

FREE REIN WITH:

Sharon White

Story And Photos By **KIMBERLY LOUSHIN**

Shortly before she started her journey to Santiago, Chile, for the 2023 Pan American Games, Sharon White received a special gift from Gail and Jennifer Wofford, wife and daughter of White's longtime mentor Jimmy Wofford, who died in February.

"They give me Jimmy's pinque coat," White said. "There were some tears. So much effort goes into it. It's not about the coat, but that coat means so much. You've just put a lifetime of work into something, and to have it come to fruition really means a lot to me.

"I love having it, and I will cherish it," White said of receiving Jimmy's coat. "I just see the decades of effort and emotion in that coat. Now I've got his, and now I've got my own. It's just so cool. It's not about that thing, but it's about what that thing stands for, which is just a true love and dedication to the sport of eventing, which is just really awesome."

White, 49, Summit Point, West Virginia, has worked towards earning a spot on a team for her entire career, and now she's gotten her shot with her own Claus 63, an 11-year-old Holsteiner (Cattoo—Tina II, Levisto).

"I feel very ready, and I have been close in the past and probably haven't felt as ready as I do now, so I'm willing to fight for it," she said. "I feel very strongly about this horse and myself, and so it's really, really special."

And as she approaches her team debut on Oct. 22, White feels gratitude to the vast amount of support she's received—not just from her friends, family and staff, but from those she's only met once or twice.

"People send me cards after I teach them clinics or something like that. I save them all," she said. "I think we should be so grateful to all of the people in our world. I'm grateful to everybody. I'm grateful to the people who do the important things that matter in the world while I get to ride horses. I am so glad someone is taking care of things that actually matter."

Sharon White is making her team debut at this year's Pan American Games (Chile) with her own Claus 63.





Sharon White brought her Claus 63 up from training level to the four-star level.

What are you looking forward to the most about going to Santiago?

I'm actually looking forward to the whole thing. Representing my country. I'm really excited about my team and my team members. They're all excellent competitors, and they inspire me, and being around the level of competition that you're going to see in a team sport, I think that's huge. I'm really looking forward to being part of Team USA.

Tell me about your first horse or pony.

The very first one was a mare named "Sprite." Sudden Fortune was her show name. My mom [Carol White] and I found her in the newspaper. I think she was \$3,000 on the Eastern Shore [of Maryland] and an off-the-track Thoroughbred—all the things you should not have. We took our barn manager with us to go look at her, and the barn manager of course said, "Absolutely not. This is completely inappropriate, and you will not do this," and of course we did, because I was like, "Oh no, I have to have her. I love her!"

I fell off of her many, many times before accomplishing anything. One time I fell off her and broke my tailbone, and that's when my riding instructor was like, "We need to put you somewhere different," in a better program. That actually worked out great because I got put in a better program, and you learn. She ended up being my first preliminary horse. I

ended up doing the DeBroke [Championships] with her.

You're known for your orange cross-country colors. What's the origin of that?

There's no actual special story to the orange besides it was a happy color, and it was different, and no one else had it. I started out blue and green as everybody did, and then I had a friend who was like, "Why don't you do orange?" And I was like, "Oh, that's a good idea. That makes me smile." And that was the beginning, and it evolved into a thing. Other people took over it, and the amount of orange stuff I was given was [extensive]—and I love everything. I cherish things that are given. I love that it was special.

What quality do you value most in a horse?

I think most horses are earnest, and I love that quality about horses. They're very, very genuine. As a competitor, my answer to that is very simple: trainability. If you have a trainable horse, in this sport you can get really far with that. And sound, so good legs, straight legs, good feet. As a competitor those are the things I'm interested [in].

As a horseman and someone who loves horses, I appreciate their earnestness. I think you can have a horse that's never going to be a team horse but is so special and so earnest, and you know there is the right place for that horse.

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It might not be at the top level, but I've learned that over the years, having bred and trained many, many horses—many horses to the highest level, and [I] tried to train many horses to the highest level and [didn't] succeed—you really have to appreciate what a horse is physically able to do and make sure they are doing that job.

I think if they are not earnest or lack trainability [it] can usually be that you're trying to make them do something they just can't. I really appreciate that now.

What quality do you value most in a person?

Genuineness. If you are willing to be trusting and open, I think most people really want to be genuine and hardworking, and these are the things that really matter to me—that you put forth what you want. You have to put out what you want to get back. You care about something, and you do your best. That's all you can do. I try to find that in people.

Which horse past or present would you most like to ride?

The one that's running through my mind right now is Gem Twist, but there are so many horses that I would just love to

sit on. Gem Twist I think is just so special.

For event horses: Cooley On Show. That was one of the best event horses there ever was in terms of a cross-country horse; I don't think you get better than that. I think I've been really lucky with the ones I have sat on.

Bonfire in the dressage. I probably couldn't ride one side of him, but that looks like fun. I think some of the western horses too, the things they do, that's really cool. Could you imagine sitting on a really good barrel racer?

What do you like to do when you're not riding and working?

I love learning. I love reading. I'm always trying to learn something new. If it involves learning something new, I'm pretty happy. I think every time I learn something new, it's applicable to what I do and what I love, which is spending the day with horses. If I'm not involved with horses, I love reading and listening to something or trying to figure out how the human mind works. That's a never-ending project, and I just love it.

I'm addicted to the New York Times games. I'm addicted to Wordle; that's the first thing I do each morning. I'm so glad they only give you one a day. Otherwise it's totally

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—Sharon White

possible I could spend all day long playing Wordle because it keeps my mind amused.

I also really enjoy watching “Suits” in the evening with my husband, so there is some down time. It is just a great TV show; it's very satisfying. I love when you find something that you basically can just be mindless, but [that's] highly entertaining.

What are you reading right now?

I have a stack. I just read “Lessons In Chemistry.” It's amazing. I just sent it to a bunch of people because it is such a great book.

I've always got a book that I'm learning from. I've got “Breath” by James Nestor. I'm a believer in breathing and how it helps with riding, so there's the science behind it. And I'm listening to a new one [on] human behavior—why we act the way we do—and I'm so fascinated by that. And then there's another one I'm listening to, “Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers.” I will flip back and forth depending on the moment. I also just finished reading “Caste” [by Isabel Wilkerson], which is about being African American in this society. It is shocking and unbelievable and powerful, and absolutely everyone should read it.

What three things are always in your refrigerator?

I have this sparkling water, this clementine and peach San Pellegrino. It's just got a hint of [flavor]. I have to have it. I'm trying to figure out how to get it to Chile. I have to have blueberries. There are many other things I have to have, but a yogurt or a lemon are definitely always accessible to me.

What is the best feeling in the world?

That's a loaded question. So many things just ran through my mind. In direct relation to the sport of eventing, the *best* feeling in the world is after a good cross-country ride. There is so much anticipation and adrenaline and anxiety and all the things before, and then the release of that after is why we do the sport. That is why we are all addicted. That feeling and the satisfaction of being [with] your partner and accomplishing something together. That is such a great feeling, so that is one of my top three for sure.

There's also great joy in teaching a young horse, or when you learn something new, or you figure something out when riding—just those moments of getting better and learning.

Who has had the greatest influence on your career?

There's never one answer to anything, but initially when you say that: Jimmy Wofford. He is just such a special human being and one of the very top competitors, who truly had compassion for a horse, and that is me. That is me, so that is why we got along so well, peas in a pod. People think differently, and there's nothing wrong with that. I can only be me, and I can only do the things I believe, but when you find someone like-minded like a Jimmy—he loved learning, and he loved horses. He was fascinated and interested in all things.

It's just a funny thing. I didn't grow up with Jimmy. [We're] two beings that are just similar in how they view horses and life, and so that's really special. There are so many people who have influenced me and mean so much to me, but if I can only pick one, Jimmy is the one I spent the most time with and is symbiotic with me. 🐾