

# SIDELINES

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## Norman Dello Joio

HOW A CITY KID JUMPED INTO THE HALL OF FAME

DANIEL BLUMAN  
LOVE AND LEARNING LEADS TO UNBELIEVABLE DREAM

MARGIE ENGLE  
MARVELOUS MARGIE REVEALED



RIDER SPOTLIGHT

# MARIA GABRIELA BRUGAL

## RIDING FORWARD AND GIVING BACK

*By Mandy Boggs  
Portraits by Isabel J. Kurek*



*Maria, with Aletta, is based in Wellington, Florida, but calls the Dominican Republic home.*

**M**aria Gabriela Brugal had such an amazing riding experience at age 16 that she still has to pinch herself to make sure it was real. Riding for the Dominican Republic show jumping team in the 2014 Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing, China, Maria and her horse Famoso finished as a bronze medalist for the team, and 14th overall as an individual.

Competing in China was an experience many can only dream of. Fast forward four years and Maria's life has proved that her ambition for gold has never stopped.

"It's been four years since the Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing, and a lot of things have changed," Maria said. "I graduated high school, moved to Wellington, Florida, and started college. Attending the Youth Olympic Games was probably one of the best things that has happened to me. It was a wonderful experience to get to ride under pressure and I met so many great riders, whom I still keep in touch with today."

Since then, Maria has traveled to South Africa for the FEI World Jumping Challenge

Finals, where she finished silver overall. She spent two summers in Europe training under Michel Robert, basking in the experience of living on a European farm. Last year, Maria was part of the Dominican Republic team at the Bolivarian Games, her first time being part of the senior team.

**Maria believes in giving back to the community and is an ambassador for both the Step by Step organization and JustWorld International.**

### THE BEGINNING

When Maria was just 4 years old, she began riding horses. Her Olympic ambitions seemed to have ended just as quickly as they began when

Maria and Southern Comfort competing at the Winter Equestrian Festival



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a fall from a horse at riding camp scared her so badly that she didn't sit on a horse again until she was 10 years old. Time proved to nourish her love of horses and she hasn't looked back.

Maria, based in Wellington, Florida, but who calls the Dominican Republic home, balances school, time with family and her riding with a

very busy schedule. "I do go back home every so often, mostly on vacations to see my friends and family," she said. "I'm always home for Christmas and again in the spring. Now, I go to school in Boca Raton so it's not a big problem for me to drive on a daily basis and compete on weekends. When I was finishing high school, still living

in the Dominican Republic, I would fly to Wellington on Thursdays and return home on Sundays so that I could compete."

Maria's school schedule may have gotten easier, but her show schedule is quite busy. "I was in Tryon for the summer, then Upperville, back to Tryon, and then back to Wellington," she explained. This year, her goal is to be on the team representing the Dominican Republic at the Central American and Caribbean Games in July.

"We are based out of Wellington, where my parents own a farm, BG Stables," Maria said. "I've been training with Teresa 'Titi'

Mills for the past 5 ½ years. We have a really good program, and I really enjoy how well we work together. We have figured out the best way to keep the horses fit and happy. To both of us, that is the most important aspect of the sport. She's watched me grow as a person, and as a rider, I really owe a lot to her."

## STRING OF HORSES

With such an impressive riding career already under Maria's belt, the string of horses she has is equally exciting. "I have a very special bond with one of them in particular, Southern Comfort, a 13-year-old Holsteiner mare," she shared. "She is a super mare with lots of scope and is really careful. She's been with us for a little over two years now and has taught me a lot. She has a great attitude and I always look forward to riding her!"

A Belgian Warmblood gelding named Vasco is another special horse to Maria, who proves that the size of a horse's heart can often overcome the trials and tribulations they may face. "He's a 20-year-old who thinks that he is 6," she joked. "He's had two career-ending injuries. After the second one, our vet didn't know if he would ever be able to jump again.

"Up until that point, I had never actually sat on him. My father had always given him to other riders because he thought he was too strong for me," she said. "After almost two years of rehab, our vet cleared him to jump a



Maria believes in giving back and is an ambassador for both the Step by Step organization and JustWorld International.

in class last year. I jumped my first night class in Tryon, and in March I jumped my first 1.50m on him. We closed the season jumping in the 1.50m Grand Prix, the last day of WEF. He just has the most amazing spirit and absolutely loves his job.”

Maria competed in the Palm Beach Masters in 2017, and again this year. Between the significant roster of competitors, intimidating fences and fierce competition, Maria used her lifelong dedication to the sport and unbounding persistence to make quite the impression. “I am always happy placing in any class, but finishing fourth this year, with Vasco, was really special,” she said. “It was a super-competitive class, and I was riding my 20-year-old horse!”

## GIVING BACK

It comes as no surprise that Maria strives to do the best she can in all aspects of her life, including that of giving back to the community and making a difference. “I’ve been an ambassador for both the Step by Step organization and JustWorld International, since 2012 and 2014, respectively,” she explained.

The Step by Step Foundation, founded by Liliane Stransky, works with organizations around the world to change the lives of children. JustWorld International, like Step by Step, also works towards making impactful and positive changes for those in the developing world through education, health, hygiene and other important programs to improve the lives of those in need. Both organizations work directly with the equestrian community in the Wellington area, utilizing the network available for like-minded equestrians looking to give back to those who need it most. Like Maria, both organizations use riders to raise awareness for their organization and bring the equine community together in support of their programs.

“Both organizations have such a great purpose and are doing really great things,” she said. “Step by Step has helped thousands of kids in Haiti, a neighboring country to my home. I’ve seen firsthand what some Haitians are exposed to and I love to see how small things can make such a big difference in their lives. JustWorld also helps thousands of kids in different countries. I’ve been fortunate enough in my life that I feel the need to give back, and for me, this is a way of doing so and seeing the difference one person can make.”



Photos from top to bottom:  
Maria, left, with her best friend Maria Victoria Palacios

Maria and Aletta