

The Lion's Roar

The word from **PETER LEONE** and **LIONSHARE FARM**.

Remembering My Road to the Olympic Games

There is so much excitement around show jumping for the upcoming London Olympic Games, with Reed Kessler the youngest person ever to represent any country in our sport and McLain Ward's dramatic comeback from knee injury. We are rooting for them!

My own story of how I made it to The Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996 was a personal and family dream come true. It was something that we—my brothers, parents, our entire family—had targeted for 30 years.

You only come across an Olympic horse once in a lifetime—maybe twice, if you're really lucky. I had such a horse in Legato. He was the right age, in the right health, in the right form, in the right year. With my family's help, we were able to develop this very talented horse. I bought him as a four-year-old and he was ready to perform for our country in Atlanta in 1996.

The first two out of a total of eight trials were in Wellington in early April. They were held in the International Arena, which was grass, at the time. The third trial was at Michael Matz's facility in Pennsylvania, the fourth and fifth were two-rounds on the same day at Old Salem in North Salem, NY, then another two-rounds at Devon on the same day, with the final Olympic trial at Gladstone, NJ.

The first two trials went really well. I was sitting in good ranking at number three or number four. Then, 48 hours before trial number three, I was jumping a young horse in a preliminary jumper class—they don't even use that terminology anymore—I had a bad fall and shattered my collarbone.

It was just like the movie, *For the Love of the Game* when Kevin Costner gets hurt, "I need to get to Dr. So-and-So. He's the most important person in my life right now!"

I told my wife, "You've got to get me to Florida. You've got to get me to Dr. Virgin."

A Miami Orthopedic Surgeon, Dr. Charles E. Virgin's philosophy is to get you back on the playing field—so that you don't even think about your injury—so you are functioning at 100%. That's exactly what he had done for me, when I had previously broken some bones in my hand.

I flew down to Florida to see Dr. Virgin. So, instead of competing in trial number three, I spent the day in surgery in Miami.

Two weeks later, was the next trial. My brother, Mark, kept my horse going. My brother, Armand, who is a doctor, worked with me in the gym, doing very strategic rehabilitation, getting range of motion and strength back in my arm.

With broken collarbone and all, I was ready to compete in trial four



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and five, the two-rounds at Old Salem. Robert Ridland was the course designer. Despite my injury, I managed to get one good score in.

The Olympic trial format is different every year. That year the selection trials had eight rounds—you could discard two of your scores. So if something strange happened, like stumbling or slipping on route to a jump, you weren't necessarily out of the Games.

We did the course walk at Old Salem. Then my brother, Armand, drove me quickly to Mt. Kisco Hospital. We arranged to have an anesthesiologist locally inject the fracture site. I couldn't take any pain medication, but I was allowed to have a local. Then he drove me back. In the meantime, my brother, Mark, had warmed up the Legato. I got on, jumped a couple of jumps, went in the ring and put in one good, useful score, a four-fault round.

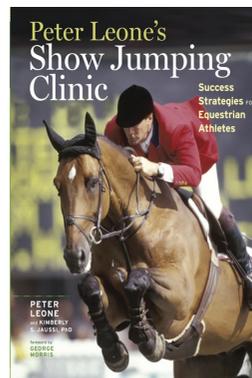
Two hours later was the second round. I was in a lot of pain and was unable to ride effectively, resulting in three down. So, I used this score as my second and final discard.

The two-round trial at Devon followed two weeks later. This time, we got the anesthesiologist on site. He was in the little medical room underneath the grandstand near the main entrance to the Dixon Oval.

I got the fracture site touched up for round one. Went clear. Then got touched up for round two. My brothers were in this with me all the way, with Armand helping me, and Mark, again, preparing Legato.

I had three weeks before the final trial at Gladstone. We, again, got the anesthesiologist on site, went clear, won the final trial and qualified for the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games.

In one of the most spiritual moments of my life, Legato and I went on to contribute the best scores for the US to secure Team Silver. This achievement could never have been realized without the love, help and support of Team Leone—my parents, my family and most of all, my brothers. —With Carrie Wirth. **EQ**



Peter Leone and Legato on the cover of Leone's new book, *Peter Leone's Show Jumping Clinic: Success Strategies for Equestrian Athletes*. Courtesy of Storey Publishing. Photo by Arnd Bronkhorst.