

EDDIE MACKEN

BY PHOEBE LANG & SANJAY BAGAI



Opposite:
“Tedechine Sept”
and Eddie.

Born on October 20, 1949 in Granard, Longford County, Ireland. Even though he was the youngest of four, his father expected him to carry on the family business of butchering and farming. However, Eddie had a different dream for himself. As a child, just like today, he had three wishes for himself; to ride, ride and ride. As he sat astride his first pony as a boy, little did Eddie know the enormous impact his passion and natural talent would have on the sport of show jumping. A self-made man who left home with 2 pounds in his pocket and a reluctant hug from his father, Eddie risked his relationship with his family to forge an illustrious career that has left the world reeling.

In 1933, Wilhelm Musüler, a renowned German author, must have been speaking about Eddie Macken when he wrote, “... Although the art of riding can encompass a lifetime or two, one day through your barn doors will walk a young student

who makes everything look so easy...” This is exactly how in 1969, one of Europe’s top trainers, Iris Kellett, experienced Eddie when he went to work for her at the age of 20. In Iris’s own words: “He came to me as a rough country boy but when he sat on a horse it was magic: he had an excellent build, was supple, had the temperament and natural sensitivity. Above everything else he had a feel for the horse.” Macken went to Kellett to learn how to develop, train and produce horses. A six-month stint which ended up being six years, yielding incredible results for the stables and for Ireland. Starting in 1970, with three consecutive Nations Cup wins, Eddie began to lay down one of the most impressive careers in show jumping history.

At Iris Kellett’s Eddie took his international exposure very seriously. Competing in the same arenas as David Broome and Harvey Smith, he was a keen observer of his competitors’ training techniques and riding styles. Commentator and ▲

head of RTE Radio Sport Ian Corr referred to Macken as: "... one of the few Irish internationals of his time who had such a cool and detached lack of awe for the opposition he faced..." Simultaneously, his obvious talent too was being observed by his peers. Alvin and Paul Schockemöhle both made him offers to ride out of their stables and, although an unpopular decision at the time, Macken wisely chose to take the offer from Paul in the hopes of fulfilling his ambition to compete internationally and to gain access to a larger pool of talented horses outside Ireland.

Eddie's dreams slowly began to materialize. Riding out of Schockemöhle's yard his weekly international exposure, combined with his passion and talent, yielded the results he was hoping for. He rode talented horses like "Boy", "Miss FAN", "Schalkaar", "Easter Parade", "La Bamba", "Welfenkrone", "Royal Lion", "Kerry Gold", and "Boomerang" and the results he obtained are now part of show jumping history. Eddie's peers at the time, Franke Sloothak, Elmar Schweckhorst, Otto Becker, Evelyn Blaton, Manfred Kotter, Johan Heins, Gerd Wiltsch and Paul & Alvin Schockemöhle were all in awe of his style. Elmar Pollmann-Schweckhorst credited Eddie with a new style of show jumping and he referred to his skills as "sensitive, harmonious, rhythmical, and inconspicuously controlling the point of takeoff, thus making the horses jump in a very precise manner."

Eddie, now 62, has been competing internationally at the highest level for over 40 years. Eddie has won events at almost every major venue and with over 100 consecutive Nations Cup appearances. He is truly what legends are made of. In his

40 year career, Eddie has won events at Wiesbaden, Cologne, Dublin, Wembley, St Gallen, Aachen, Hickstead, Brussels, La Baule, Rome, Olympia, New York, Washington, Geneva, Gothenburg, Nice, Milan, Zurich, 's-Hertogenbosch, Dortmund and Hamburg. With over sixty CSI***** wins and hundreds of Grand Prix's wins to his credit, he has also been on the winning Agha Khan team numerous times. Eddie represented Ireland at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona and the 1996 games at Atlanta. He also represented Ireland at the World Equestrian Games in 1994 at The Hague, 1990 at Stockholm, 1982 at Dublin, 1974 at Aachen where he was a silver medalist by 1/10th of a second and 1974 at Hickstead where he was also a silver medalist by a mere 1/8th of a second. He was at the European Championships for Ireland at Wien in 1977, Hickstead in 1979, Rotterdam in 1979, Munich in 1981, Hickstead in 1983, San Gallo in 1995, and Mannheim in 1997. He was at World Cups held in Goteburg in 1979, 1984, 1986 and 1995, Del Mar in 1992, 's-Hertogenbosch in 1994, and Geneva in 1996. He led the world computer rankings for three years between 1977 and 1979, won the Hickstead Derby four times, the Hamburg Derby three times and still holds the record at Spruce Meadows, where in 1979 he won all four of the big money classes. He was the recipient of Irish Supreme Sports Star in 1978 in addition to countless Irish Showjumper of Year awards and other honors. British journalist Judith Dreaper in her book, *The Stars of Show Jumping*, sums up Eddie's career: "Eddie Macken, the supreme stylist, will go down in sporting history not as one of the greatest riders to come out of Ireland but as one of the greatest riders of all time in the world."

Bottom: "Tedechine Sept" and Eddie Macken at Hickstead.





Left: Legendary Eddie Macken on his beloved "Boomerang." // "Bank Strike" and Eddie.

The handful of riders who have attained a level of greatness like Eddie, have the ability to feel, think and react like a horse. So they are typically caring, sensitive, powerful, loyal human beings who work extremely hard. I have always called Eddie a magician, not because he does tricks, but because when he rides, we are unable to see how he achieves so much grace, style, form and accuracy. While he is riding he displays a sense of calm, ease, style and confidence that always comforts horses. They trust him enough to display a side of themselves that is normally not seen with other riders. Eddie is uncanny in his recognition of what horses need and what each horse is capable of: he will never push a horse beyond what they can do and he will never put them in situations where he feels that they cannot perform. One of the noblest qualities of Eddie Macken is that after over 40 years of doing this, he still loves and respects horses with a passion. For him this sport is not a business. For him it is a way of life: it is his life, his passion.

Recently, after turning down a lucrative coaching position with one of show jumping's leading countries, Eddie instead has chosen decided to divert his energy towards his client business on the West Coast of the United States. The quality of life that his client business provides him over the familiar hectic routine of being on the road in Europe as a competitor, allows him to slow down, placing family and friends over everything else. Little does Eddie realize that he is about to make an even larger contribution to the sport than his prominent career: he is about to inspire and mentor the next generation of horsemen and legends.

Eddie is now based out of New Kells Farm in Langley, British Columbia with a string of four horses; two of them are in the big sport. This year Eddie is planning to return to the sport after recently recovering from a serious injury. His top two horses are in partnership with Samia and Daryl Stæhle who are dear friends and co-conspirators in his quest to continue to humiliate the next generation of international competitors in the jump off.

In addition to his own blue ribbons, Eddie is proudest when his clients are also in the ribbons. Running the day to day operations of a barn at this stage in his life is arduous. Therefore,

the role he prefers with his clients is that of an advisor, mentor and coach instead of trainer. Periodically, professional trainers consult with Eddie about their clients via clinics or shows to enhance their client's success. In addition to the two to three clients with roughly 12 horses that ride with him throughout the year, Eddie is always available to professional riders who continue to seek out his counsel. At the beginning of each year, Eddie and his clients jointly devise an annual tour which consists of select venues on the West Coast, in Canada and in Europe. Eddie sees his clients every two weeks, whether it is at a competition or—if there is none—at home to ensure that all skills remain sharp and honed. This is one coach who can easily tell if his clients have done their homework. Even though he does not assume day to day responsibility of the horses, he has invaluable input as to conditioning, diet, veterinary and other horse management practices.

With Eddie we are learning horsemanship and the life that goes along with it. Life with horses has its unusual twists and turns, the ups, the downs, the care of the horses... But most importantly, Eddie has taught us "how to give your horse the best opportunity to win." A simple statement that we may never master like he has. However, we are never in doubt of the 40 years of success as a competitor, gentleman and horseman that Eddie is trying to condense and communicate to his clients.

Eddie's passion to teach is fueled by qualities, which he recognizes in his clients, that drove him as a young man: desire, ambition, hard work and talent. Even though 20 years ago, training was not in his repertoire, over the last few years training equally passionate and hard working amateurs and professionals like Stephanie Sapperstein, Phoebe Lang, Sanjay Bagai, Andrea Beatie, Jennifer Crooks, Sayre Happy, Keely Stranahan, Guillermo Obligado, Tara Couch and Sara Neiman has completely revived his interest in trying to communicate his methods and what he does so naturally.

Says Stephanie Sapperstein of Eddie: "Eddie Macken is first and foremost a legend; he is an unbelievable rider and horseman. He brought me from struggling around the children's jumpers to jumping around my first grand-prix, and he helped me compile ▲



Left: Jennifer Crooks, Kath Macken, Eddie and Helen McNaught.

the team of horses I have today. He taught me about the real work that goes into horseback riding, considering I use to think that just showing up at a horse show should lead to winning. He would tell me to make it around the course no matter how pretty it looked, or more often, did not look. I would come out of the ring and learn what I needed to work on for next time, or on the rare occasion he would tell me that my round was "pure magic," words that still give me the chills. More important than anything he taught me, is that he really cares. Each day I wanted to work and try harder, not because of what anyone would think of me, but because I knew that while Eddie was standing there watching he genuinely cared for my development and for me. By believing in me, he made me believe in myself. Eddie remains as a significant inspiration for me, and he will always be a big part of my life."

Says Phoebe Lang about Eddie: "Eddie is a proud but humble man, in spite of his legendary record he never assumes the pose of a 'know-it-all.' A constant learner and an astute observer, Eddie treats horses and students with uncanny sensitivity and care. As a teacher, Eddie is calm, respectful and firm with us as well as with the horses. He always adopts the style of an advisor and a coach, not as of an authoritarian, and he is constantly encouraging us to think and feel for ourselves. One of his favorite lines is, 'feel what is going on under you.' Eddie is a master at providing his students with information and education in layers. Making sure he does not ask too much from his clients at the wrong time, but ensuring that he challenges them enough to get to the next layer. He is patient and manages the learning of his students with slow, steady and intentional instruction, keeping his students on a path of building confidence, having fun and growing as horsemen."

Money has never meant much to Eddie, his choice in horses is economical and appropriate for the level of his students

and he spends his clients' money frugally and conservatively. His eldest son Stevie Macken runs a wildly successful horse dealing business out of Maastricht, and much to Stevie's chagrin, on buying trips Eddie often pushes Stevie to seek out better and more affordable.

This sport is changing very rapidly and the history and story behind the evolution of the sport is receding quickly in our rear view mirror. The sport has a very deep and rich culture here in the United States, but more so in Europe and this history, this knowledge and perspective is very important to keep alive and in perspective as the sport evolves. There have been many legendary horses and riders before our time who have competed in this sport for decades and left a legacy for all of us amateurs and professionals. So for us, as Eddie's clients, we feel fortunate to learn the real story, the real history, and the real depth of the sport from him. My wife and I are students of the sport and to have Eddie in our life and to have learned the sport from him is one of our life's greatest privileges.

Eddie is a Gentleman before he is a horseman, a horseman before he is a rider and a rider before he is a competitor. Constantly trying to figure out what his horse needs to give him the best performance, Eddie is always listening to his horses to understand them better and to decipher their stoic messages.

Eddie is a fierce competitor and a natural stylist. Even Eddie's father Jimmy recalled that: "... the stools in my butcher shop, the chairs at home, walls, whatever, became horses and even then he rode them with style."

Eddie walks softly amongst us trying to blend in with his tantalizing smile, unassuming posture, legendary twinkling blue eyes that light up with his great sense of humor and kind words; we must not forget that we have a living legend in our midst, and if you ever are in the jump off with him, prepare for the worst! 

