

Ageless Pursuit

By HDS member Dawn Metzger

My Journey to a USDF Gold Medal at age 67 (and what I learned along the way)

My name is Dawn. I am a 67-yearold semiretired small animal Veterinarian. I like reading, travel, gardening, and cooking. But most of all I like riding. My riding partner for the last 9 years is an Andalusian named Corrado M, now 16 years of age. We started showing together at 3rd level.....and in 2017 we won our USDF gold medal together.



I want to share with you how we accomplished this because for me, and I expect for many women of a certain age (Or not!) a gold medal seems like a goal so impossible as to not even be considered. For me this all changed soon after the owner of the barn where I was boarding brought in a new trainer from Virginia, Pati Pierucci. Pati looked at me one day, and said with a perfectly straight face “You know, you can do Grand Prix with this horse.” I replied “Prove it! “. That was the beginning of my journey to a USDF Gold Medal.

I will share below some details on what I discovered enroute about horses, instructors, physical and mental fitness, and learning. But in general –

- You do not need to be a natural rider. I am certainly not a natural.
- You do not need a specific type of horse. Just the other day, I saw a mustang do quite a nice piaffe.
- What you do need is the willingness to do the work necessary to improve - and it is A LOT of work.

You will learn loads about riding, but you will also learn about yourself, and develop an even deeper relationship with your horse.

Your Partner, Your Horse

Any person's equestrian experience begins with the horse. I purchased my horse because he seemed safe, forgiving of my mistakes, and because I liked his personality. I did not buy him because I thought he was a future Grand Prix horse.



Who knew that he would become one! In my travels, I have seen many instances where people were convinced to buy horses that they were not capable of riding, and which in some instances they became somewhat afraid to ride. That is not any fun, and is not helpful in the long run, in

my opinion. Now, if your goal is to buy a horse for your trainer to ride, then this is fine. If your goal is to ride yourself, buy a horse that you are comfortable with. The horse will know if you are uncomfortable, and it will make him uncomfortable. Do not buy a really fancy horse with huge gaits if you cannot sit the trot! Your horse may surprise you in the future with what you and he can accomplish, just as mine did. You may also end up moving on to a different horse. Another person will be found to love the horse that you have outgrown, and there are options such as leasing where you can control his destiny if you are concerned about selling him.

Take any opportunity you can to ride other horses. I learned a lot just this year when my husband and I visited France for four months. I found a place to ride. I was given a Meren (a French draft breed that is always black, and small for a draft breed) to ride. I learned a great deal from this heavy trail horse about how I could support and help him with my core, encourage softness, and balance. I was also recently fortunate to get the ride on a 17-hand Grand Prix level warmblood while the owner was away. I learned even more from him because he was so very different from my 15-hand sporty model.

Take care of your horse as the athlete he is. Take care with his feed and supplements, give him regular veterinary care and have a good shoer. See to his mental health by having a day off as well as a play day each week. I do different things, such as trail riding or playing with working equitation obstacles. Sometimes we try jumping, or in our case tripping over jumps.

Learning

I have had several instructors and clinicians over the years, but initially I really wanted to do it all myself, and consequently failed to make the most of their help. It seems I was in the phase of learning known as unconscious incompetence. I didn't know what I didn't know. Then, I began to become aware of how much I didn't know. I became consciously incompetent, a most distressing state, but one common to most of us! I slowly became able to understand, think about and do the right thing. I entered the phase of conscious competence, where I mostly remain today except for forays into the previous incompetence, and occasionally into the final learning phase where I expect the "big guys" mostly inhabit - the phase of unconscious competence. That phase is distinguished by the feeling where you just automatically make the right aid or correction without having to think about where each body part (yours and the horse's) needs to be.

I have learned that I need to go to the barn each day with a plan, even though I recognize that my horse and I are not the same from day to day. So, the plan might change, but at least I have thought ahead about what I want and need to do.

Trainers, Instructors and Clinicians

I have observed, listened to, and worked with a number of trainers and clinicians over the years. The following is my opinion.

The trainer you work with should be happy to work with the horse you have. The trainer with whom you choose to work should have trained horses, preferably several, to the level at which you aspire to ride. Any good rider-trainer can ride a previously trained horse with help. However, someone who has personally trained horses to that level understands the challenges you are facing. They can help you get through them, and hopefully avoid some of them. You can check with USDF scores, or the other online score service to see how much the trainer has shown at the level, and how he or she has done in general. You can also look them up on Rate My Horse Pro (especially a good idea for parents of young riders). I don't worry about a few bad scores. These are horses and people. Anyone can have a bad day, or a dragon in the form of the dreaded plastic bag, or a horse in the next arena going ballistic.

It seems to me that there are two varieties of trainers. The first is the shut-up-and-ride variety. The second is the kind who wants your feedback. This is the one I prefer. I like to be able to talk about what I am feeling, say that I don't understand, or ask for further clarification. Just this week I had yet another light bulb moment. I have been using my core a certain way in the passage. It has been working well, or so I thought. For some reason, I said "What exactly do you mean by 'use your core'?" I ended up changing what I do, and it made a big difference. This came after like three years of doing it the other way! Talking is good! At the end of a lesson, you should be able to say what it was you worked on, how you did, and have some idea of what you will do tomorrow.

I feel that a good trainer is positive in his or her interactions. They do not hesitate to tell you when you are screwing up, but they are quick to point out and praise even a small improvement. If they tell you why it is better, then that is wonderful, too. It is easy to want to drill a movement over and over to get it right. Drilling is hard on your horse because it results in tired muscles and increased chance of injury. If something doesn't work after a reasonable time,

quit and go on to something else. Come back to it another day. Certainly, we can all feel frustrated or unhappy about our ride on a given day, but if the trainer regularly makes you feel horrible about your riding, then it is no longer any fun, and you might need another trainer. The devil in me says it might be interesting to point out to such a trainer, if you have been with them for a while, that they trained you to ride that way. But that is just the naughty side of me.

Attitude and Mental Fitness

We dressage riders tend to be fairly detail oriented and hard on ourselves. I found that some mental coaching was and is very helpful in keeping me on track. I have read that top riders, and indeed top athletes in any field get help to keep them on top of their game mentally. My coach Nancy Murray frequently helps me to stay positive and grounded. Because of her coaching, I have kept a journal for a few years now. In it, I first write three things I liked about the day's ride. Then I write three things I would like to improve. Believe it or not, there are always three things to like about your ride (I admit, some days they are pretty small things!).



When others in the barn get off and are unhappy with their ride, I encourage them to tell me three things they liked about the ride, and I hope it helps them as much as it does me. It is important, I

think to be positive and encouraging to all riders. Another rider's success does not diminish you. Comparison is your enemy. One coach put it quite succinctly. "Compare and despair." This journey is yours, and yours alone. The only reasonable comparison is to you and your horse and only over time, as horses are living creatures. Just as we are not the same from day to day, neither are they. There will always be ups and downs, and that makes the good parts even sweeter.

Physical Fitness

At any level in dressage, in my opinion, fitness is very important. It took some time for me to realize how just how fit I needed to be and just how important that is. The holy grail of an independent seat comes from a core that is strong enough to keep your torso in place and upright without any support from your hands, and without stiffness. I communicate with my horse with my whole body. He likes to be stiff on the left rein. When he is, I look first to the position of my left seat bone. I found it interesting and informative to engage different parts of my core (once I discovered that they exist) and note the different reactions.

Having said all the above, the awful truth is that I positively hate exercising. The gym is not my friend. So, I combine exercise with routine activities wherever possible. For example, I do piriformis stretches when I put on my socks. I do hamstring stretches when I put lotion on my legs and feet. As a not-so-young person, I find that it is helpful to loosen up before riding by doing Sun Salutations and other stretches. I also do planks and side planks to wake up my muscles. The ladies room is a bit of a ways from the tacking up area, so I do lunges on my way back. I have weights and one of those big exercise balls at home and use them a couple of times per week. When I use them, I am also exercising my self discipline.

After many years of struggling with an arthritic hip, I finally had it replaced last year. If you need to have this done, do not wait. Get it done! Find a great surgeon and get the least invasive approach your body type will allow. In my case, this was the anterior approach. I walked out of the hospital the next day, and was back in the saddle in six weeks. The difference in my riding was immediately noticeable to my trainer. However, I am still dealing with residual crookedness due to having protected the bad hip for many years. After surgery, physical therapy is very important as well. My surgeon tried to tell me I didn't need it. I informed him that though I am old, I am an athlete, and I required physical therapy. I still use the exercises they taught me.

“Other Stuff”

I have had friends who said their horse “refused” to do something the way they wanted. Horses most definitely do not stay awake at night plotting how to refuse and make things difficult for you!. They are incapable of that kind of thought. They can have a physical problem, or a fear, or simply not understand what you are asking. There can be a tack problem. My horse went a thousand times better when I got him his latest saddle. My horse (and I think most others) mostly does exactly what I tell him, whether or not it is what I think I am telling him. Yes, there are times when I am told he is blowing me off, but I have learned that if there is an issue, I should look first to myself. Visualize things going correctly, not badly. Talk to your horse and praise him while riding. It keeps you breathing, which is quite helpful, and he needs to know when he has done what you want, or even gotten a little closer to what you want. Praise any effort on his part to try. What you visualize is what you get. Appreciate your horse, he will feel it. Tell him thank you, out loud.

Reaching Grand Prix

I rode my first Grand Prix test in July of 2014, and received the first of my several scores of 59.7 - one point on one movement from the all-important 60%. I took long breaks from showing to improve my riding, but didn't manage to improve my scores until early 2017. Even after breaking the score barrier and even after our long journey together, the scores are still a bit up and down.

So my final bit of advice is do not give up. It took me three years but I finally did it! Whatever your dream is keep after it. If I can do this, anyone can. You have to make the dream your own, visualize the journey and the reward, pursue it with humility (This is a very humbling sport and horses can be very humbling, indeed!), plus have persistence and a love of learning. In these three years, I have had enough lightbulb moments to light a football stadium. I have had good scores for bad tests, and bad score for good tests. Tests scores may not even be your dream. Whatever is your goal, stick with it, keep your eye on the prize and believe!



Summary

What I have learned (and hope that I shared with readers) is that as an amateur, earning that USDF gold medal required more effort than I ever imagined – and was even more rewarding than I had hoped. I did have to use a trainer, although I did the great majority of the riding myself with her helping from the ground. I had to up my mental and physical game, and keep discouragement at bay. I had to persist, love my horse, treat him well, and use every opportunity to learn. I continue upon this path today.

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