

GABRIELLA GEAGEA

"My trip to California was a dream come true!"

By: Jean-Claude Noujaim

In Lebanon, the sea flirts with the mountains, and the warmth of the sun is always there, lying on the beach and skiing on mountains at the same day is not uncommon for Lebanese youngsters. Gabriella Geagea grew-up in Beirut, skied on slopes and at the age of six, she rode her first horse.

The Cedars of Lebanon area has witnessed the rise of poets, philosophers, writers, and highly talented skiing champions. Today, a young 14-year-old girl is emerging in the new generation of athletes. Although far away from Bsharre, Geagea parent's hometown in the Cedars of Lebanon, Geagea likes to spend weekends riding or skiing in the more affluent resort of Faraya. Geagea personifies the future in sports for Lebanon. Soft-spoken, reserved, yet assertive, she is a fierce competitor; a new class of champion that excels both in a ski slalom and show jumping.

Geagea was the 2003-04 children's slalom skiing champion. She represented Lebanon twice in international competitions in Italy. Her riding career started with Karim Fares in Fakra at the age of six. It was not long before she started reaping huge dividends from her hard work. The results speak for themselves as she currently ranks 9th in the world in her age category - a true accomplishment for a star in the horse-jumping world in the Middle East.

Geagea's road to California was not obstacle-free. She had to qualify in Fakra, Lebanon. There she achieved a zero-fault in four rounds and won the championship. But the suspense was not over; Geagea had to wait for other qualifiers from other countries in the Middle East. After an anxious wait, she was chosen as the rider to represent Lebanon and the Arab countries at the FEI.

The trip to California was a unique opportunity to Geagea who spoke with great pride and joy about it. It



Geagea in Fakra

started by touring several equestrian clubs in L.A. After attending Hunter competitions she was taken to the Hummingbird Nest ranch in Simi Valley, a private property of 120 acres. "This place was heaven on earth," she said, "the stables resembled five-star hotels with very large grounds. I had never seen anything this big!"

On the first day riders met and were briefed on the events to come and had to draw horses. Every American participant had to provide two horses, one for himself and another for the foreign rider.

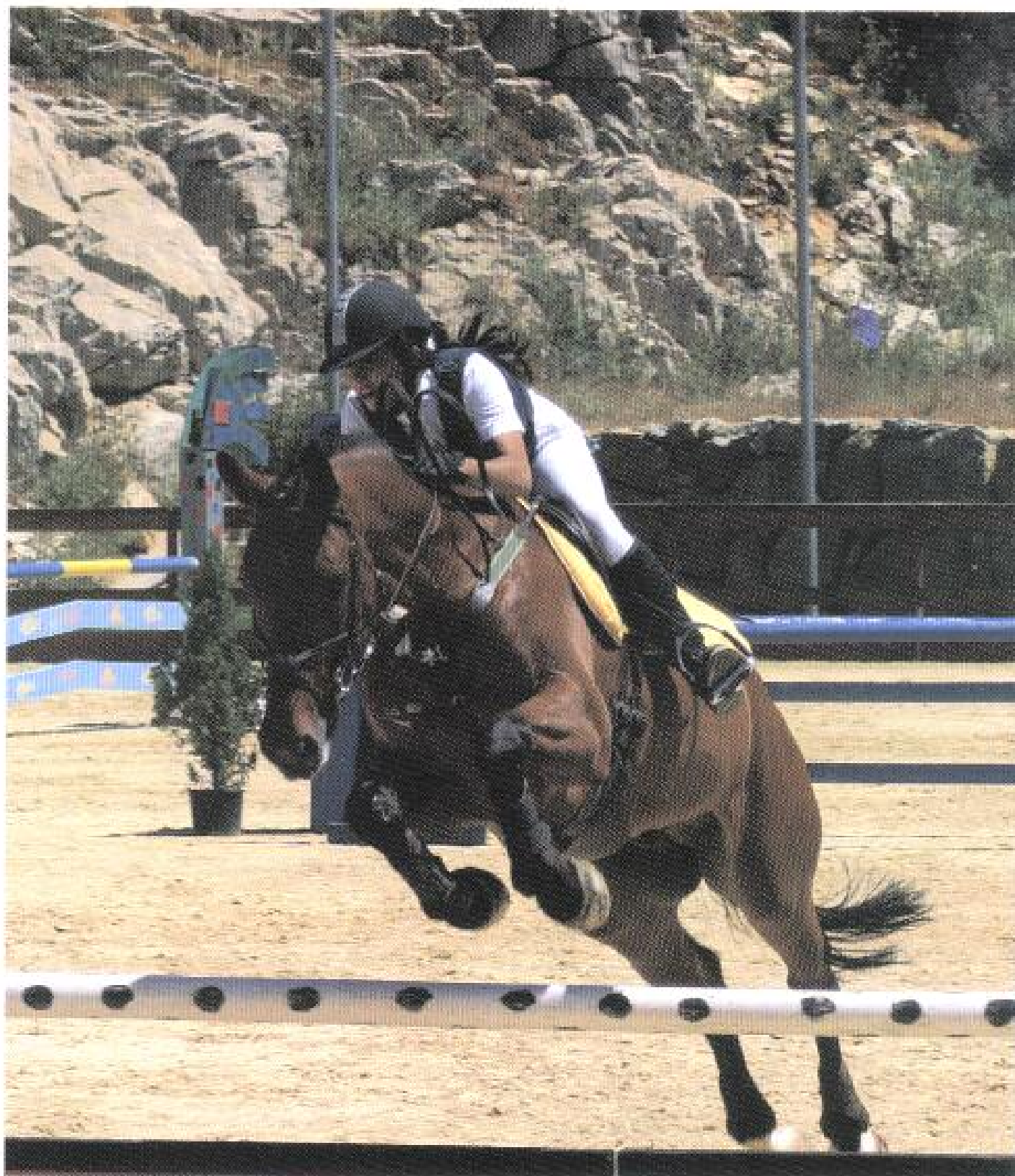
There were 16 countries qualified in the finals and 16 Americans (a total of 32 riders representing 13 nations).

There was another draw to form the teams which consisted of two foreigners and two Americans. Geagea's team was called "Speed Demons!"

On the first day, in the welcome competition, Geagea placed 8th. The second day was the first qualifying competition, a jump off, and in spite of dropping the last fence Geagea finished 9th with the fastest time in the group. "On the second qualifying day things got really serious as this was the round to decide on the finalists", she said, "It was "make it or break it" for the youngsters."

"It was the hardest day of my life," Geagea said, "it was very cold, rainy, and the visibility was poor. I rode in the pouring rain and was extremely scared that the horse would slip on the wet grass. However, I was determined to get to the finals and managed to have a clear round in a speed class; I finished 7th, received my prize in the rain,

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Geagea in Fakra on Ricardo

soaking wet, but I was happy and relieved."

The last day was Geagea's last chance to score big. She remembered: "the course was difficult and I was hoping La Crosse (her new acquired Dutch horse) would clear all the jumps and pass the heights. As I was riding, my heart was beating faster and faster, but I felt in control. When I dropped a fence I only had my coach's advice in my mind: to go for speed. I finished 9th in spite of dropping two fences and felt extremely proud". "The best part is that we also won the team competition, it was amaz-

ing!" she added.

In spite of a unique closing ceremony, a parade, and walking behind her country's flag, Geagea did not forget to mention that her staunchest supporters were her family, her aunt, her trainer Karim Fares, and her mentor and Godfather Jihad Ibrahim.

"I simply wish to continue riding and qualifying again next year for the FEI Children's jumping final." She said.

Good riding! Gabriella. We will be rooting for you! ■