

Meet Laurentia

A Paralympian proving
dreams do come true.

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Laurentia Tan attended Mary Hare School from 1990 to 1997. She studied Business Studies, Mathematics and Sociology in 6th Form, went onto Oxford Brookes University to study BA Hospitality Management & Tourism (Hons). Laurentia is a dressage rider and is the first Asian to have won four Paralympic medals in equestrian sport. Laurentia's love of riding started from an early age. So, what has been the story behind her success? Has her relationship with her horse been key? How hard has it been to thrive in a competitive industry? What influence has music had on her career? Laurentia tells us her story.

You are a successful Paralympian and it all started with your love of horse riding. Can you take us back to that point?

I started riding as part of physiotherapy when I was 5 years old. I had difficulty sitting up, let alone standing. Horse riding helped develop and strengthen my core, my legs and improved my co-ordination and mobility.

Was riding part of your week when you were at Mary Hare?

I would go home every week to continue riding at the weekends.

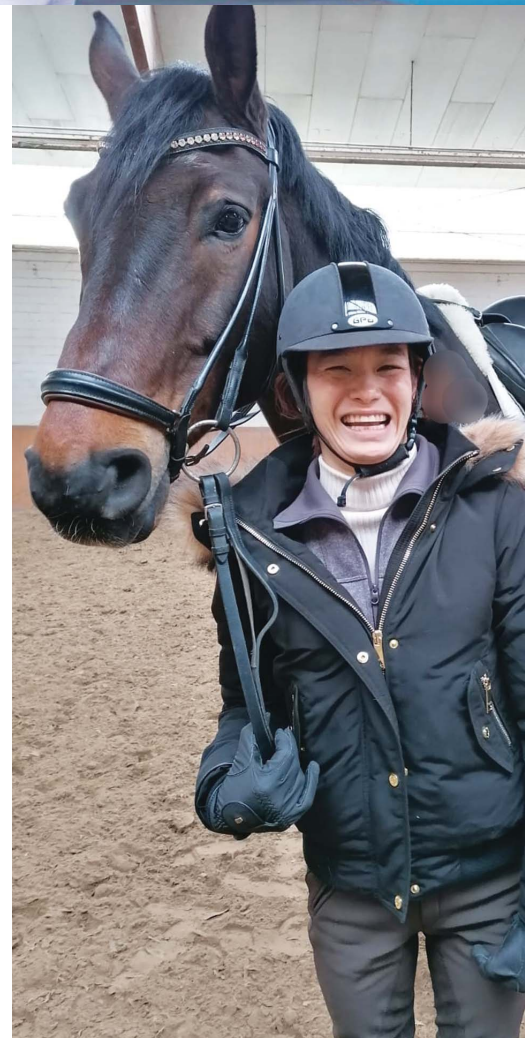
What did you study at University?

BA Hospitality Management & Tourism (Hon), and I had a fantastic opportunity to go on an exchange program where I studied in Biscayne Bay, Miami (USA) at Florida International University.

When did competitive riding become your dream?

I did not think about riding competitively until after I went to the Paralympic Games in Beijing 2008.

I actually took a break of eight years from riding while I was at university and started working. However, I missed riding and took it up again. Within a few months, my coach suggested I do an in-house dressage competition, which quickly progressed through the Regionals and Nationals. Then I was 'selected' and invited to go to my first international competition, where I qualified for the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games.



When did you start training for dressage competitions?

It wasn't until 2007 when I started training for the World Championships in Hartpury that year. I started training with a retired eventing horse and he became my first competition partner, and we got our two Paralympic medals in 2008.

How key is the relationship you have with your horse? How did you develop this?

It is very important to have a bond with the horses that I compete with. I have competed with quite a few horses through my sporting career. At the moment, I train and compete with three horses, Banestro, Florenzius and my own horse, Sherlock. Every horse has their own character and personality, and as a rider, I have to know them to get the best potential out of each of them as they all require different ways of 'communicating'. In a dressage test, the horse and rider have to perform a series of exacting movements and paces with smooth transitions and the performance should look elegant and truly effortless. In other words, the rider is relaxed, and with

minimal 'aids' (i.e. looks like it's effort-free) the horse willingly performs the requested movement so the harmony and connection between horse and rider is very important.

Can you tell us a bit more about how you use music during your competitions?

One of my dressage events is the Freestyle (to music). There is a set of compulsory movements, but with your own freestyle choreography / floor-plan. As a deaf rider, this is one of the hardest events but also the most fun. The music has to match the horse's pace and movements. As a Grade 1 rider (the most disabled class), my tests are in walk only, so I need music that is the same rhythm but not repetitive or boring.

A lot of riders use different music (from classics to films), with edits to match their choreography and timings. As a deaf rider, I would prefer my music to have variations within one piece, highlighting certain movements. Music and sounds can have an impact on the perception of the performance, so I like to have something to match my horse's character.

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What has been your most memorable moment in your career?

There are so many memorable moments, good and not so good! One of the most memorable has to be London 2012. At the end of my freestyle, Ruben James was so focused on me that when I patted him, he got spooked. Then when we came out of the arena my coach came round and jumped in the air, he was so happy but I could not understand what he said! He was telling me I'd got the silver medal!

What have been your biggest obstacles you have had to overcome?

My biggest obstacle so far has been when I had an injury and in the approach to the Rio 2016 Games, I spent eight weeks in bedrest. Despite my injury and had only ridden / trained with my horse less than a dozen times, I am proud we still managed to compete and I came 5th.

My other big obstacle is doing the Freestyle to Music. I cannot hear the

music, especially when I am concentrating on the riding, and I remember in one event my horse got spooked within the first 30 seconds of the performance and cantered. I managed to calm RJ and wanted to retire.

My coach indicated to me to continue. However, I was horrified as I had lost track and had no idea how much time I had left... luckily I managed to put in all the required movements and finished right on time! I realised sometimes we do not know our full potential until we challenge ourselves. We do not know what we can or cannot do unless we try.

What has your success meant to you and your family?

It is more meaningful when you are doing something you enjoy or something that you are passionate about. And horses have changed my life. I feel blessed to have a team of wonderful horses and great people around me.



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