

# JUST DO IT.

(on a horse)

By Geoff Young

**S**erena Williams, LeBron James, Tiger Woods and Ayden Uhlir all have one thing in common. Three of the names listed are known to anyone who has been on planet earth the last several years. They are superstar athletes who have won multiple championships, Olympic Gold Medals, and a fan base in the millions. So who is Ayden Uhlir and what does she have in common with Serena, LeBron and Tiger?

Nineteen-year-old Ayden Uhlir has been signed to a sponsorship deal with Nike, making her the first US equestrian athlete to join the giant sportswear conglomerate and take her place along side the other illustrious athletes who wear the swoosh logo. And the Nike slogan, "Just Do It," certainly applies to Ayden, because against all odds she went and did it!

Ayden, while unknown to the general public, is an equestrian superstar in her own right winning back-to-back Individual Gold Medals at the 2012 and 2013 North American Junior and Young Riders Championships (NAJYRC), becoming the first young rider to achieve such an accomplishment. Of course Ayden couldn't have done all of this without her

partner and horse, Sjapoer (by Contango), a 14-year-old KWPN gelding.

Horse Connection caught up with Ayden while she and Sjapoer were competing in Dressage Week at the Del Mar National horse show. She had just

completed her first I-1 competition and had scored a 72.7%. Needless to say she was very excited.

**HC:** How do the classes at the Del Mar show compare to the NAJYR Championships, where you won two gold medals?

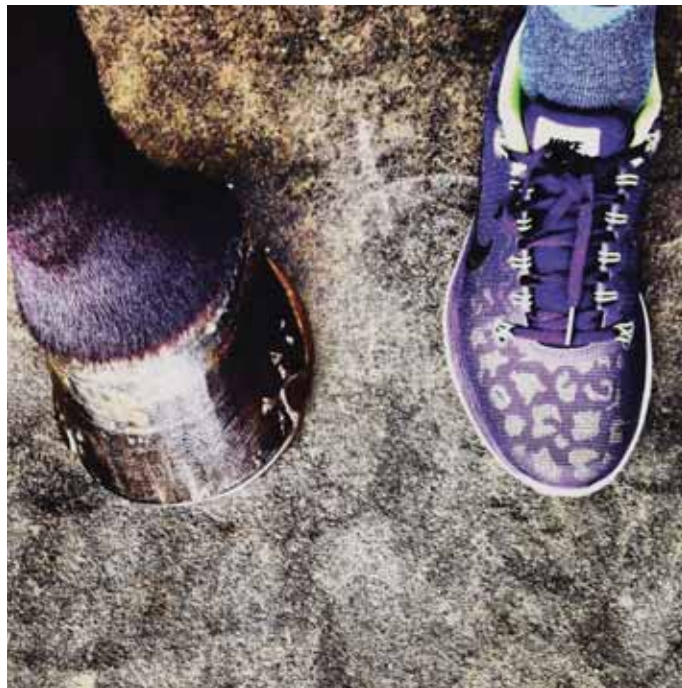
**AU:** It felt a little more intense than NAJYRC, but I was able to keep my nerves in check so it didn't bother me that much.

**HC:** How long have you been competing?

**AU:** I've competed since I was about eight-years-old, but only for the last three and a half years at FEI level.

**HC:** Did you ride in any other disciplines before getting into dressage?

**AU:** When I was seven, my mom let me do some jumping, but only for a little bit. It was uncomfortable for me because my mom made me wear this protective safety vest that was so large and restrictive, and I'm all about feel in the saddle and this vest was getting in the way. If I'm not comfortable I don't like to do it so I got out of jumping really quickly and then got hooked on dressage, and have been ever since.



**Sjapoer has shoes and now, thanks to Nike, so does Ayden.**

Photo courtesy of Lisa Uhlir



"... we are so affectionate towards one another and I know all his likes and dislikes." photo by Elma Garcia 2014

**HC:** Are you someone who likes to be in control?

**AU:** Well, some people think that being a control freak is a bad thing but in the dressage world I think it's a good thing, especially when executing the movements.

**HC:** Tell us about your horse Sjapoer?

**AU:** Sjapoer is a Dutch Warmblood I bought in Holland in the winter of 2011, and he just turned 15 in February.

**HC:** Did you develop a quick connection with Sjapoer?

**AU:** Oh yes, within three months of getting him we did the Juniors but we didn't do too well that year; we were just working the kinks out in our relationship and we didn't know each other very well. We were brand new so it took some time to develop a bond, but the next year we really jelled and that's when we won the gold medal in Individual.

**HC:** To get to the top of the podium, it usually takes years to develop that partnership with a horse. You did it in one year.

**AU:** Yeah, I love to spend time with Sjapoer, just sitting in his stall with him, and I don't even have to spend time petting him. I just have to be in his area and he in mine, and we are so affectionate towards one another and I know all his likes and dislikes. It has definitely been a journey.

**HC:** Getting that connection with a horse is important isn't it?

**AU:** It really is. Why would a horse want to work hard for a rider he isn't connected with or cares about?

**HC:** You are the first young rider to win back-to-back gold medals at the NAJYR Championships. Following that amazing accomplishment, you started reaching out to find sponsors to help further your riding career. Can you take us through your process for finding a sponsor?

**AU:** Basically, my parents can't continue to pay for my riding forever and I'm 19 and like most normal 19-year-olds, I should

have a job and be going to school but that's just not what my life was meant to be like, and I really needed to find a way to fund my riding myself. So, I decided to send sponsor books out to every company I knew of, and not just companies but families and breeders and individuals. Because what's the worst that could happen? They say no.

**HC:** What was the sponsor book all about? What was in it?

**AU:** The book was all about me - my life and my story, the bond between Sjapoer and myself and what I want to achieve in my career. And what I really wanted the book to portray to potential sponsors is that Sjapoer and I are worth taking a risk on. There are not many people who want to invest money and products on a young person because there isn't a lot of show experience, results or consistency. I really want people to believe in us like I believe in us. I'm really proud of the book and I feel like it showed who we are as a team. The book has lots of photos of me growing up, my first ponies, going up the levels, and of course, Sjapoer.

**HC:** I find it interesting that none of the equestrian companies you sent sponsor books to agree to sign you, but then here comes Nike, and suddenly you become the first US equestrian to be sponsored by this huge sportswear giant. That had

to be incredibly exciting.

**AU:** Yes, some executives at Nike were interested in my story and they were in southern California for an ironman competition and contacted me and wanted to meet Sjapoer and me and see my barn.



**"I love to spend time with Sjapoer, just sitting in his stall with him, and I don't even have to spend time petting him. I just have to be in his area and he in mine..."**

Photo by Elma Garcia 2014



Ayden Uhlir is the only young rider to have won back-to-back Individual Gold Medals at the NAJYRC. She accomplished the double gold in 2012 and 2013. Photo by Susan Stickle/ USDF.org

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We hit it off and they wanted to know my plans and goals. A week later they emailed me and said they were interested in helping me out. Then around the first of April they flew me out to the Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon and I met with the team and took a tour of the campus and it was amazing. If I had to work at an indoor job I would work at the Nike campus. It is a wonderful place.

**HC:** *What is it that Nike wants to do for you?*

**AU:** As a rider you have to be in great physical shape and Nike really wants to help me with that by providing products and different workout techniques using the Nike Training Club App that features videos of workouts that take you step by step, showing you how to properly condition yourself. It is a great app and I can take it with me everywhere and still get the workouts that I need.

**HC:** *So Nike is putting together a training program for you?*

**AU:** Yes, they're really excited about dipping their toe into the equestrian world and they thought that this would be a good time to test the waters with me. The dressage world is fairly big and Nike is really intrigued with the sport, especially with how hard you have to work when you're on the horse, while making it appear that you aren't doing anything. Nike has developed a lot of resistance training and core strength techniques and they think they can make me a better-conditioned athlete in those areas.

**HC:** *What Nike clothing do you enjoy wearing?*

**AU:** I really love the Nike Tech Fleece jacket that is a lightweight shell that is so soft with really great material that I wear to the barn and over my workout clothes. They also sent me some great shoes with my favorite being the Nike Free 3.0. I wear them all day at the barn when I'm not in my riding boots.

**HC:** *So will we see the Nike swoosh logo on your saddle pads or on you?*

**AU:** I have to see if the dressage rules allow it, but I think it would be a great idea. This is a funny story; after I was signed by



**“Why would a horse want to work hard for a rider he isn't connected with or cares about?”**

Nike, I got some colored hair chalk and drew a Nike swoosh on Sjapoer's flank. It was really adorable and I can do it in different colors but I don't think the show regulations will allow that.

**HC:** *Have you met any of the other Nike athletes, and if not, whom would you like to meet?*

**AU:** I haven't had a chance yet because I was only on the Nike campus for a day, but I'm sure I will next time I visit. Nike would like to see me become part of the Nike team going to different events with the other athletes. I would really like to meet Gabby Douglas and Shawn Johnson, the Olympic Gymnastic medalists.

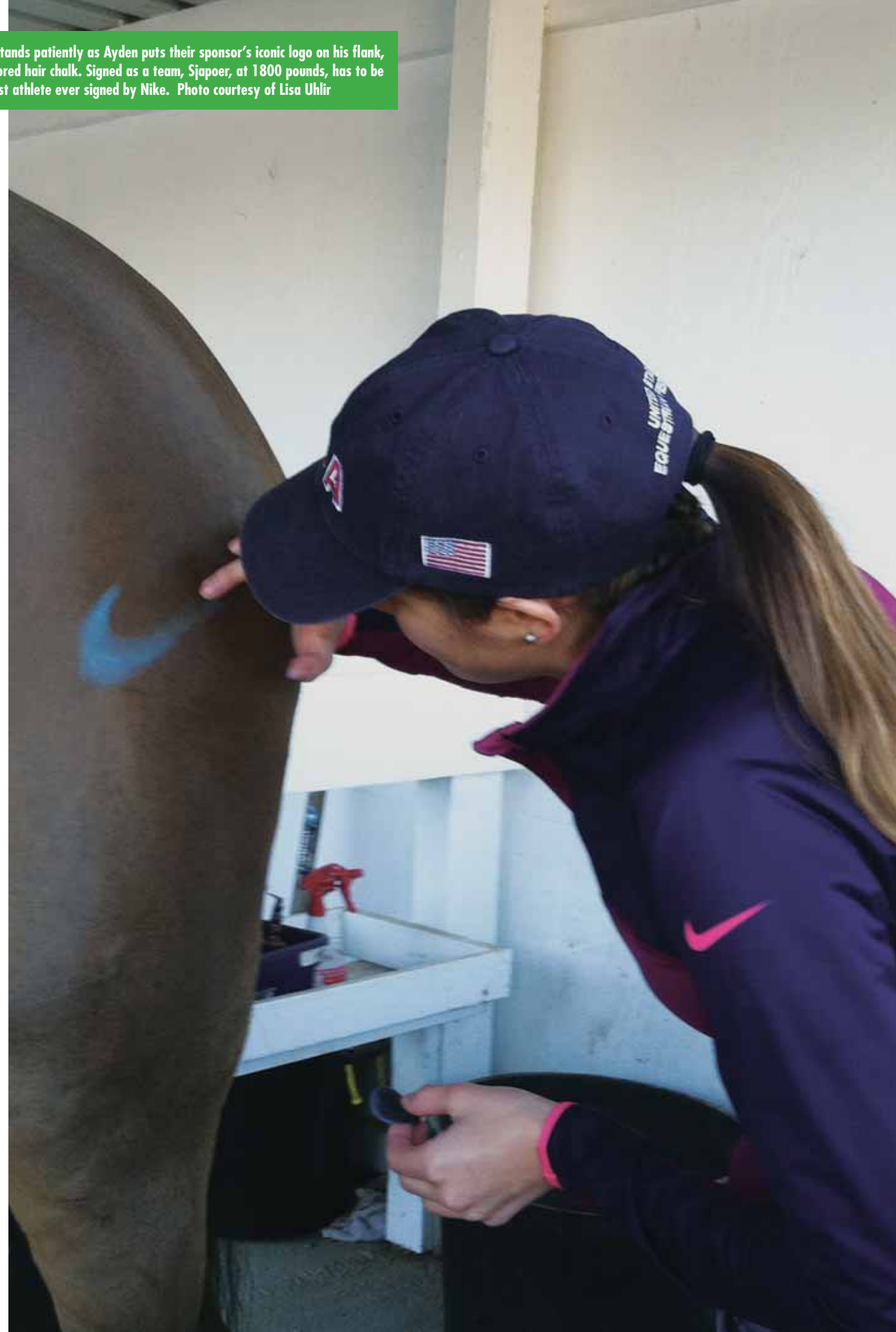
**HC:** *Speaking of the Olympics, is that a goal of yours?*

**AU:** Oh absolutely, that is my main goal. Since riders have a very long career, I can potentially qualify for seven or eight Olympics, and Nike is excited with that possibility. At the last Olympics, there was a 70+ year-old Dressage rider competing.

**HC:** *That's a good point because potentially, Nike has an athlete that can be on the world stage for 40 years, something that can only be done in equestrian sport.*

**AU:** Yes, that is one thing that Nike is excited about – that the public can kind of grow up with me, that young girls can go through life with me. That excites me that I could be a potential role model and help young girls. The sport is amazing and I am so excited to be able to expose it to everybody and give it the appreciation that it deserves.

Sjapoer stands patiently as Ayden puts their sponsor's iconic logo on his flank, using colored hair chalk. Signed as a team, Sjapoer, at 1800 pounds, has to be the largest athlete ever signed by Nike. Photo courtesy of Lisa Uhlir



**HC:** I think you are in the perfect position to be a great role model, not just because of winning the double gold medals in young riders, but the initiative that you took to find a sponsor, and to present yourself in such a way that a huge company like Nike would take an interest in you. Has the discipline of Dressage given you some tools that have helped you achieve all of this at such a young age?

**AU:** I think Dressage has helped me become more independent – not in a way where I can do whatever I want, but in a way where what I do is done correctly. Especially with horses - you have to be in charge of taking care of this big animal. It's not like a soccer ball where when you're done with it you put it in the closet. You have to exercise and feed and groom a horse and it is a really big job that teaches you responsibility for yourself and the horse.

**HC:** You are now training in California with Olympic Bronze medalist Christine Traurig. What are you learning under her guidance?

**AU:** She has been teaching me finesse with effectiveness and she is a wonderful teacher and I admire her and what she has done throughout her career.

**HC:** What is finesse with effectiveness?

**AU:** It is being able to sit on the horse and look like you're not doing anything. Achieving effectiveness is about getting the horse connected without pulling him around and forcing him into the contest - being able to get him to be willing to go there without force by using technique and leg aids. The finesse part

for me is learning how to keep my hands steady and not disrupt the horse's natural movement. I need to be able to go with the gaits of the horse and follow him with my hands and be steady. That's the finesse end of it, to be able to follow the horse with a calm steadiness.

**HC:** I heard that you have a funny nickname for Christine. What is it?

**AU:** The "magical unicorn." I think it is so funny that this has become a thing. All of us who ride with Christine have a really fun relationship with her and we were talking one day about how awesome she was and I said, "she is like a magical unicorn, because she can make things happen and we

don't know how." And everybody started laughing and we all just started calling her that.

**HC:** What are your plans for the rest of 2014?

**AU:** Right now Sjapoer and I will be doing I-1 classes while he is preparing me for my future horse. I am looking for a younger horse that could do the Brentina cup classes. Sjapoer is not able to take me to the grand prix level - it's a huge jump from young riders to the under 25 grand prix, and it's hard to make that jump to reach that next level, so I'm working on creating a solid base for myself for that next horse.

**HC:** What lessons has Sjapoer taught you in your life?

**AU:** He has taught me unconditional love. He is always there for me no matter what and that is something that I want to be for my friends and family - someone that they can count on. I also need to learn that you can't always control things and horses can definitely teach you that!

**HC:** Since you and Sjapoer have been signed as a team by Nike, does that make Sjapoer the largest athlete Nike has ever sponsored?

**AU:** Definitely the largest. I don't think there is anybody larger than him. He is 1,800 pounds of raw energy and I wouldn't be where I am today without him.



**Ayden trains with Olympic Bronze medalist Christine Traurig.**

Photo courtesy of Lisa Uhler





**A**yden will certainly be a fantastic ambassador for the sport of dressage and equestrians everywhere should be excited with the news that Nike has entered the world of sporthorses. However, it remains to be seen where all of this will lead. Dressage as a sport is far from mainstream, but this is a step that could be very positive in moving horse sport into public awareness.

We can only hope that one day we might see Air Uhlir Dressage Boots or Air Sjafoer saddle pads and bell boots under the Nike brand. After all, there wasn't any Nike golf equipment until Tiger Woods came along. One can only hope and wait.

To keep up with Ayden, visit her blog at <http://dressagespot.blogspot.com/> ■