

Transcript of the  
**Improve Your Ride, Improve Your Life**  
**Interview with Tina Irwin**

January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012

**Lori:** Hello everybody, this is Lori Albrough, and I am the creator of the "Improve Your Ride, Improve Your Life" eZine, where we are all about ways to get better results in our riding, ways to improve ourselves as horse trainers, working on our fitness and our positive mindsets. And the reason for all of this is to be better partners for our horses.

Today I have some inspiration for you because I am here with rider Tina Irwin, who's just coming off an absolutely stellar year in 2011. Tina has achieved some fantastic results representing her country Canada in the Pan Am games in Guadalajara Mexico. Tina was a member of the team that brought home the silver medal for Canada and qualified Canada for the 2012 Olympics.

Tina rode the 14 year old Dutch gelding Winston, and individually at the Pan Am Games, Tina and Winston placed 5th overall and scored over 77% in their freestyle.

Now if this wasn't all amazing enough, just six months before competing at the Pan Am Games, Tina gave birth to her first child, baby boy Gavin. Tina's husband Jaimey Irwin is her coach and trainer, as well her partner in their dressage training business, Stoney Lake Equestrian.

Welcome Tina, and congratulations on your wonderful results in 2011.

**Tina:** Thank you very much!

**Lori:** I'm wondering if you feel like a different person after having this experience of representing Canada, and doing so well.

**Tina:** Yes and no. Of course I still feel like the same old Tina, but after such an experience I think it's hard not to feel any different, and it has changed me in that it's been such an honour to represent my country. I just feel excited and more motivated to continue to represent Canada at international events. So, very inspiring and motivating.

**Lori:** Do you think it makes achieving your future goals easier to have had this level of success?

**Tina:** I don't think it makes it easier. There's still that you have to have the next horse, keep coming along. You have to be qualifying for the next four years, the next Olympics, the next Pan Am Games, whatever it is. It's still the same process to go through, but I do feel, in a sense, now that I've had the experience, that part is a little bit easier, because I know what I'm getting into.

**Lori:** And it takes you to a new level of motivation.

**Tina:** Yeah.

**Lori:** Just on a physical level, how were you able to recover from giving birth and get back into shape in order to qualify and then compete so quickly?

**Tina:** Well, it wasn't so easy. I spent many hours on the treadmill, and did some free weights while I was pregnant. And when I finally gave birth to Gavin, I was really lucky because I had a really easy delivery, and pregnancy. Nothing was complicated and it all went as planned, which is not always how it can go. Luckily, I felt really good afterward, and because I kept my fitness up, I was able to be back in the saddle by the 5th week after I delivered Gavin. And, the doctor had recommended 6 to 8, so I kind of just went with how my body felt. I went with that, and luckily it worked out for me, but the first week was definitely a push. I was feeling pretty sore.

**Lori:** Did you work with a physical trainer to stay in shape and get back into shape, or did you work on your own?

**Tina:** Actually, I worked on my own. I'm pretty motivated myself, so I was driven to try to make the Pan Am team, so it kept me going and kept me fit. I did not work with anyone; I motivated myself.

**Lori:** On the mental side however, I know that you worked with a sports psychologist going into the championship, and I find that really interesting, and I wondered how important that was to your success.

**Tina:** It was really beneficial to me. The sports psychologist I used, her name is Dana Sinclair, and she's from downtown Toronto, and she's worked with many athletes throughout her career, everyone from NHL players to NFL players, gymnasts, figure skaters, and also other equestrian riders. It was my first time working with a sports psychologist, so I didn't really know how it would go. I've read some books before, and I thought it would be a really great opportunity going into the Pan Am Games, that I should probably prepare myself mentally to the best of my ability. She gave me some really fabulous tools to use, and I think it really helped with my success.

**Lori:** What specific techniques did she give you to deal with the pressure of competing at an international championship?

**Tina:** Well, everything in her program is designed to each individual, so when you first arrive at her place, she basically tries to find out exactly how you will react under pressure, and you fill out a lot of forms and questions, and basically she interview you, so we made and formulated a plan specifically for me, and what my hangups are ...

**Lori:** Sort of, what triggers you ...

**Tina:** Yeah, and then we did that specifically for me, and we worked really on my problem areas, and how I would go through that. One of the techniques she used was a breathing technique, and I actually had a CD that she gave me, and I had to listen to on my iPod whenever I had free moments. And a little bit of, I guess it's similar to being in a Zen sort of state of mind, and how to bring your body back to relaxation when you get overly excited, or anxious, or nervous, and how to quickly get back into the zone. So if you make a mistake while

you're in the ring, to quickly get out of that and move on. There's nothing you can do about that; move on, get over it, and keep going. That was one of the tools specifically used.

**Lori:** That's great!

What about support in reaching your goals. How important was it to you to have support, and who was important in helping you reach your goals?

**Tina:** I am really lucky. I have a super support team behind me, and everybody is important. Starting of course with my husband and trainer, Jaimey, and my family, who has helped me immensely with Gavin, looking after him. I could not have done any of this without their help, looking after him while I'm riding and competing.

As well, as the owners of Winston, Mary Ellen and Michael Horgan, and my vet, and farrier, and clients who allow us to go away, and support us competing, and trying for games, and being away for a month at a time.

So, everybody. That's why we call ourselves "Team Irwin". Because it's not just Tina Irwin or Jaimey Irwin and the horse, it's the whole team that's behind you that helps you achieve your goals.

**Lori:** How does the average person build the support structure for themselves?

**Tina:** I think it's important to surround yourself with the right people. You have to surround yourself with positive people, people that support you following your dreams, and want to be there, and want to see you do well. And that's how I think you can really start to develop a really strong support team.

And include people in what you're doing. If you have a great ride at the horse show, or you want to post the video of your ride on the Internet, and send it to your friends and family and say, "Look, here's some pictures of me", or, "Here's my web page; check it out", so they can support you, and they feel included in what you're doing. That's really important.

**Lori:** That they understand what you're doing as well.

**Tina:** Exactly. So they say okay, when you're gone for two weeks at a time, "What exactly were you doing out there?" Or make a blog, so people can follow your progress, your up and your down days, because not everything is always sunshine and lollipops.

**Lori:** This experience of being on the Pan Am team I would imagine is quite different from normally, where we're competing as individuals in dressage. How do you prepare for that?

**Tina:** Well, it is very different, because we're always competing as individuals, and all of a sudden, the people we have competed against to make this team are now our team mates. The biggest preparation for that was our training camp in New York. We were there for 2 weeks, and I think that really bonded us as a group. We did a lot of team building, where we went for dinner every evening together. We would go on trips. A group of some of the team members went together to New York City on one of the days off, had a little sight seeing tour. We just spent a lot of time together, so we became more like a family and a real team, and could understand what each of us were like in different situations, which was important for getting

into those under-pressure situations. And how different people react, and how you can support your team members to the best of your and their ability.

**Lori:** Did you watch their training sessions?

**Tina:** Yes, yes. We all watched each others' training sessions, and say, "That was a great ride", and, "Good for you", and, "Looks a lot better today". And it also would help us learn within our own training, because maybe there was a certain issue they were working through, and it would help us with our own issues.

**Lori:** What was it like working with Markus Gribbe, the Canadian team coach?

**Tina:** He was really fantastic. Markus Gribbe is a wonderful team coach, and he worked exceptionally well with Jaimey Irwin, who is also my husband and trainer. When Jaimey wasn't there, Markus would help me and he worked exactly along the lines of what Jaimey and I had been working on, and didn't want to make any major changes, and really oversaw everything, and looked at the big picture. He brings a lot of experience and expertise in the field. He's been very successful in his own riding, and has had many partnerships with talented horses. You can learn a lot from someone who has that experience.

**Lori:** Yeah, he's quite the super star, and had a lot of super star students as well.

**Tina:** Yes, he's had really, ... He's taught Laura Bechtolsheimer, and he's had many top horses himself. You really have to be open-minded in this kind of situation, where we haven't really had him as a team coach for very long. Being at the training camp in New York was a really super time to get to know him better, not only as a trainer, but as a person, and that also helps because he sees what we're like in different situations, and we see what he's like in different situations. He's very good with people, reading people and deciding how he's going to help you move forward.

**Lori:** How did you structure your horse's training and your own training in order that you peaked at the right time for Mexico, because I think there would be a lot of pressure just to make the team, but then you wouldn't want to peak too soon.

**Tina:** Yes. Our qualification period, or our last qualification trial, was a month I think, or more than that, before Mexico. Almost two months. You're right, we had to peak sort of in time to qualify, and then we gave the horse a little bit of downtime after we qualified for the team. Reorganized. Looked at how many weeks we had leading into Mexico, and then we really pushed for making his fitness even higher. So we worked him sometimes twice a day, where we could out on another hack, or he would get lunged in the afternoons and ridden in the mornings and have a really good training session.

And for me, I think he really started to peak 2 weeks prior to Mexico, at the training camp. Because the training camp really allowed us to focus on just our horse, and our partnership, and the team. It took us away from our everyday responsibilities, being at home, running your business, cooking for the family, shopping, cleaning the house, that sort of thing. So the training camp was, I think, one of the best preparations for the horse and myself.

**Lori:** I'm thinking about the element of luck that goes into being able to qualify for the team, and compete, because, just on the fact that both the horse and the rider have to stay sound and

healthy. And we did see this when the reserve rider, Roberta Byng-Morris, who Jaimey also coaches, was put on the team at the very last minute when another horse had an injury right before leaving for Mexico. So, I'm just thinking about what specific things that you can do to "make your luck", and given that there's so many factors outside of your control, how do you mentally deal with that?

**Tina:** Well I was hoping that I wouldn't fall down the stairs and break an ankle. And I'm serious. Of course these things go through your mind, and you think, "Oh my goodness, I've made it. Everything's lining up the way it should. The stars are all aligning. Now just keep everything bubble-wrapped."

So, there's a lot of pressure there, thinking that. But I think you have to take every day, day by day. We had a top vet (Alan Manning) working with our team, and he was at the training camp as well. We took the horses out every morning, directly out of their stalls. He wanted to see them jog; he looked them over every day, to be on top of anything that was just maybe starting to creep in there. To keep them at their best.

But of course, there's a lot of luck that comes with it, and, you know, I think that's just a little bit out of our control, so mentally, you just have to stay really positive, and focused, and you have to be smart. I wasn't going to ride any crazier horses before going to Mexico. I had made the team. I was being very careful. I was sticking to Winston and quiet horses to ride, and not competing any young horses at a horse show the month prior, things like that. I think you just have to be really smart and look out for yourself, and just say, "Okay, this is my priority for the next month, so I need to be careful."

And with Winston, we would make sure that only our groom, Penny, who is amazing, would be looking after Winston. We would be riding Winston. So you're just a little bit more careful during that time.

**Lori:** But not letting it get to you?

**Tina:** Exactly. You still have to stay balanced, which is hard.

**Lori:** Sometimes I think you can worry so much that you bring it on.

**Tina:** Exactly. I think you just have to look at the big picture, and stay focused on that.

**Lori:** What advice do you have for the amateur riders, who are working towards improving their riding, balancing that with life in general, and sometimes dealing with the frustration that comes from how long it can seem to take to learn to ride the way that we want to ride, and to achieve our riding goals?

**Tina:** Well, I think that some advice that I can give is, really have fun riding, and look at the big picture, and say to yourself, "Am I enjoying this? Am I having fun, coming out every day, riding my horse?"

Yes, there are days that are frustrating, but if you enjoy what you're doing, that's the most important thing. I think, as an amateur, you're doing it for fun, and you want to progress, yes, and you're serious about what you're doing, but you have to really enjoy it. If you're not enjoying it, maybe look at the situation, and say, "Okay, maybe I need to make some changes

here."

Work with a great trainer and a good support system, like we talked about earlier, that you surround yourself with positive people. And you just stay focused on the prize, and say, "Okay, these are my goals."

Set realistic goals within short and longer time periods and talk to your coach about those goals to make sure they are realistic and achievable. Don't set goals for yourself that are going to be unattainable, and be realistic. Your coach should help you formulate a plan to do that.

I like to do that with my students. The new year comes around, and I say, "Okay, so in the next 3 months, what is it you're looking to improve, and where do you want to be in 3 months, 6 months, a year?"

Then we try to work towards that, and if it's not realistic, then, diplomatically, I will tell them.

**Lori:** Staying focused on what's positive each day, and then over time, you can make a lot more progress.

**Tina:** Exactly. And also little things, like making some videos of your lessons every couple of months to see what your progress has been, because sometimes it's hard, as the rider, to feel the difference or see the difference when it's maybe just a little bit, but over the next couple of months, it's actually a lot more than you think. If you keep maybe a diary of it, writing it in a diary, or with videos as well, you can really start to see that progress.

**Lori:** Well, I want to thank you so much for sharing your experience with us, and I want to wish you all the best in your future riding goals.

**Tina:** Thank you very much!

**Lori:** And thank you everyone for listening to this Improve Your Ride, Improve Your Life podcast!

For more information on Team Irwin, you can go to Tina's web site at [stoneylakeequestrian.ca](http://stoneylakeequestrian.ca)

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