

# Kelse Bonham – The Other Side of the College Fence

By Lauren R. Giannini

Kelse Bonham grew up living the life that most horse-crazy kids dream about: hitting the road two to three weeks every month to show. The Bonhams have a long history in the horse world: her father Michael was a fourth generation horse trainer and her mother Heather (née Herring), rode with Denny Emerson, US Eventing Hall-of-Famer. Horses romped all over the family tree and a foxhunting grandmother introduced the young rider to the chase.

## Early Leap Into Showing

Kelse's equestrian career began precociously: she was jumping before she started kindergarten. Her parents had a hunter/jumper and eventing farm, Scotch Wheat Stables, about 30 minutes from St. Louis, Missouri. When she was 10, they decided to move to northern Oklahoma. One reason was the need for a school district that would better understand about Kelse and her younger brother Chester being on the road so much to show. "I rode ponies until I was 15 – I'm very short – and we had six or seven at a time," explained Kelse. "Occasionally, we'd get in a horse. When I was 11, my grandfather bought me a children's jumper. I had him until I was 16. I really fell in love with the jumpers. They make sense to me. I enjoy equitation and hunters; but I always feel I have to put on a show, like a figure skater going in the ring. With the jumpers you go in and ride instinctually and I think the horses enjoy it, too."

## Riding On The SCAD Team

Enjoyment seems to be a new bottom line for Kelse. Her priorities about horses, life and showing shifted when she arrived at Savannah College of Art & Design for her freshman year. She majored in Equestrian Studies with a minor in business, earning a 3.7 grade point average and riding on the team. During her four years there, Kelse has racked up an impressive list of collegiate titles, including IHSA 2010 Cacchione Cup Reserve Champion.

"Our school is relatively young in IHSA – I think SCAD has only been doing it for 20 years or so," said Kelse. "Last year was our first time of making it as a team to the Finals and we won the team jumping. To qualify you have to win your region and be first or second in your zone. We finished fourth as a team and we were really happy with that."

SCAD, coached by Ashley Kelly, earned their fifth consecutive for a total of eight American National Riding Commission (ANRC) team titles. Kelse scored her fourth individual national championship at Centenary College, in New Jersey, April 20-23.

Before SCAD, Kelse won the 2008 Pessoa/USEF Medal Final. She has been a working student with North Run Stables in Vermont and with Todd Minikus in Florida, in addition to the years she rode for her parents in the family business. She won two Grand Prix, the 2005 \$25,000 Tunica and the 2006 \$30,000 American Royal.

## More Education

With graduation looming, Kelse faces some important choices. She thinks that going professional for a year or two will give



*Armani and Kelse Bonham, undefeated ANRC individual national champion, Savannah College of Art and Design*

her a chance to catch her breath and put money toward more education. "I want to go back to school and get my MBA," stated Kelse. "I want something to fall back on if I end up riding as an amateur. I also love to teach. I enjoy it and it energizes me."

Growing up in the business and learning every aspect from grooming to dealing with clients, teaching and training has been a hands on education, not available in any institute of higher learning. Kelse will be the first to tell you that for a long time, showing was all she knew – until she went to college.

"My whole outlook on riding has changed. I've matured into a more laid-back, home-loving person," admitted Kelse. "I used to want to be on the road all the time. In the last couple of years of school I've taken a breather and gone only to a handful of shows." Keeping her marks up, enjoying riding and lessons factor into Kelse's new outlook on riding and life in general.

"I enjoy training and not having to worry about the next show," she said. "I actually don't have big riding goals right now – I used to have them; but I'm very content and happy riding and competing for the fun of it. I don't like to push my horses hard. I want them to have fun, too. Part of the reason why I'm drawn more to jumpers is the standards expected in hunters and equitation. It's unfair to the horses if they play on the landing side of the jump and they're penalized for being horses. In the jumpers, horses can be themselves a little bit more."

## Riding Into The Future

Success has not turned her head. There's a lot to be said