

 Cover Story

Eric Lamaze – Portrait of an Olympic Champion

By Jennifer Ward

A boy from Montreal saw his dreams come true at the 2008 Olympic Games. For Eric Lamaze, winning an individual gold medal was an accomplishment that came at the right time on the right horse, and propelled him to become the number one ranked rider in the world.

When Eric stood on the podium and the gold medal was placed around his neck, it was a moment that defined all that had come before, and all that was still to come. These three segments of Eric's life – before, during and after the Beijing Olympics – could be fodder for a thrilling blockbuster trilogy straight from Hollywood. And it has been thought of; Eric has received more than 30 requests from production companies, both big and small, to bring his life story to the big screen, never mind countless offers from authors seeking to write his autobiography.



Olympic Champion Eric Lamaze
Photo by SusanJStickle.com

Eric's gold medal was all the more astonishing considering how long he had to wait. Having first ridden for the Canadian Team in 1993, it would be another 15 years before Eric finally made his Olympic debut.

The Beginning

As a young boy growing up in Montreal, Eric didn't come from an affluent background, instead relying on sheer talent to put him on horseback. A family friend owned a stable, and it was there that Eric first starting taking lessons at the age of 12. His natural ability was quickly recognized and he was soon riding and showing horses for owners and trainers in the junior jumper and junior hunter divisions. His first time showing at Toronto's prestigious Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, the final event of the Canadian show season which riders must qualify for, Eric claimed both the Junior Hunter and Junior Jumper Championship titles.

As a teenager, Eric worked for Roger Deslauriers and Jay Hayes and also spent time in the United States as a working student for George Morris.

Eric credits two Canadians with helping him make the successful transition from junior rider to young professional: Hugh Graham, the first person to send Eric to Europe to buy horses, and Tom Gayford, who gave him the ride on his first grand prix horse, Big Deal.

"Tom was the coach and chef d'equipe of the Canadian team at the time, so it was an honour that he believed in me," said Eric, of the 1968 Olympic Team Gold Medalist. "Meanwhile, Hugh introduced me to Eddie Creed, who rented me space in his barn. It was an old polo barn that needed some work and I literally had \$1,500 in my bank account, which was less than the rent. We struck a deal where I moved in and cleaned everything up in exchange for a few months of free rent."

With 10 stalls rented from Eddie at his property just north of Toronto, Eric was in business. Operating under the name Torrey Pines Stable, Eric started buying Thoroughbreds off the track and reselling them as hunter and jumper prospects.

When Eddie purchased Cagney for Eric, it opened the door to the international level of the sport. The pair would go on to represent Canada at the 1994 and 1998 World Equestrian Games and the 1995 and 1998 World Cup Finals, in addition to claiming two Canadian Show Jumping Championship titles at Spruce Meadows, where the Irish-bred horse was a fan favorite. To this day, Eric says, "I have rarely felt that kind of power in a horse."

A string of top grand prix horses succeeded Cagney including Rio Grande, the prolific Hanoverian stallion he rode at the 1996 World Cup Finals and Mill Creek Raphael, his partner for the 2002 World Equestrian Games.

Then, along came Hickstead. While other top riders had passed on the small Dutch Warmblood stallion, Eric took a chance on the seven-year-old in partnership with John Fleischhacker of Ashland Stables. At the 2006 World Equestrian Games in Aachen, Eric and Hickstead gave the world a glimpse of what was to come by producing jaw-dropping performances.

Team silver and individual bronze medals at the 2007 Pan American Games in Rio de Janeiro were followed a month later



Eric Lamaze and Hickstead captured Team Silver and Individual Gold Medals at the 2008 Olympic Games. Photo by Cealy Tetley

by a win in the coveted \$1 million CN International at the Spruce Meadows Masters Tournament. "That is the grand prix that everyone tries to win and it just so happens to be in Canada," said Eric. "It was such a magical day and the atmosphere was amazing. The crowd was ready to have a Canadian win that class. It was great that I could do it! Winning that class is something I will remember forever."

Weeks after the biggest win of his career, Hickstead underwent colic surgery just before he was scheduled to depart for an indoor European tour. Luckily, the little horse rebounded with no complications and, by the 2008 Spruce Meadows summer tournaments, was back in top form, winning the \$200,000 CN Reliability Grand Prix and the \$200,000 Queen Elizabeth II Cup. There was no doubt that Eric and Hickstead were ready for their Olympic debut.

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2008 Olympic Games

Before the individual accolades came the team competition. Tensions mounted for the Canadians on the second day when Mac Cone

was forced to withdraw an injured Ole. With only a three-man team and no drop score, the odds were firmly against Canada to medal. However, the clear rounds just kept on coming and Canada found itself in a two-way jump-off for the gold medal against the United States. In the end, Canada settled for the team silver.

"I was confident with the team we had there," said Eric, of Canada's chances. "Everyone was capable of doing the job, but

to do it with three riders was unbelievable! We put in three solid rounds and to find ourselves in a jump-off for the gold medal was amazing. For us, it was meant to be. You can't kid yourself and say that you just need a lucky day to win a medal. You have to have all of the elements already there and then you need to have luck on top of it."

With the team competition behind him, Eric focused on what would prove to be a dramatic individual final. Held at night under the lights in a huge stadium, Eric and Hickstead jumped two rounds fault-free to force a jump-off with the only other rider to equal his performance, Sweden's Rolf-Goran Bengtsson riding Ninja. Tensions were running high as rain began to fall, signalling the impending typhoon that would soon shut down the city. First to challenge the jump-off track, Rolf-Goran was clear until he toppled the final fence, the imposing Chinese wall. Incredibly, Eric stopped the clock in the exact same time as Rolf-Goran, but left every brick in place over the final obstacle to claim the individual gold medal. For a rider who had fantasized about competing at the Olympic Games his entire career, it was a dream come true.

"You can win at Spruce Meadows or in Aachen and it is a great thing to have on your resume, but when you win the gold medal, it is an honor that you cherish and carry with you forever," said Eric. "The impact of winning the gold medal is huge, especially for our sport in Canada. It is really amazing!"

After the Olympics

For the next three seasons, Eric and Hickstead were fan favorites at every show they entered. An individual bronze for Eric and the 'Best Horse' title for Hickstead, who jumped clear for all of his riders in the 'Final Four' at the 2010 World Equestrian Games, were their next major games achievement. With grand prix wins at such prestigious venues as Geneva, Aachen, La Baule and Rome, Eric spent the better part of three years at or near number one in the World Rankings. A sponsorship deal with Rolex was a natural fit for the charismatic Canadian.

On September 11, 2011, in front of 89,632 fans, Eric and Hickstead won the \$1 million CN International for the second time in their career at the Spruce Meadows Masters Tournament, bringing Hickstead's career earnings to \$3.65 million. It would prove fitting that their final win would be at home in Canada.

At the height of their success came the biggest fall. As the pair casually walked out of the arena after jumping the World Cup Grand Prix in Verona, Italy, Hickstead suddenly collapsed and died from an aortic rupture. In a moment, Eric's life was changed forever. The international show jumping community was stunned and the outpouring of grief both in Canada and around the world offered overwhelming proof of Hickstead's stature in the sport and the incredible number of hearts he had captured on his way to superstardom.

Today

In the shadow of Hickstead's death, Eric questioned whether he would, or even could, keep going in the sport. Supporters gathered round, ensuring that he had a mount to defend his title



*With Hickstead, Eric Lamaze enjoyed major grand prix victories around the world.
Photo by Cealy Tetley*

at the 2012 London Olympics, with the Fleischhacker's Derly Chin de Muze ultimately becoming his partner. After nine months of pushing forward, Eric stepped out of the spotlight in the fall of 2012 to absorb the loss of Hickstead, and to focus on rebuilding for the future.

Thanks to his sponsors Carlene and Andy Ziegler of Artisan Farms, Eric now has a new string of top horses, led by Powerplay, Quelmec du Gery and the newly acquired Zigali P S. As the 2014 season dawns, Eric will compete throughout the Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Florida before returning to Europe, where he has been based in Belgium for the better part of eight years.

"We would normally give the horses a break in Florida, but this year we've planned our schedule differently to keep the horses going," said Eric. "There is more prize money than ever, more world ranking points available than ever, and, with the new Rolex sponsorship, Florida has become a much more serious show. We're hoping to have a super competitive season."

Eric will spend the 12 weeks of the Winter Equestrian Festival developing his horsepower. "I'll spend some time getting to know Zigali," said Eric, of the 10-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding acquired by Artisan Farms in November. "He's a horse that I love. He's super, and I think he's a winner. Fast, careful and easy to ride. He has all the qualities that everyone looks for in a horse these days. He's the whole package. I put him in the same league as Powerplay."



*Eric Lamaze and his current top mount, Powerplay, owned by Artisan Farms LLC.
Photo by Spruce Meadows Media Services*

For Powerplay, Eric has the Alltech World Equestrian Games 2014 in Normandy firmly in his sights. “Powerplay is extremely scopey; he’s a horse that has more scope than you need. He’s very careful, but also laid-back and super cool. He doesn’t change from home to the show. He loves showing, he loves jumping and he delivers.

“With those two plus Quelmecc du Gery, I think I have a good top string,” Eric continued. “Then, we have four new young ones that are really good, so I’ll be getting to know them more and determine where they all fit in.”

In addition to training and riding his own horses, Eric also coaches several students including his London Olympic teammate, Tiffany Foster, who also rides for Artisan Farms and Andy Ziegler and his daughter, Caitlin. New to Eric’s program is 17-year-old Mackenzie Edwards of Canada, who is competing in the junior divisions during her first circuit in Wellington.

It’s not all horses, all the time, for Eric, however. A natural athlete, the 45-year-old is an avid golfer and also spends time away from the show circuit by hitting the slopes, preferably in Courchevel, France. Home renovations are another passion. He remodels and sells two or three houses each season in Wellington.

“I spend a lot of time with my friends,” said Eric, of balancing his personal life with being one of the top-ranked riders in the world. “For me, I have to find some enjoyment in life and not just spend 24 hours a day with the horses. We do work hard, but then you need a break from it as well.”

With an Olympic gold medal already to his credit, Eric can take all the breaks he needs.