



*“Knowing George is watching gives me a little bit of an edge. It’s the immense respect I have for him.”*

GEORGINA BLOOMBERG

# GEORGE H. MORRIS

# UNRELENTING

The Real Story: Horses, Bright Lights, and My Pursuit of Excellence

with  
Karen Robertson Terry



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was spooking at the noise, but when I reached in my pocket to take them out he freaked out even more! I couldn't even take the change out of my pocket while on his back. So I just kept riding and remembered to empty my pockets before I got on him from then on!

## VII. THE HICKSTEAD HEDGE

While I was getting back on my feet after my broken leg, Jane Clark loaned me some of her hunters to ride so I could get back in the show ring. Her horses were just wonderful—you thought, “Wait,” and they waited, you thought, “Move up,” and they moved up—I never knew horses could ever be that simple to ride. It was a great way to strengthen my body after my injuries.

I took an all-women team on a tour to Europe that summer, which was a combined private tour with Conrad Homfeld and Joe Fargis. Debbie Dolan rode Albany, Anne Kursinski had Starman (a wonderful horse from Germany), Joan Scharffenberger rode her favorite Victor, and Katie Prudent rode Make My Day and Special Envoy.

I also brought Rio on that summer's tour and decided to take my first crack at a Grand Prix in thirteen months at the Windsor show, a national-level show and a good one to get my feet wet again. Well, my plans to take it slow with an easier Grand Prix course were foiled. Thinking we'd feel right at home, Alan Ball built a huge course! He likely wanted to show his course-designing skill and get invited to build courses in America, and in particular at the Garden. I guess he didn't realize that I was hoping he'd go easy on us! That was also the show where we had two queens in attendance—Queen Elizabeth was on one side of the ring in her Royal Box seat, and Joanne Woodward the queen of American theater watched from her seat by the in-gate. Rio jumped around beautifully that week with me back in the tack. It felt like we hadn't missed a beat, despite the fences being so huge. I was on top of the world, being back in the Grand Prix ring.

The next week we showed at Hickstead. Between shows, I drove up to David and Lucinda Green's place. Lucinda is a famous Olympic event rider with a dozen medals from international championships and Olympic Games during the seventies and eighties. Mark Phillips of Britain, and Mark Todd and Andrew Nicholson, both from New Zealand, were also there, completing an A-list crew

of world-class eventers. I taught a two-day clinic with them and not only did they ride hard, but I learned that eventers leave show jumpers in the dust when it comes to partying! They are all guts and gusto, living life to its absolute fullest whether in the saddle or celebrating afterward. We had a wonderful two days and I really enjoyed (as I always do) crossing over into that world.

### Mark Phillips

I rode with George in England at a clinic with all the top eventers, and that was quite an experience. I remember he had us all line up and jump a line in four strides. Then he had us each jump it in five, then six, then seven, then eight, and even nine strides, where we were forced to put a huge bend in the line to fit that many strides in. Then after all that, he said, "Okay, now do the three." So I went down to the end of the field and had to really gallop to get the three strides! George is classical equitation through and through, everything he does and teaches is out of a classical textbook. For George, jumping is very simple. You come to the jump in the perfect canter, with the perfect balance, in the perfect rhythm, to the perfect spot, and it will always work out! Truly, George has much wisdom to offer and one would be daft to not listen to what he has to say. As well as help you through a riding moment, he also makes you think and work out the best way to solve the puzzle for your particular horse. You take away so much from his lessons.

At the Olympics in Athens and Beijing, I was coaching the three-day eventing team at the same time that George was coaching the jumpers, and George was always super supportive for the eventers. When we won the World Championships in Jerez in 2002, he walked the course with us and was a great help. He also has a great sense of humor that shows itself: one day he was helping my eventers and they kept leaving a massive gap, so maybe out of frustration he said, "You've got to learn to loooooove that deep spot!"

After Windsor we moved on to Hickstead, and with the Bunn family as our hosts going back to the fifties, it always felt like a home away from home. On the first day at the show, the master of Hickstead, Dougie Bunn, suggested he and I go for a ride together. I thought that would be wonderful, as the Hickstead grounds were an old English countryside estate with beautiful trails and fields. I met up with Dougie and much to my surprise, followed him on Rio as he walked his horse into the main arena. Typically, you aren't allowed to ride in the arena before the horse show for obvious reasons. Douglas knew exactly

what he was doing and I wasn't in a position to argue, so we hacked around in the main arena for forty-five minutes together. Of course, this was the perfect preparation for Rio, to have this chance to look around in the ring. As a result, the first day of the show went more smoothly than it likely would've otherwise.

The second afternoon at Hickstead, the course wasn't a scopey course but it was a very careful one with lots of verticals, planks, and flat jump cups. It was like a rub class, since even rubs would end up being faults. The second fence on course, the massive and historic Hickstead hedge, was set seven strides after the first fence and on a turn going away from the in-gate. The difficulty with a hedge like that one is that sometimes a horse misjudges it as a bank. The Hickstead hedge that day had been built with a wide oxer over it. I rode in the middle of the order and witnessed over a dozen horses struggle with the Hickstead hedge. Some paddled and knocked down the rails and others had bad falls or simply refused it. Paul Schockemöhle and Deister were among those who had trouble, nearly falling down. I didn't really worry about it much because the fences at Windsor were very big the prior week and Rio had a lot of scope when he was feeling confident. After that big hedge jump, the course required a delicate, careful approach, so my biggest concern was overriding the hedge and getting Rio so wound up that he'd be more likely to have a rub at the jumps afterward.

I rode Rio into the ring, jumped the first fence and galloped down the seven strides in a nice forward hunter stride to the Hickstead hedge. In the last couple of strides, I felt I might be getting there too soft and a bit early, without the torque to attack it appropriately. Rio had never been a horse to swim through a fence, but if he got to a fence awkwardly, he would simply *wilt*. When he did that, he felt like a tire with the air rushing out of it over the top of the jump. He would jump weak and upside-down, and I would have to whip him across the fence to give us a chance to make it to the other side. Rio jumped the giant hedge oxer, but he wilted as he did so, bringing rails down and catapulting me off his back.

I landed on the ground and was quite shook up. I saw lights behind my eyes and my fingers tingled. I lay there and got up slowly. Michael Rüping, a German rider and also a doctor, took me up to the jury room and examined me. After he was done poking around, he patted me on the back and said, "Georgie, I think you're all right. You go ahead and get on and ride in the speed class." As I walked back to the barn, my fingers were still tingling and my head and vision didn't feel quite right. Having been raised in a very cautious family when it came to health, I didn't think getting back on right away was a great

idea. I figured it would be smarter to pop over to the nearby hospital and get checked out, and perhaps some radiographs taken.

Kathy Moore and Danny Marks drove me to the hospital. The X-rays were taken and after several hours of waiting and speaking with doctors, they gave me a clean bill of health. As we drove out of the parking lot, a doctor in a lab coat came sprinting up behind us and pounded on the trunk, hollering at us. Kathy slammed on the brakes and nurses came trotting out of the building with a gurney. Panting, the man informed me that I had a broken neck! As the story went, a radiologist was walking by the film viewing box, where my films still hung, and asked, "Where's the patient with the broken neck?" Not only was there a fracture, but it was unstable and could have caused paralysis. They put me on a stretcher with a neck brace, wheeled me back into the hospital, and drugged me up with sedatives. Consequently, after my injury and the falls of so many others at the hedge that year, Dougie Bunn decided to substantially cut it down!

Cooped up in the hospital for the weekend with a halo on to stabilize my neck, I tried my best to keep up with what was happening over at the show. Kathy kept things running and from my hospital bed, I watched on television as my all-women team won the Nations Cup! Even in current record books, this was one of the only instances when an all-female team won the Nations Cup at a five-star show. To end up on top of all those great teams from around the world on their home turf was a major accomplishment, and the Europeans were taken down another peg by stellar American riders (photo 170).

After only riding one entire show at the Grand Prix level, I found myself grounded once again. Frustrated, it helped I had two burly male nurses by my side as I floated all the way back to New Jersey, drugged to the hilt. I was so high I didn't need an airplane! Back in the States, the Hunterdon medical center welcomed me back for more treatment and thankfully, the recovery wasn't nearly as long as the broken leg. Still, I had to suffer through another few months out of the show ring.

Later that same summer, we organized a short, all-Hunterdon trip to Europe for some and Martha Wachtel (later: Jolicoeur) brought a couple of mares. I was supposed to have ridden myself at one particular German show but with my broken neck I couldn't. Instead, I sent Martha there with her second horse. Surrounded by German men hitting on her the entire week, Martha kept placing higher and higher against all of them with each day that went by!



## Martha Jolicoeur

George told me I had to ride in his place at the smaller German show since we had accepted the invitation. I agreed, but I could only ride my second-string horse Servus, who was a mare by Lucky Boy (my other mare wasn't good in the mud and the weather had been very wet). I was really nervous about taking George's place, and when I first got there I felt a little out at sea. I didn't speak a word of German and I remember the German riders laughing at me and mocking me, especially because Servus didn't flex and they were all into their flatwork, of course. George arrived a day or two afterward and, day by day, as the show went on, we improved our results. I was sixth the first day, then second or third the next day.

At the end of the show, George came to meet me and watch—and I won the Grand Prix! I even won a Volkswagen. It was such a thrill! I hadn't seen George yet that week and after the victory gallop and presentation, I saw him working his way through the crowd to see me. He put a hand on my knee and said, "You know, Martha, you always whine and worry, but you're a winner. I forgot that about you, you always win!" and then he turned, without missing a beat and said, "But you can't take that car you just won, because you're driving me in the Mercedes back to Aachen." And I replied, "Of course, I'll drive you to Aachen, but not until tomorrow morning. Tonight, we celebrate!"

In 1987, the girl I'd seen on her way to becoming a huge talent in California, Meredith Michaels, came to Hunterdon. Karen Healey still coached Meredith in the equitation Finals that year, but otherwise she trained with me for the jumper ring. Meredith had something special from the beginning. When I traveled back to Aachen later that summer, I invited her to come along to give her exposure to the international scene. She also came with me to the Pan American Games later that year in Indianapolis. I wasn't in the habit of taking teenagers with me to Aachen or to the Pan Am Games, but she was so ambitious and bright with a wonderful work ethic. Nobody knew who she was yet, but people were very impressed when they met her, in particular William Steinkraus. Long before she became known as the famous rider she is today, I helped her get some important exposure to the top of the sport.

## Meredith Michaels-Berbaum

Riding with Karen Healey exposed me to George from the very beginning and I rode in clinics with him regularly from a young age. It was always a dream for me to go east and ride with him. I worked hard in

school, got into Princeton University, and went to school in New Jersey. That meant I was very close to Hunterdon and could ride with George. It was such a dream come true to have that opportunity.

Later, George brought me with him as a student to Aachen and the Pan American Games in the late eighties, when he was Chef d'Equipe for the Belgium team. George also took me to Europe on a Young Riders team to give me exposure to competing in Europe. Those two trips opened my eyes to the international world. I badly wanted to compete for a gold medal and ride at Aachen. I was a good student in school and interested in a lot of potential career options. Before I went to Europe with George, I hadn't yet decided that horses were going to be my profession and my life. Taking me to Europe showed me the world stage and that's when I decided what I really wanted to do. So you see, George had a huge impact on the path of my entire life. Even more than the important lessons he taught me about riding and training, that exposure sparked a dream. When they all went home at the end of the Young Riders tour, I stayed in Europe and followed that dream.

To this day, Aachen remains my favorite show in the world. I later went on to win the Grand Prix there, which was an amazing experience. Throughout my career, despite staying in Europe and changing my nationality, George continued to resurface and be present during big moments in my life—like when I was nominated to be the first woman ever to ride on a championship team in Germany when we went double clear and won at Hickstead. He was there when I won three World Cup Finals, when I made the final four in the World Games with Shutterfly, and he was also there when I lost a bronze medal by a couple of tenths of a second. George was there again and again and again and always supportive of me. He's not just a mentor but a very, very close friend.

Our team for the Pan American Games in 1987 was Rodney Jenkins, Katharine Burdsall, Lisa Jacquin, and Greg Best. Ian Millar won individual gold on Big Ben and Rodney Jenkins silver on Czar, with Canada winning team gold and the USET silver. Canada impressively stood toe to toe with the American team, with Ian Millar leading the way. After three months recovering from my broken neck, I regained strength and started showing once again, rising quickly back up to the Grand Prix level. I went to Calgary that fall and to the indoor shows and Rio did very well, despite the fact that indoor courses weren't as comfortable as the outdoor ones. I continued helping younger riders, like Joan Scharffenberger and Lisa Tarnopol, and others in the jumper group out of Hunterdon.

Jeff Cook, a wonderful friend and excellent rider, horseman, and teacher, became a very important part of Hunterdon in those years. Jeff worked for me for periods of time on and off, and was always a fabulous fit for our operation. He's a phenomenal horseman, with the necessary attention to detail, intelligence, and personality that works excellently with students and clients. Working side by side with Chris Kappler, Jeff practically ran Hunterdon for many years in the late eighties and early nineties.

## Jeff Cook

I grew up riding in clinics with George Morris at Don Kerron and Joan Curtin's farm in the early seventies. From a professional, etiquette, and commitment standpoint, I've learned so much from him. I saved my money to go back East to watch him teach when he still had the big hunter/equitation operation, with Bill Cooney and Frank Madden working for him. When I went to work for him the first time in 1986, George was in the upper barn doing the jumpers and he was still riding competitively then. Perhaps the biggest thing I took away from working for him was the day-in, day-out training of the horses. It was so meticulous, how much he flatted and jumped day to day. He also was creative in getting out of the ring. In Florida in the late eighties we would do a lot of trail riding, because Palm Beach wasn't very developed then like it is now. George would trot down the trails and we'd follow behind him.

Every detail matters to George. One of my favorite things was to sit with him and go through the list of clients and horses when he was in town. We would talk through each one and he would give us feedback on what direction he thought made sense for that rider or horse. I really cherish those moments, looking back. I learned so much from listening to his thought process.

George's string of hunters was unbelievable and many of them he spotted as very young unproven horses. It wasn't just George training top show horses for the Garden. He bought Dillon as a two-year-old at a training stable out West where they raised racing Thoroughbreds. He just jumped him over a couple of hay bales and saw his potential; that horse was a national champion year after year. That's something people don't realize about George, that ability to spot and bring along horses when they are very young. He has always had such an excellent eye.

I remember one day in particular: a hot summer Friday late afternoon. A young student and his mom pulled in with their two-horse trailer for his lesson. The boy was a fairly green rider with a pony and it had been a very long day, so I offered to teach the lesson for George. He

said no, that he would teach him, and I so watched and help set jumps. The boy didn't jump more than cross-rails that day, but George gave him a careful and detailed hour-long lesson. That taught me something just as important as what I learned watching George get someone ready for the World Cup: that you have to put your all into it, no matter what.

The World Cup Finals in 1988 were back once again in Gothenberg, Sweden, which is the official home of that show although it does travel from city to city. I was thrilled to be competing that year on Rio, who was in peak form. The first leg is a Table A course under Table C rules, which is a speed class. Rio was clear and for him, he was very good. I didn't ask him to race around and be a speed demon because if I did that, he was liable to get scared and worried. We ended up fourteenth after the first class, which I was very happy with because of the way they used to score it. If you were in the top eighteen after the first round, you still had a chance to win it. Nowadays, with the current scoring system in the World Cup, you really need to be in the top five after the first round to end up on top.

The second night was the big Friday night jump-off and overnight the schooling ring had been completely flooded. It was a total aberration—I've never seen it before or since, but I believe a pipe broke at the facility overnight and caused the flood. Rio was completely undone by the footing, dancing and spooking and unable to focus. Warming up was a nightmare and with him so flustered, he went poorly in the class, wilting at the fences and not jumping confidently. It wasn't necessarily a surprise after his behavior in the warm-up ring, but I was so disappointed. I rode him in the big class on Sunday but his confidence had unraveled...it was the only time he stopped in his life. It wasn't a quick stop, it was one of those slow motion "giving-up" stops at the fourth fence and I knew he was just shaken up. His heart wasn't in it—so I tipped my hat and left the ring (photo 172).

Ian Millar won that World Cup Final with Big Ben, which I was very happy about, as it was yet another North American winner (photo 173). In fact, Ian won back-to-back World Cup Finals in 1988 and 1989, an incredible feat! Out of eleven consecutive World Cups, the score was: Europeans 1, North Americans 10. I'm not sure we'll ever have an era of dominance like that again. Of the winners during that era, most were either my students or my classmates, so to speak, under the tutelage of Bert de Némethy, like Michael Matz.

After Rio had lost his confidence in the sloppy warm-up ring at the World Cup Final, he needed to be rebuilt from the ground up. First, we did a lot

of flatwork to relax him and then literally began by only jumping cross-rails, steadily raising his confidence. Rio's program was totally designed to build his confidence as solidly as possible, and by the time Spruce Meadows Masters rolled around, he was sharp and ready to go to Calgary. I just hoped we wouldn't run into any issues like the flooded footing at the World Cup Finals.

Nearly every year I was Chef d'Equipe for the American riders in Calgary, and it's a fabulous show with one of the best Grand Prix classes in North America. The du Maurier International was one of the richest Grand Prix in the world—these days it still is, but they call it the CN International. In the Friday night class, Rio went excellently and we were fifth. We would've been even faster in the jump-off if not for slipping in a turn from deep footing. Chris Kappler was the youngest rider on the team and placed eighth on his horse Concorde, which was an excellent result for him. Chris was really starting to show his ability in the big jumper ring, and he worked Concorde through some difficulty at Liverpools and the water jump.

The du Maurier format was the old fashioned Grand Prix approach with two full jumping rounds followed by a jump-off, if necessary. Rio felt great warming up and we went clear in the first round—then we went back in, rode ninth in the order and were clear in the second round too—the only ones to go double clear. I was thrilled! Only one rider was left to go after me, and I walked Rio down the backside of the stabling area, since I had to get off him near his stall. Katie Prudent came running down the road and yelled, "He had a fence down—you've won!"

### Katie Prudent

George and I joke about that day, because I was trying to help school him in the warm-up ring before the second round of the du Maurier. I was talking through some of the lines on the course, and George was so focused on what he wanted to do in the ring that he barked back to me, "Stop it, I can't listen to this! I know what I'm going to do." And he was right. He was in the zone. The second round was a lot of pressure but he rode it beautifully. After he won, I told him he was just the absolute worst student, talking back to me like that!

At last, my wonderful and quirky Rio whom I loved so much had shown the world he was a winner! We finally had our day in the sun. The du Maurier was the richest class in the world then, with the purse of a half-million dollars. I never would've dreamed I was capable of that kind of world-class win after

more than a decade out of the jumper ring. We had each overcome obstacles to earn the win—to have success on such a fragile, complex horse was quite a feat, especially after our difficulties at the World Cup and my rehabilitation after two injuries. It was of equal importance to winning the Grand Prix of Aachen in 1960, but it was particularly special to win with Rio, a horse I'd trained and developed myself. That day was one of the proudest moments I've ever had as a horseman, because it was truly when all my hard work and patience with Rio paid off. I was thrilled beyond words, and it was a great ending to that year of many ups and downs (photos 175, 176).

After we'd won the du Maurier International up in Calgary, I took Rio to Washington to show. As we were warming up in the schooling ring, he stopped at a cross-rail about six inches high—acting like he'd never seen a jump in his life! Caught so off guard—with Rio putting his head down and dropping his shoulder so suddenly—I slid right over his head, hit the ground, and separated my shoulder. I couldn't believe it. All my war wounds were from that horse!

By the Florida circuit in 1988, Rio was one of the best horses in the country. Down in Wellington and Tampa that winter, he was back at the top of his game and consistently in the ribbons. We were second in the Tampa Grand Prix to Joe Fargis riding Mill Pearl, an Irish TB mare that Joe took to the Olympics in Seoul. Both Joe and I went clear, but there was an inside turn to a fence that Rio simply couldn't make and so we ended up second. It was nothing to sneeze at, no doubt about that, and as a result of that great placing, I qualified for the World Cup Finals.

I heard from a friend that while a famous past Olympian looked out over the ring as Joe and I were getting our ribbons, he commented that the Americans had so many good riders for the Seoul Olympics that they could field a men's team, a women's team, and a gay team. I didn't hear him say it myself—I heard it secondhand so he may not have—but I'd like to think he did. To me, it was a sign of both our enormous depth of good riding in the United States at that time and that alternative lifestyles were becoming more accepted. Even though this guy allegedly made the remark in a very friendly way, I do remember feeling a tad bit sensitive hearing about it at first, simply because I was very private about my personal life. However, looking back I think it said a lot about the horse world in those years.