



Kobi Rhodes and his daughter, Lielle Rhodes, with their horse Cliffhanger, at their Kobi's Place Farm in Wellington, Florida.

Kobi and Lielle Rhodes

FATHER & DAUGHTER BOND OVER HORSES

By Laura Scaletti
Portraits by Melissa Fuller

With a passion for horses that started in his homeland of Israel, Kobi Rhodes has always known horses would be his life's work. "From the time I was a young kid, it's always and only been about horses for me," Kobi said.

Those beloved horses have taken Kobi from the small Israeli village where he was born to the winter equestrian capital of the world, Wellington, Florida, where he runs his Kobi's Place hunter-jumper-equitation business with his daughter, Lielle, today.

ISRAELI ROOTS

Growing up in that small village, Kobi was introduced to horses by his uncle. "He took me riding a lot, mostly trail riding through the village," Kobi said. In addition to riding with his uncle, Kobi would go out for rides with his friends on horses, donkeys, whatever he could possibly get his hands on to ride.

At 13 years old, Kobi relocated with his family to Central Israel so his father could continue his career as a power station engineer. It was in Central Israel that Kobi met Izzy, who introduced him to English-style riding and jumping. "At an early age, I started watching videos and following the European riders. I quickly fell in love with the European way of doing the sport," Kobi said.

When Kobi was getting his start, the equestrian opportunities in Israel were much more limited than they are today. After watching hour upon hour of European

equestrian accomplishments, Kobi was ready to explore the equestrian opportunities around the world; however, first he had to take care of his national duty.

Completing military service is considered a rite of passage for all Israeli citizens—three years for men and two years for women. Kobi served in the Red Berets from age 18 to 21. "While I was a combat soldier, I had the importance of discipline and routine instilled upon me. My time in the military helped make me a more independent, organized and disciplined person, getting up early in the morning and immediately going into action—taking care of business and not leaving anything behind," Kobi said. "I still carry on the lessons I learned in the military today."

After completing his service requirements and taking the opportunity to travel the world, Kobi was ready to get back to horses.

GLOBAL CLASSROOM

Initially getting his start in Los Angeles, California, Kobi competed in his first event as a professional at 24 years old and began training hunters and jumpers up and down the West Coast. With his feet wet in the sport, Kobi decided it was time to see what the European system he watched for hours and hours on tape growing up was like in real life. Kobi was familiar with the names and whereabouts of many professionals from the videos. He decided to travel to England in search of Fred Welch, a leading rider in Great Britain.

"Fred was a reputable trainer and had many talented horses in his barn such as Dollar Girl, Limited Edition and Showtime, all ridden by Nick Skelton. On a daily basis, I was exposed to world class horses and was able to ride a lot of their siblings and other horses in the barn at the time," Kobi said.

Kobi remained in Europe for two years, gaining the experience and knowledge necessary to begin competing at the Grand Prix level of show jumping. "It was in Europe that I learned all about how the European system handles horse care, how to produce young horses and the importance of dressage for all disciplines. Everything I learned in Europe made me the horseman I am today, where I can develop young horses and take problem horses and turn them around," Kobi said.

With a good understanding of the European system, Kobi decided it was time to head back to the United States and launch a place of his own.

CREATING ROOTS

Once Kobi made his way back to the United States, he decided to settle down in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It was in Florida he not only built his business, Kobi's Place, but also a family. Known for his skill in helping problem horses, Kobi met his now wife, Pam, when she needed help with one of her Amateur Owner hunters she had recently purchased. "Mom asked my dad to come help her with the horse, and it went from there," Lielle said.

Kobi and Pam got married in 2000 and welcomed their daughter, Lielle, in 2001. Lielle quickly followed in her parents' horse-loving footsteps. "I've been very lucky because I was born into a horse family. If it was up to my dad, I probably would have been put on a horse right out of the womb," Lielle chuckled. "I didn't really start riding until I was 3 years old, when I rode random ponies. It wasn't until I was 5 years old that I got my first pony and I started to take the sport seriously."

Kobi feels extremely lucky that Lielle is as passionate about horses as he is. "As a parent, you always hope your kid will follow in your footsteps. Lielle has been in love with horses since she was young, always riding and spending as much of her time in the barn as possible," Kobi said. "She learned so much just growing up with me and watching how I train and care for the horses."

As Kobi's child, Lielle had the best of both worlds: being able to train with her father at home and having plentiful opportunities to work with other professionals in the business. "I did most of the training myself, but Lielle also spent time with a lot of other professionals including Geoff Teall, Missy Clark, Don Stewart, Ken Smith and Jimmy Torano," Kobi said. "I tried to get her as much exposure as possible to different programs, having her work with other professionals as often as possible."

Lielle agrees having a professional as her dad was monumental as a Junior rider. "It was a huge advantage to be supported by a lot of professionals growing up. Dad always had friends who had horses for me to ride. I'm so thankful for the opportunities his friends gave me, as those rides made me the rider I am today," she said.

After making her mark in the hunter, jumper and equitation rings as a Junior rider, Lielle took a gap year to spend time in Europe before heading off to the University of Georgia, where she was recruited to be on the equestrian team. After her fall semester sophomore year, Lielle decided she wanted to go back to Florida, turn professional and join the family business while continuing her studies in sports psychology remotely.

FAMILY AFFAIR

With Kobi championing Lielle's riding since she was a child, it was a natural fit for her to become an official member of the team at Kobi's Place. Located in Wellington, Florida, for the past 10 years, Kobi's Place focuses on the development of both horse and rider in a family-oriented and personal environment. "I try to limit the number of customers we have and keep it at eight to 16 horses at any given time in order to give both horse and rider

the personal attention I believe differentiates Kobi's Place," Kobi said.

Kobi and Lielle share riding and training duties at the farm. "My dad is the boss man. He handles a lot of the training duties, while I focus on barn management and riding. I'm always in the background making sure things are organized and trying to keep our day running smoothly," Lielle said.

Kobi gives Lielle a bit more credit. "She pretty much gets involved in everything; She teaches the customers; shows all of our young horses; prepares horses for the customers who are competing; and competes on her own horses."

At this point, Lielle can't imagine doing business with anyone other than her parents. "Working with them and being involved in horses together has created such a special relationship between the three of us. They aren't just my parents, they are my business partners and friends," Lielle said. "I'm so lucky I can go to them whenever I need advice or help."

It's this closeness to Kobi and Pam that makes seeing them everyday enjoyable. "I know a lot of people wouldn't like hanging out with their parents, but since I'm 21 and still relatively young, I still enjoy the time we spend together. They are always there when I need them; it's such a huge thing for me," Lielle said.

As an Israeli citizen, Kobi served in the Red Berets from age 18 to 21. "My time in the military helped make me a more independent, organized and disciplined person," he said. "I still carry on the lessons I learned in the military today."



Used to being treated as an equal by her parents, making the transition from Junior catch rider to professional had its challenges for Lielle. "It wasn't so much I had to change the way I carried myself, it was more I had to shift the way people thought about me. I needed them to view me as a young professional rather than Kobi's kid," she said. "I'm really trying to make a name for myself as a professional."

Kobi believes Lielle has already made her mark on the sport. "I'm so proud of the transition she's made since she made the decision to go professional. She's been such an asset to Kobi's Place and is having success in the national Grand Prix," he said. "I got the best present of all, having my daughter love the sport that means so much to me."

FUTURE GOALS

Both Kobi and Lielle are excited about the future of Kobi's Place. Kobi hopes that together they can continue to help their Junior riders climb up the ranks and be successful in each ring they enter. "I'd like to know that any of my Juniors have the horses and knowledge that can take them to the winner's circle at any finals, whether that's in the hunter, jumper or equitation ring," Kobi said.

On a more personal note, he's hoping to see his own young professional continue to have success. "I really hope next year Lielle is competitive in the two-star and three-star jumper division," he said.

While Lielle cannot wait to see what the future holds working at Kobi's Place, she also has her eyes on following in her father's footsteps. "I'd love to spend more time in Europe and continue to learn the European system—get more of the craft of flatwork, which my father has always considered the most important part of riding. Americans often don't pay enough attention to this aspect of training," she said. "I really want to learn and grasp new concepts that I can bring back home with me."

Regardless of where her travels may take her, one thing is for sure: Lielle is in this for the long haul. "I love horses, I love this business, I love my family," she said. "Why wouldn't I want to do this horse thing for the rest of my life?" **S**

For more information, visit www.kobisplace.com

Photos by Melissa Fuller, msfullerphotography.com



Photos top to bottom: Lielle, with Lordi, said she loves working with her parents. "They aren't just my parents, they are my business partners and friends."

Kobi with Axel, a Mastiff/Great Dane mix.