

straightforward nature and excellent canter, and before she knew it she'd written the check. She'd intended to put some miles on him and market him as a children's hunter, but as the jumps inched up it became clear that wouldn't be quite the right fit.

"He's really expressive with his tail, and I didn't want to block it, so we decided to try him in the jumpers," said Hamm. "I'd never had a jumper, and it had never crossed my mind to try it. I'd thought if I were to get a second horse it would be a young hunter. But I tried it, and I started loving it, and all of the sudden he found all this ability."

While Hamm embraced the challenge of the new sport, she admits it humbled her quite a bit too as she realized it wasn't the same as the amateur hunter ring.

"I remember the first time I did it I thought I'd just canter around, and we were in a 1.00-meter class," she recalled. "I would go galloping up and find a nice little gap, and my trainers would tell me I'd have to get closer. Then I'd chip, and they'd tell me it was perfect. For the longest time I'd canter around the course and say, 'Oh, there's my distance, now I need to run past that.' It was terrifying to go around course like that."

Pellegrini and Hertz helped Hamm learn to ride to the base of the jumps, and two years after trying her first jumper class Hamm really felt like things were clicking in Gulfport, and she's challenging herself to up her game. When she got into trouble recently, with a missed distance eight strides from another fence, she thought briefly about circling, but instead organized her reins, got her seat back, and kicked on to finish well.

"This is the first time in a long time I feel like I'm walking away from a circuit, and I feel like I've learned so much," said Hamm. "Even when I make mistakes, it's not just something stupid because I'm figuring things out. It's been such a blast."

Hamm's job as an economist allows her to work from home and enjoy a flexible schedule. She's already started dabbling at the 1.20-meter level, with the goal of competing in the low amateur-owner division. 

▶ Third Time's A Charm



Wilmer Diaz has won the hunter groom's class with Wahlberg three years running at the Gulf Coast Sunshine Classic. MOLLIE BAILEY PHOTO

Every year the Gulf Coast Sunshine Classic hosts two groom's classes, and for the third time running Wilmer Diaz claimed the top prize in the hunter class, while Rodrigo Martinez won the jumper award.

Diaz, who serves as the Tustin Farm barn manager, has partnered with Nicole White's Wahlberg for all three wins. This time he had an extra challenge as the 13-year-old Dutch Warmblood just came back to his care after a lease two weeks before the class. Diaz got to work body clipping and rubbing on the horse he considers his lucky charm to bring his coat up to his own standards.

"I take my time with each horse and spend time with each one to really make them look their best," said Diaz. "It's the third year in a row that we've competed and the third year in a row that we've won. He's a very handsome horse and very easy to deal with."

Diaz has been working with horses for 16 years and working with Audrey Winzinger and John Mastriano of Tustin Farm in Hainesport, N.J., for the last 12. Winzinger doesn't hesitate when describing what makes Diaz stand out.

"His attention to detail," she said. "He's always paying attention to every single thing that's going on with the horses. We have everything from the littlest short stirrup kids to junior hunters, and he's proven more than capable of treating each one as an individual. We work closely together and depend on him quite a bit. We spend a tremendous amount of time together, and he's very much a family member."