

# The Sport of Dressage is an Equine Ballet, BUT It Can Have a Light-Hearted Side

BY ROBIN STANBACK

The music hits a jaunty beat and the crowd hears the words of “George of the Jungle” in their minds as the massive, muscular horse performs the piaffe, an in-place trot with great animation, in perfect time to the beat. It is a feat that combines years of training, hours of practice and days searching for just the right melody for the unique personality of horse and rider. The humor implied in the song belies the great effort that has gone into the finished product *Karakter* and his rider, Barbara Silverman, present in the dressage arena.

The 12-year-old Russian Warmblood is a competitor that almost never was. It took Ms. Silverman’s practiced eye to see in the anorexic, frightened horse a future competitor. It also took the backing of some very dedicated dressage enthusiasts. Together the team of trainer/rider and owners/supporters made a huge difference for

“We fed him every fifteen minutes for a while to try to encourage him to eat even a little bit. It finally began to work and a side effect was that he began to like us. He’s a very personable horse now and one that has a real sense of fun about him. ‘George of the Jungle’ just fits him perfectly.”

The transition from thin and frightened horse to Grand Prix contestant didn’t happen overnight, but then nothing about competing at this level of perfection comes quickly. Dressage is a sport that, according to competitor Ms. Kathy Priest, “takes a great deal of time, a commitment to working with the best people and a level of maturity that grants an individual a great deal of patience. While the sport is becoming more attractive to younger people, the majority of top contenders in the show ring are those who have been competing for years.”

Ms. Priest, who competes with her Elite Hanoverian stallion *Bordeaux* in Grand Prix events, cited herself as an example of someone who came from the ranks of another sport to embrace the challenge of dressage. She explained, “When I was younger I was very involved in three-day eventing and dressage was a part of that sport. I did it because I had to, but I was more interested in the cross-country and stadium jumping aspects of eventing. The dressage was just what you had to do to get to that point. When I became pregnant, I couldn’t run and jump anymore and chose to concentrate on the dressage. I fell in love with the challenge of the sport and never went back to eventing.”

The challenge of competing at the Grand Prix level for both horse and rider is a lengthy process. The Fédération Equestre Internationale, the governing body of the sport, recognizes four levels of training: Prix St. Georges, Intermediaire I, Intermediaire II and Grand Prix. At this top end of the dressage spectrum all of the tests or movements required of horses and riders are standard throughout the world. To get to the international level, though, competitors like those in the United States go through yet another series of tests beginning with the training level and advancing through levels one through four with a fifth level available to help in the transition to international competitions.

To reach international levels a great deal of time needs to be spent building the rapport between



Photo submitted by Barbara Silverman

Barbara Silverman on *Karakter*

one horse and, perhaps, a difference that will be seen in competition all over the United States in the coming year. “He was a 10-year-old when I saw him for the first time,” Ms. Silverman stated. She continued, “He was in pretty bad shape. He was very afraid of people and he was so thin. I am very blessed to have a wonderful group of people who support me and some of them formed the F.O.B. Corporation and helped to purchase this horse and import him to the United States.”

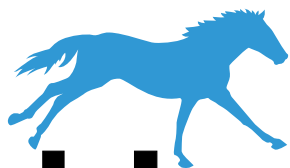
The horse, whose name in Russian means “character,” required some very special efforts to bring him back to good health. Ms. Silverman explained,

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horse and rider that is necessary for the horse to respond correctly to requests for collection. The team needs to make transitions from one gait to another, from one movement to the next that appear effortless. The movements themselves require a tremendous amount of power from the horse. Well-developed musculature is a hallmark of horses in the top levels of the sport. The time it takes to build that muscle and the working relationship between the horse and rider is often not appreciated by the casual viewer. Paradoxically, the appearance of effortless movement and grace takes a tremendous amount of effort to achieve.

Many of the movements required by the sport originated centuries ago when horses carried their riders into battle. The horses needed to be able to respond immediately to their riders as both of their lives depended upon it. The best of these horses were greatly prized and exhibited throughout Europe. The renowned Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria developed its Lippizan stallions to be the best of the very best and many of the movements developed to highlight the abilities of the famous white stallions are seen today in international dressage rings.

The horses that perform these feats are often similar in size and structure to the white stallions that made equine "high school" performance a well-accepted phrase in equine nomenclature. Ms. Priest elucidated, "Warmbloods like the Hanoverians seem to have a very good temperament for this sport. Often you see horses that are warmblood-Thoroughbred crosses. Some warmbloods are a draftier sort of horse and crossing them with a Thoroughbred adds a little refinement. The horses need to have very balanced conformation and the ability to move freely. They also need to have the mental ability to concentrate on the job at hand. This can be developed slowly and carefully. You can't do anything with the young horses for a long period of time because their attention span needs to be developed. You vary the demands you make of them and slowly increase the time spent on one movement or effort. I will usually work a horse for about 45 minutes at one time, but occasionally I will work a horse for 20 minutes in the morning and then again for another 20 minutes in the afternoon. Careful attention has to be paid to the individual."

Dressage riders also need to work to perfect their ability. As champions in this sport are true teams, the rider must also have practiced as much as, if not more than, the horse has been trained. Clinics put on by some of the top people in the sport enable riders to perfect their abilities. Ms. Silverman started riding as a seven-year-old competing in hunter/jumper and equitation classes. She began seriously studying dressage at the age of 19 when her instructor, Bert DeNemathy, told her she needed to practice more on her flat work. "Bert asked me to do a 20-meter circle and I realized I just couldn't do it. By the time I had perfected

my circle, I was in love with dressage," she laughed.

Since that time she has studied under dressage-world icons including Will Coleman in Virginia, Holger Schmietzer in Verden, Germany, and Robert Dover in New Jersey. She began teaching clinics herself and it was her clinics in central Kentucky that eventually led to her relocating there for half of the year. She explained, "I had been asked by some friends to teach a clinic in Kentucky and, after the first one, there was such a demand that I began coming back every six weeks. After every clinic there was still a long waiting list so my friends asked me to consider moving to Simpsonville. I joined them in 1994 at Diamond Hill Dressage Incorporated. I spend half the year there and the winter months of the year in Jupiter, Florida, the Wellington area where there are more dressage competitions."

Ms. Silverman is fortunate, as are many of the top-level riders, to be supported by horse owners and corporate sponsors. She explained that competing in Grand Prix events is a very costly endeavor. The horses at this level come at a very dear price, with travel and upkeep adding to the expense. "Without sponsorship, I could not compete," she stated. She added, "I went to France last year with Robert (Dover) to look at a wonderful Dutch Warmblood, Chantor de Bonce, who had already made a mark in international competition. With a horse of this caliber, it might be possible to compete for a spot on the United States Olympic Team for the Sydney 2000 Games. People from central Kentucky, the Centauri Group, purchased the horse and brought him back to the United States for me to show. Individuals and equine companies have also sponsored us. One of those is Kentucky Equine Research (KER). The beauty of this sponsorship is that, wherever I am with my horse, I know I can depend upon the quality of my feed to stay consistent. I very much appreciate the help KER provides to help me meet my horses' nutritional needs."

The help that is provided by sponsors and horse owners is also mirrored by fellow competitors. Ms. Priest mentioned her appreciation for Ms. Silverman's assistance. "Barbara and I are competitors and good friends too. I appreciate Barbara's suggestions after I have performed with one of my horses. It is a great help to have someone whose opinion you respect on the ground watching your performance. Even though you compete against each other, every dressage rider is actually competing against his or her own best effort trying, always, to best their best."

The time and effort that is required to perfect a rider's ability and a horse's performance - to best their best - might seem intense enough that enjoyment would not be a word associated with the sport. But the sheer beauty of a Karakter performing to the strains of "George of the Jungle" or Bordeaux dancing through a performance to the tune of "Chattanooga Choo Choo" makes it obvious that fun is very much a part of the world of dressage. 