

# Into The Sport - Melissa Dragoo

By Mark Boardman · January 27, 2008



## Meet Melissa



*It wasn't that long ago Melissa Dragoo was a shining star on the Wrangler circuit of Cowboy Mounted Shooting. Even at a very early age she had the desire to win and compete with all her might. This dream has come true.*

What were you doing at age 13?

You were probably in junior high or middle school. You faced the challenges of new subjects—algebra, biology, foreign language. Your body was going through some really weird changes (my voice couldn't decide what it wanted to do—go up, or go down). Maybe you were starting to notice members of the opposite sex, and felt things you'd never felt before. Parents were a pain in the butt. You might have been newly involved in band, or competitive sports like football, basketball, soccer, volleyball.

It's doubtful you ever gave a serious thought to being a World Champion.

Melissa Dragoo is different. She did more than think about it. At the age of 13, Melissa won the CMSA's Overall Woman's Championship in Las Vegas. She beat the best of the best—almost all of them older than her. She reached the pinnacle of the sport.

She didn't do so alone. Right after winning the crown, Melissa gave credit to her support team: "My horse Slapshot. And all the help and support from Dan Byrd, Annie Bianco-Ellett, my parents, everyone. I really love all of them."

Let's call them TeamMelissa. And it all starts with The Parents.

## The Parents

Doug and Elizabeth Dragoo live in Scottsdale, Arizona. They have four kids; Melissa is the youngest. And they supported her "horse habit" from the get-go. Melissa remembers first being attracted to the animals when she was 3 (and what were you doing at age 3?). Her parents arranged riding lessons for her. When Melissa was eight, one of Doug's friends suggested that the youngster check out mounted shooting. She did; she got hooked; and we know where that story goes.

Doug and Liz were along at every step. They helped set her up with two other members of TeamMelissa—Dan Byrd and Annie Bianco-Ellett. They bought Slapshot, a proven winner, and the horse that would take her to national prominence. They traveled to competitions across the West. Heck, her mom even became a mounted shooter herself (ironically, dad is allergic to horses).

More recently, the Dragoos purchased a finished horse named Broadway, which will take over for Slapshot when that horse's schedule is limited to just major meets. Another present: the four-year-old Rundown, which Melissa will finish herself for competitions down the road.

Now all of that is a huge investment—time, money, commitment. And you might wonder if these are the stereotypical sports parents, trying to find glory (and money) through the kid's

achievements. Not Doug and Liz. “My parents are great,” Melissa told a reporter. “They motivate and support me, but they also let me go at my own pace.” “There’s no stress, no push, no demand being put on her,” says Dan Byrd. “Her parents, if she quit tomorrow, they won’t care.”

### **The Coach**

Top CMSA rider Annie Bianco-Ellett has been part of TeamMelissa for more than four years. She lives just up the road from the Dragoos, in Cave Creek, Arizona. One of the first things she did—introduce Melissa to the horse. “This cute little blue-eyed, blonde haired girl fell in love with my blonde haired horse [Slapshot]. And the two of them were a team right away, even when she was taking lessons.” The Dragoos soon bought the animal.

Annie worked with Melissa on riding patterns and gun handling. When the youngster was still a Wrangler, Annie had her ride matches with heavy, real-sized cap guns, taking aim at every target, using proper form and technique. Melissa didn’t like that much, arguing she could ride faster with two hands on the reins. But Annie insisted, promising that the guns would be great preparation for the future. Promise fulfilled. And besides, Melissa won the 2004 Wrangler World Championship; the guns obviously didn’t slow her down that much.

Annie was (and is) a big proponent of the use of weights to strengthen the arms and wrists. Melissa took that lesson to heart. At the age of 9, she started carrying guns around the house. Real .45s. She’d raise them to firing position, practice the switch from one gun to another, that sort of thing. “I think it must have scared the UPS man,” Melissa laughs. No, the guns weren’t loaded.

Today, Annie and Melissa root for each other, and the coach still gives tips to the student. But they also compete against each other, and make no mistake about it, neither will give any quarter.

### **The Trainer**

Dan Byrd’s route to TeamMelissa meandered a bit. He sold Slapshot to Annie Bianco-Ellett back in ’01. He met the Dragoos in ’02. But he only began to work with Melissa about three years ago, after he moved his operation to Annie’s Palm Ranch in Cave Creek.

Dan has had his own success in mounted shooting over the years, winning a number of titles. He’s also a well-known horse trainer who also teaches students about riding. Dan’s a quiet guy who doesn’t much toot his own horn. Ask him about Melissa, and he’ll give her almost all the credit for her success. But he helped the Dragoos buy Broadway and Rundown for Melissa. His horsemanship coaching has been vital to Melissa’s development. “Dan has taken her to the next level,” says Annie. “And he goes to almost all of the competitions—so he provides a huge support system for her on the road.”

It’s no coincidence that since Dan came on board, Melissa has won a Reserve Championship and Overall Women’s Championship at the CMSA Worlds.

And his work is ongoing. One of Dan’s current challenges: develop the “new” horses, Broadway and Rundown, so that Melissa can stay at the top of the sport over the next fifteen years or so.

### **The Talent**

Don’t be fooled—Melissa Drago is the person most responsible for her success, even at such a tender age. When you meet her, you’ll understand that.

She’s tall at 5’9”, yet she’s remarkably graceful. Her large hands give a firm handshake, and her blue eyes look straight into you. Melissa is mature for her years. “We have a hard time remembering that she is only 13 years old,” says Dan Byrd. “She’s very articulate—you think you’re having a conversation with another adult.”

That maturity allows her to compete with older folks without being intimidated. And it gives her confidence, a knowledge that she can be (and is) great. “[I knew it] when I won Nationals in 2006. I thought, ‘Wow! I beat most of the people here. I can probably beat more of them.’” Her personality drives her to excel. Annie Bianco-Ellett saw it early on: “She was very coachable and listened, and you could see that her mind was constantly working. And she’d challenge you—‘Why? Why do we have to do it this way?’” “She doesn’t get worried. She doesn’t get

excited,” says Dan Byrd. “She just stays very focused.” And in spite of everything, Melissa is down to earth and modest about her accomplishments.

Then there’s the physical aspect. Fellow competitor Kenda Lenseigne says, “What sets her apart is that she’s obviously a natural born athlete. And she’s got a lot of natural ability.” Melissa comes from an athletic family; her brother plays golf at Georgia Tech. But she’s particularly gifted. In fact, Melissa is on her school’s track team, competing in almost all of the events. She’s played soccer, volleyball, and baseball (“That’s baseball, not softball,” she emphasizes). Melissa surfs, rides dirt bikes, and she plays polo.

She’s also got an eye to the future. Melissa is aware that many young athletes get burned out on their sport, and she admits that it’s possible that it could happen to her. But her voice expresses only enthusiasm for mounted shooting. It’s fun. She likes to hang out with her fellow competitors. Dan Byrd thinks she’ll continue working hard: “She will be challenged to stay on top of the sport...new horses, new riders, new courses.” Annie Bianco-Ellett agrees. “A lot of these teenage phenomenons disappear,” she says. “But I think Melissa is going to be in the game for awhile.” It’s likely that TeamMelissa will be together for a while, too. A couple of weeks after her victory at the World Championship, Melissa advanced to the wizened old age of 14.

**What were you doing at age 14?** You were probably in junior high or middle school. You faced the challenges of new subjects—algebra, biology, foreign language. Your body was going through some really weird changes. Maybe you were starting to notice members of the opposite sex, and felt things you’d never felt before. Parents were a pain in the butt. You might have been newly involved in band, or competitive sports. It’s doubtful you ever gave a serious thought to being a World Champion.

Melissa Dragoo is different. She not only dreamed about it, she did it. And she’ll probably do it again and again.