

Bred by Tani Zeidler (left), India Blue ZF is a Canadian Sport Horse mare that has been ridden to great success by Zeidler's daughter, Julia Tops (right).



PHOTO: JUMP MEDIA

TANI ZEIDLER

Inspired by the Love of Horses

By Emily Randolph, Jump Media

Tani Zeidler was 14 years old when she first discovered a farmer's Quarter Horses living behind the lake cabin where her family spent its summers.

Soon after, she began to frequently visit her four-legged neighbours. Before long, spending time with the horses had progressed to riding, and by the end of that summer, she was jumping over hay bales in the farmer's field.

Those horses sparked an ongoing, life-long love affair with animals, a love that has led Zeidler from representing the Canadian Show Jumping Team to launching her own highly successful breeding and training operation, Zeidler Farm in Calgary, Alberta.

Igniting a Passion

Shortly after discovering her love for horses, Zeidler's parents enrolled her in lessons at a nearby riding school in Edmonton, Alberta. The idea was that the lessons would be enough to fulfill their daughter's interest in horses until she outgrew her riding phase. What they did not anticipate was that "the phase" would ultimately span decades.

"It was a historical riding school, and they just dropped me off," explains Zeidler, who grew up in Edmonton. "I loved it; I just kept riding. I was there day and night. If they didn't drive me, I took my bike and would ride down the ravine

through the woods to get there."

It wasn't long before her parents realized they were mistaken to think that Zeidler's passion for riding would be short-lived. Instead of fighting it, they embraced her newfound sport and purchased her first horse for her 16th birthday.

"They bought me a horse, and that was it," recalls Zeidler of the life-defining moment. "I went to shows by myself. I didn't really have one trainer yet at that time. It was kind of an interesting start; it certainly wasn't done in an orthodox way whatsoever. But I just loved it!"

In the years that followed, Zeidler sought instruction from numerous trainers

wherever she went, including in California while she attended Pepperdine University. While there, Zeidler worked with highly successful hunter/jumper professionals and began winning with increasing frequency in the amateur jumper divisions.

Zeidler's parents and grandmother took note of her success and, as Zeidler considered law school following her graduation from Pepperdine in 1993, they made her a very generous offer.

"They said, 'Why don't you ride for a short time? Go buy yourself two horses!'" recalls Zeidler. This conversation would ultimately shape the next phase of her life and her career with horses.

An Equestrian Education Abroad

With the support and blessing of her parents and grandmother, and with her trainer and veterinarian in tow, Zeidler went to Europe where she found her "first great horse" — Starvos.

Only a year after graduating and purchasing Starvos, Zeidler and the bay Selle Français gelding made their World Cup Qualifier debut in Monterrey, Mexico. With a seventh-place finish, it marked the start of an exciting show career for Zeidler.

"At that time, I got invited to my first top shows," explains Zeidler. "After competing in Monterrey, the show organizers said, 'Well, why don't you come to Amsterdam?' I went from show to show, knowing that I had to place to get invited to the next show!"

And place she did. With Starvos and other mounts, including Power Lady and Murphy Brown, Zeidler continued to rack up top results throughout the 1990s.

She finished second in the Grand Prix of Paris in 1994 as well as the 1995 Grand Prix of Zurich, and claimed numerous Leading Lady Rider titles throughout Europe. In 1995, Zeidler was named to the Canadian Equestrian Team short list and awarded the prestigious Firestone Development Scholarship. The same year, she and Starvos enjoyed a seventh-place finish in the Spruce Meadows 'Masters' grand prix, which remains the richest grand prix event in the world.

Three short years later, Zeidler made her Canadian Show Jumping Team debut riding in the Nations' Cup at the 1998 National Horse Show in New York, NY, where she was the top Canadian performer.

"I was really blessed," says Zeidler, whose success continued well into the 2000s with top mounts including Ranville and Loving Dancer. "I am able to look back at it and feel I was incredibly fortunate. I traveled the world competing at the very top shows for years

Tani Zeidler and Ranville competing at the 2011 Winter Equestrian Festival.



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PHOTO: VICTORIA MCFADYEN

Tani Zeidler at home in Calgary, Alberta, with mares Maya and Illusion.



Julia Tops and India Blue ZF competing at the Longines Global Champions Tour in London.

“I took a lot of time deciding which stallions to breed to,” says Zeidler, who has used such accomplished stallions as Calvados LV, Cardento, and For Pleasure. “I watched all their videos; you have to research it well. For me, it was really thinking about all the right questions... size, type, character, health issues. For example, I would never breed to a horse that stopped or had a soundness issue. I was methodical and diligent, and it would take me a long time to decide.”

As fellow breeders can appreciate, selecting the stallions was just the beginning of the work in store for Zeidler as she began raising her young stock, which she registered as Canadian Sport Horses. No matter how much extra effort it entailed along the way, Zeidler remained committed to producing her horses in a manner that benefitted them the most.

“They were all handled every day from the beginning,” says Zeidler. “Then I had a cowboy come, and he would spend all winter with them every year. He taught them everything — to be brave and not spook and to have manners. He was my golden ticket.”

After their initial training, Zeidler would turn the young horses back out in the large fields at her home for three months.

“A lot of people say, ‘the horse has to stay in work,’” says Zeidler, who is a proponent of the opposite, even as the horses get older and begin competing. “They’ll get sour. I think people are afraid of letting them be turned out for long periods of time, but I think it gives them the chance to be what they are: a horse. They become physically strong and their body naturally heals itself; they are better for it. Mentally, they’re happy to go back to work and do their jobs. It’s like us having a vacation.”

While this approach has proven highly successful for Zeidler, she is also the first to admit that breeding is not without its fair share of challenges, particularly in North America.

“In North America, the most difficult challenge has always been the cost,” explains Zeidler. “In Europe, you can find riders that really want to ride young horses whereas here, every rider wants to go to the Olympics. I’ve always struggled with finding a rider who can ride babies. It’s a specialty that, I think, North America really misses the boat on.”

While finding riders highly adept at producing young show jumping

representing Canada. It was a privilege. It’s hard to even pick a favourite moment or a favourite horse.”

If Zeidler were forced to choose, Starvos would be among the front runners, as would Ranville, the Dutch Warmblood gelding that Zeidler rode to numerous top grand prix placings from 2009 to 2012. Throughout much of 2010, Zeidler was the top-ranked Canadian rider in the North American League World Cup standings due to her success in World Cup qualifying competition with Ranville.

“They were all great,” says Zeidler of the horses and highlights throughout her career. “To take one show or anything away would be missing out on a horse or a moment. I kept riding and showing because it truly was my passion. My love for the horses is what it’s all about. For me, it’s always been about the horses.”

The Next Chapter

Zeidler’s love for horses helped fuel the next chapter in her life, but there

was also another important determining factor: her daughter, Julia Tops. Amidst her flourishing show career, Zeidler had met her now former husband, Dutch Olympic gold medalist Jan Tops, at Spruce Meadows and the pair married in 1995. Two years later, Zeidler gave birth to their daughter, Julia, on Christmas Eve.

Having balanced motherhood with a demanding competition schedule for several years, Zeidler decided it was time to cut back on her time in the show ring and international travel as Julia grew older and began riding herself. Having moved back to Canada, Zeidler settled in Calgary, knowing she wanted horses to continue to be the mainstay of her life. And so, the Zeidler Farm breeding program was born and, in 2006, the first Zeidler Farm-bred foals arrived. By 2012, Zeidler hung up her show coat for good to focus on producing young horses and supporting Julia’s flourishing junior riding career.

Breeding provided a new challenge for Zeidler.

PHOTO: JUMP MEDIA

horses was a challenge and further cost prohibitive, Zeidler faced the challenge and added expenses bravely in order to do the best she could for the horses she loved.

“Choosing riders was difficult. I really made a conscious decision to say, ‘I’m only going to have really good riders because I don’t want any bad habits for these horses,’” says Zeidler, who has employed top show jumpers including Nick Dello Joio, Francie Steinwedell-Carvin, Olympian John Perez, and US Olympic team gold medalist Will Simpson, to compete the young Zeidler Farm horses over the years.

The Fruits of Her Labour

Zeidler’s love and passion for her horses and her commitment to developing them in the best way possible has proven to be well worth it. Today, Zeidler Farm-bred horses range in age from five to 14, and they are all thriving in their current roles.

“I’m not showing anymore, but I still get great satisfaction from the breeding and seeing my horses win with anyone and everyone, anywhere,” says Zeidler, who has watched her horses, including Lady Margaret ZF (Cardento x Iroko), Zinnia ZF (For Pleasure x Iroko), and Jibber Jabber ZF (Calvados IV x Igor de Vauptain), win at venues across North America, from the Winter Equestrian Festival (WEF) in Wellington, Florida, to Spruce Meadows at home in Calgary.

“I remember Francie [Steinwedell-Carvin] taking India Blue ZF into the International Ring at Spruce Meadows for the first time and jumping clear; I nearly passed out!” laughs Zeidler. “I can’t even explain it. When you’ve been with them since birth, and you’ve been a big part of their life, there’s nothing like it. It’s a completely different connection.”

For Zeidler, that special connection and feeling doesn’t end when the Zeidler Farm horses go on to their new homes. In fact, Zeidler finds it equally special.

“Papaya is in Seattle winning in the hunters,” says Zeidler, referring to Africa ZF, who has the barn name “Papaya” in keeping with Zeidler’s tradition of nicknaming her homebred fillies after fruits and colts after vegetables. “It just makes me ecstatic. I just got a text from Lady Margaret ZF’s new owner thanking me. It makes you feel good when you know that the horses are doing something good.

“I always want them to go to good homes,” continues Zeidler. “So far, every horse that’s been sold, all they do is win in whatever they’re supposed to. That makes



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Tani Zeidler presenting Eric Lamaze aboard Take Off as the winner of the Zeidler Cup at Spruce Meadows in 2009.

me really happy, being able to put really good horses out there in the jobs that are best suited to them. I’m not trying to make them something they’re not; I’m very careful who I sell them to. I think it goes back to how I grew up riding. It was because I loved it; I wasn’t trying to make something out of what wasn’t there. I just loved the horses and wanted the best for them.”

Moving Forward

While seeing her farm-bred horses succeed brings Zeidler satisfaction, there is one particular pairing that stands out above the others: that of her daughter, Julia, and Zeidler’s very first foal, India Blue ZF (Mr. Blue x Calvados IV), who goes by the nickname “Apple.”

Julia, now 22, has been a big part of Apple’s life from the beginning and, for the past several years. The now 14-year-old mare has been one of Julia’s top mounts as she competes throughout Europe and on the Longines Global Champions Tour.

“When I look at Apple with Julia, it’s incredible,” says Zeidler, whose mother purchased India Blue ZF for Julia. “My mom became a huge promoter of the breeding program. She loved it, and she believed in it. Somebody wanted to buy Apple, and my mom said, ‘No, I’m giving her to Julia.’ I said, ‘Are you kidding? We were offered a good amount of money.’ My mom looked at me and said, ‘Selling her is not going to change your life, but she’s going to change Julia’s life.’ How amazing is that? My mom is a big part of the legacy.”

It’s a legacy steeped in the passion for



PHOTO: KATHY RUSSELL

Tani Zeidler began breeding at her Calgary-based Zeidler Farm in 2005.

horses — a love that Zeidler found naturally on those early family vacations; a love that her mother found as she was drawn into the sport by her daughter; and a love that has now been passed down to Julia.

As Zeidler Farm’s youngest horses head into their five- and six-year-old years, Zeidler is uncertain of what the next chapter will hold, but she knows one thing for sure: what she does next will undoubtedly reflect her connection with horses.

“With horses, we can evolve with what we do with them. I love that about the sport and animals,” says Zeidler. “It will be interesting to see where Zeidler Farm goes next, but I will never not have horses. I love them too much for that to be an option.”