

SIMON DELESTRE

RIDING HIGH IN THE GRAND PALAIS

In professional show jumping, pedigree is as important for the rider as it is for the horse. Unless your father's father's father was an elite jumper or your mare's mare's stallion made top three in a Grand Prix event, the probability of a decorated career for man or animal is next to nil. Creating a winning balance of rider, breeder, sponsor, and horse can cost millions of dollars. It seems unlikely, then, that Simon Delestre, only a second-generation equestrian from the small town of Metz, in northeastern France, could become number one in the world. But this is the situation for the thirty-five-year-old on a stormy afternoon in March, during the second day of the Saut Hermès, the sport's most opulent Grand Prix event.

With a half day's riding still ahead of him, Delestre is making his way down a golden staircase under the vaulted glass ceiling of Paris' Beaux-Arts masterpiece, the Grand Palais, where the event has taken place for the past seven years. Delestre is a partnered rider with Hermès, and he's competing on his home turf. Every third step or so, he is attacked by a different news reporter, some with cartoonishly large, furry microphones, all questioning the rider about his plans for the upcoming Rio Olympic Games. Wearing a tapered blue Hermès coat with a pressed shirt and white pants, Delestre directs their questions—in English and French—back to the event at hand.

Like many of his peers, Delestre began his professional career as a child, riding ponies in the junior league. He finished high school with honors, competing in jumping events throughout. Delestre then went to college, pursuing a degree in science, but after only a few months, he asked his parents if he could stop studying and devote his life to horses. In time, they obliged.

Delestre's decision to study science in college was due, in part, to his father's worry that his son might be mediocre. "It's nice to think your boy could be one of the best riders in the world," Simon says. "But he has a better chance of just being a normal rider. And if you're not on the five-star circuit, it's tough to have a nice life because the prize money is average, and it's difficult to win because there are so many good riders," he continues. "I think he was a little bit afraid that I would only be a good rider, but maybe not the best."

Saut Hermès is one of forty-eight showings Delestre will compete in this year alone. At every event, Delestre and his team will try to pick the right horse without overextending any one animal. "I have two horses that will be able to jump in the Olympics—Hermès Ryan and Classic Bois Margot," he says. Hermès Ryan is Delestre's prize horse, a powerful though petit, chestnut-colored eleven-year-old gelding who took the bronze in last year's FEI European Jumping Championship in Aachen, Germany. This weekend, however, Delestre is resting both; instead, he is jumping Chesall Zimequest, to build the younger horse's confidence. "Chesall has good experience indoors, but, outside, he's still a little bit green. He still has to learn a little. He has only this season to get to the same level as the two others when we go outside."

From the stands in the Grand Palais, one might observe a scattering of well-dressed men and women passing close-range remarks just behind the first obstacle or exchanging firm handshakes in the tunnels of the stadium. As much as show jumping is a sport of physical prowess, it is also a game of high-value deals and Bodhi speculation. For example, Delestre purchased Hermès Ryan when the horse was only five years old. "He is, for sure, one of the twenty best horses in the world. He's like a

diamond," Delestre says. Hermès Ryan might well be sold to another rider and, over time, adapt to become a Grand Prix champion for somebody else, Delestre admits. Many elite horses compete until they are seventeen or eighteen years old, so, barring injury, a prize gelding could be a million-dollar moneymaker, but at a tremendous cost with no guarantees.

With the help of his father, Marcel, a former five-star rider and current coach of the Colombian Olympic team, the Delestres are known for getting good returns on their investments. "I have fifty-five horses at home," Delestre says. "I have four riders working for me and going to shows with some younger horses, but I always try to keep one or two top horses for myself." But things can still go wrong, and slowly. "If a horse is only good and not a superstar, we sometimes sell them, but after six, seven years."

In the end, Delestre did not place at the Saut Hermès, but he earned Chesall some needed competition experience—the flashing bulbs and screaming fans can spook a horse into early retirement. Five months later, it was announced that Delestre was withdrawing from the Olympics because Hermès Ryan had suffered a micro-fracture in his back leg. It was a big blow for the rider, who entered the event as the number-two show jumper in the world. But, moving forward, Delestre can count on the fifty-five horses back home, one of which may be his next superstar. But who really knows? For every bit of assurance a rider gets from his illustrious bloodline, bank account, or breeder, a career at the top of this sport is precarious. The difference between a "five star" and a "normal" show jumper will ultimately be decided by the highest rail on the final obstacle of his next Grand Prix event.



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