# A Talented Rider Comes Full Circle

*By Stefan Schetselaar*

Will Coleman's first teacher was a Shetland pony named TJ.

The future Olympic eventer was only six, freshly moved from New York to a wide-open farm outside Charlottesville, the oldest of three boys with a world of green fields in front of him. TJ carried him out into those verdant Virginia pastures and began the kind of education no classroom could give.

"I was lucky," Coleman said. "I grew up in a horsey family. We lived on a beautiful farm. I got to be around horses and horse people every day of my life."

Decades later, that education hasn't slowed. When he came to Middleburg this fall to speak at the National Sporting Library & Museum, he wandered the galleries first, letting the place come to him.

Horses sculpted by Nic Fiddian-Green stood in quiet poses, made of bronze, lead, marble, each one holding a kind of stillness. Coleman had never heard of the sculptor, but he recognized the devotion immediately. "His devotion to what he does is very obvious," Will said. "He truly lives and breathes what he does. It's a bit of his soul in each part of these sculptures."

Coleman knows that kind of devotion. He's been learning it his whole life, from the people around him and from the horses themselves.

His parents both fox hunted, and he grew up riding with the Farmington Hunt Club and the Keswick Hunt Club. On day trips with his dad, he joined the Orange County and Piedmont hunts. He fell in love with the whole world of it. The riders in those fields were generous, steady people, he said, and they "made me sort of love horses and the people that were around them."

The horses taught him the rest.

"When you're out hunting, you have to learn to abandon a little bit of control to actually enjoy it, to actually let your horse enjoy it," he said. A horse reads its rider. Calm becomes confidence. And sometimes, he learned, the kindest thing you can do is step aside.

"You can sometimes surprise yourself at how rideable and pleasant and easy your horse can make it feel when you just get out of the way."

At 18, Coleman won individual gold at the North American Young Riders Championships, and two years later he became the first American to win the under-25 title at Bramham in England. Then his parents gave him the kind of advice that stays with you.

"If you want to do horses all the time, do horses all the time for a few years and see how that feels," Coleman said. "But you'd better make sure you really love horses.

He took three years to find out. He trained with David and Karen O'Connor and based himself at Jacquie Mars' farm in The Plains. "They are the three years that have defined my 30 years since," he said. "I really look back on it with a lot of fondness and a lot of appreciation."



Will Coleman had a chance to visit and lecture at the museum.

The years that followed were good ones. He rode for the U.S. at the 2012 London Olympics, and in 2021 he became the first American to win the big event at Aachen in Germany.

Paris in 2024 was a hard week, however. He was named to his second Olympic team, but days before he was scheduled to ride, his horse was swapped, and the replacement, Diabolo, was pulled with a hoof abscess the day before his event. He never got to ride.

This past spring, he and Diabolo won the Kentucky CCI5★, the crown jewel of American eventing, an extraordinary achievement for their first start at the sport's elite level.

That's what devotion looks like over time, and it explains why the museum's old sporting art spoke to him. His father loved it and used to tell him how the great sporting artists went to veterinary colleges to watch horses dissected, to see "how the tendons and ligaments interacted with the bones." They wanted to know the horse down to the bone.

"In our own way, we're just a couple of event riders," Coleman said, speaking of himself and his wife Katie, also a professional rider. "But we're trying to live out our life with horses doing that with the same level of detail and sort of healthy obsession about what we're doing and how we're doing it."

Standing in the Virginia hunt country that raised him, Coleman marveled at how far the circle has come.

"I don't think I would have believed you 30 years ago that I was going to be coming back here as a 43-year-old and talking at the National Sporting Library for an evening," he said. "I feel very blessed. And I kind of like to think I'm not done yet."

Asked what he would tell his 10-year-old self, he didn't hesitate. "I hope that I'd recognize how lucky I was, because I wouldn't change a thing."

Back in the gallery, Still Water and the other sculpted horses stood quietly, each holding a bit of the sculptor's soul. Coleman had said it about the artist, but it fit him, too. A man shaped by horses, still learning from them, still giving a piece of himself to the work every day.