

# Young rider McKee strikes it rich with horse Jackpot

Feb. 5-12, 1996

Melissa McKee emphatically insists the very first words she uttered were, "I want a pony."

A little more than a decade later, McKee was granted her wish.

Now three horses later, the 16-year-old Lorne Park Secondary School student has her eyes set on something else — to compete at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games as a member of Canada's Event Riding team.

And the reason for McKee's optimism stems from the moment she set eyes on Jackpot — A match, McKee maintains "was made in heaven."

All McKee and her 7-year-old thoroughbred gelding have achieved in their first year of competition is compete and place in eight events resulting in her being named the 1991 Canadian 3-day event Young Rider champion in Ottawa recently during the Canadian Equestrian Federation Awards Banquet.

Event riding, or horse trials, is a combination of dressage, show jumping and cross-country racing.

The sport is designed to test the all-round training and fitness of the horse and rider much like the pentathlon or decathlon test man. It is the most demanding equestrian sport, requiring agility, obedience, speed, stamina and courage.

And McKee had plenty of the above while capturing the award in her first year of eligibility against riders five years her elder.

Not long ago, it took great courage just to go near Jackpot.

"Jackpot had a lot of mental problems," explained McKee. "He belonged to a young girl who didn't know how to handle him because he was so high strung, so they put bits in his mouth which resulted in his getting rougher and having his mouth cut up."

"He just became more and more out of control and during showing (competitions) he got a bad reputation."

Bad reputation is just the half of it, according to McKee's trainer Morag O'Hanlon, who considered Jackpot "a basket case when we got him. He wouldn't stand still. He has half a tongue as a result of surgery required to repair the damage done to his mouth by the hardware used to control him in the show ring."

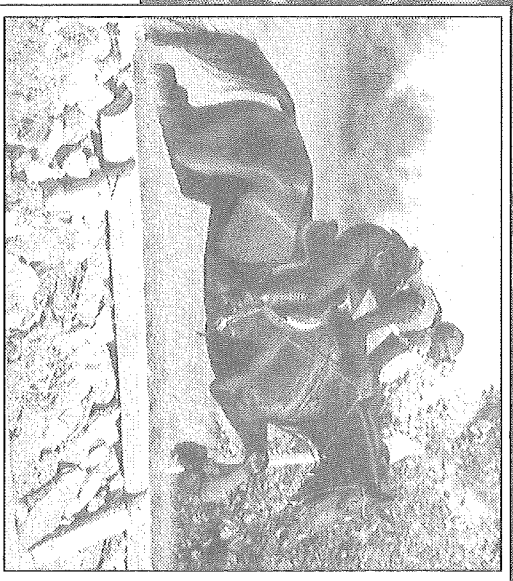
However, it was during her work at Sagl Equestrian Centre in Millton, that McKee saw a different side to Jackpot when riding him.

Given the opportunity to buy Jackpot, McKee didn't hesitate to throw her hard earned \$10,000 down to purchase him.

"That same day, a guy was driving up from Florida to pick him up, but his trailer broke down," recalled McKee, suggesting the uniting of the two was a matter of destiny.



Staff photo by Chris Horobin  
Melissa McKee, 16, is one of Canada's brightest young equestrian stars. The Lorne Park Secondary School student hopes to compete in the 1996 Olympics on board her horse Jackpot.



"When he's near strangers, he'll make nasty faces, as to say 'get away from me', but he's really a pussycat, he loves to be cuddled."

McKee plans to cuddle and pam-

per Jackpot all of next season when she hopes to make the Canadian Young Rider team for the North American Championships.

Considering the amount of time

she puts into the sport—a minimum of four hours a day, six days a week, few people would be willing to bet against McKee—someone who was born for the sport.