



BEHIND THE BRIDLE

DR. TARKAN SIDAL SUPPORTS GRAND CIRCUIT CHAMPION ALEXUS WILLSON

ARTICLE SHANNON BARR PHOTOGRAPHY MICHELLE SCOLMAN

There's a unique and unparalleled bond between a horse and a rider. "I love the connection that you get with the horses, and figuring out all of their special quirks that they all have," says 16-year-old Alexus Willson of Ramona.

This year marks the second in a row that Willson has earned High Point Junior Rider in San Diego from the Greater San Diego Hunter Jumper Association. The title is given to the rider with the highest total show points accumulated throughout the year.

"I've been riding forever, but showing since 2009," says Willson. In just a few short years, her track record is already impressive. She has been Grand Circuit Champion at Thermal and High Point Junior Amateur at Del Mar Nationals. She performs many local shows at Del Mar Show Park and the Fairgrounds. The shows include jumping and equestrian performances; riders compete for ribbons, trophies, medals, and prize money.

Each show typically costs a rider \$1,000 to \$1,500 in fees; an expense that adds up quickly. For the past year, Willson has been sponsored by Dr. Tarkan Sidal, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon who owns Torrey Pines

Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, located in Del Mar/Carmel Valley. "I wanted to give back to the community," says Dr. Sidal. He moved from San Francisco to San Diego in 2012, and in July 2015 continued the legacy at Torrey Pines Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery practice. "I don't ride horses, but I liked her ambition." He relates to her devotion to the sport; he recalls all the studying and training he underwent in his early career. "In a sense we each work hard, striving to reach our goals."

Having a sponsor has been key to Willson's riding success. "He covers one show a month, and we're super fortunate for that," says Willson's mother Jennifer. Before Dr. Sidal's sponsorship, the Willsons would often have to sell a horse to enter a show. "She wouldn't have won Rider of the Year if she didn't have that sponsor."

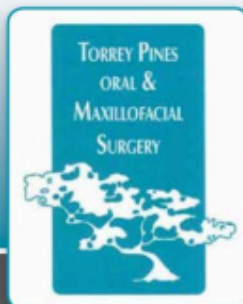
Aside from her mother, Willson also trained with Hap Hanson, a renowned winning grand



prix rider and Encinitas local. She often competes in shows against experienced trainers. "They've been doing this for 20-30 years, and I'm the youngest one out there." Instead of riding trained show horses, she rides horses that her mom rehabilitates on their ranch. "We get horses off the racetrack and then we retrain them for jumping so they can have a second career," says Jennifer. "I think that's why she can ride so well. Because from day one, she's always had to ride the thoroughbreds; the ones that are off the track that think they're still racehorses."

Willson has other sponsors that offer to pay for show clothes, or they pay for her show as long as she uses their horse; a common practice in horse show sponsorship. However, Dr. Sidal's sponsorship completely supports her shows, while enabling her to use her own personal horse, a generous offer graciously acknowledged by the mother-daughter duo.

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