eventers and this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me to not only fulfil my dream of going to the Olympics and but also to represent Thailand in a growing sport. I never realised how much of an impact I would have on eventing in Thailand until I started competing under the Thai Flag. I hope that my journey will help inspire other

young Thai riders and keep equestrian sports thriving.

### **Who has had the greatest influence on your riding career?**

Myself. My parents have always supported me and my trainers and horses helped shape me as a rider, but the dream was my own. I loved working with the horses and competing and that kept me motivated.

### **Tell us about your sponsors and horses?**

I'm lucky to have an incredible support team and group of horses. The Sports Authority of Thailand, Thai Olympic Council, and Thai Equestrian

Though competing with the world's best is intimidating, I was surprised with how comfortable I felt once I got to the venue. I knew many of the riders; Team USA and Canada from competing in the US, Team Japan from the Asian Games, and Team Brazil from my UK barn. The Eventing community is pretty small but very supportive.

I was very happy with our performance in Dressage and XC. Leon and I gave a very accurate test, and I was really glad I managed to keep him relaxed despite the atmosphere of the stadium and the cheering crowds. Our partnership was at its strongest on cross country day. The course proved to be much trickier than anticipated, but I was determined to complete with a clear round and we did just that. I had a surprising stop in show jumping, which was disappointing, but we cleared the fence on the second attempt and we went on to jump an immaculate round. Leon and I have only been a team for one year. I was proud of how we strengthened our partnership and worked together to complete my first Olympics.

**When did you first know you were going to the 2012 Olympics?**

The qualifying period for the Games went from March 2011-March 2012, so I wasn't officially informed that I had a spot until that March 2012 deadline. Even still, you're never 100% certain you are going to the Olympics until you give your first salute on the centre line.

**Explain what's involved in preparing for the Olympics and what it was like competing there?**

It was hard not to be tempted to over-train in the months preceding the Games. I wanted to be prepared to give my best possible performance, but it was important to keep in mind that training too hard puts a lot of physical and mental strain on the horses. It was crucial that I listen to what each horse was telling me and that I tailor my training plan to suit each of their individual needs.

**What was the show jumping and cross-country in London like?**

The XC course in London ran through Greenwich Park. Leading up to the Games, it seemed the biggest concern for the eventers was to ensure our horses were fit enough to run the very hilly 10 minute course and be able to SJ two clear rounds the next morning.



The course seemed fair and inviting when walked on foot, so it came as a big surprise that there were 15 falls! Because the grass was so short, there was very little purchase and horses were slipping on the turns and hills of the very twisty course. I rode near the end of the day and was able to watch how the horses handled the ground, but it was incredibly nerve wracking to watch so many falls.

**What training have you had to do to get to where you are now?**

My training started as a five year old when I first began riding. Starting at a young age gave me a great foundation to build my eventing career on and I slowly worked my way up the levels to become a confirmed 3\* rider. It was a pretty tall order to ride at the Olympics at such a young age, but given that I wanted to go to University and not become a professional rider, it was my only window. I had amazing trainers who supported my goals and helped me move safely up the levels.

**What are the greatest challenges you face?**

Injuries. The sport is very physically demanding for the horses and though we try and provide them with the best care possible, injuries are unavoidable. It is the nature of upper level competition.

**What are your plans and ambitions for the next five years?**

I am currently taking a break from riding to focus on my studies. I took two years off before starting University so that I could qualify and prepare for the Games. It has been a very big change to go from spending all day at the barn to spending all day in class, but I am really enjoying Stanford.

I'd like to say thank you to my amazing support team and all the friends, family, and Thai fans who have cheered me on.