

USDF PRE-CERTIFICATION: TRAINERS ON THE RISE

Maureen Boyd

On the weekend of May 8-9, 2010, a group of dressage trainers gathered at the Mount Holyoke Equestrian Center to participate in the third in a series of USDF pre-certification workshops. While not mandatory, pre-certification prepares candidates for USDF testing and is highly recommended by the United States Dressage Federation.

Lendon Gray and Ann Guptill served as the Examiners and observed participating instructors in sessions on lunging the horse, lunging the rider, coaching, training the horse, and riding the different test levels of dressage. The principle role of the Examiner is to assess the knowledge and skill base of the participants; and to provide constructive feedback and guidance to the trainers as they prepare to undertake USDF certification, which is to the professional dressage trainer what the Bar Examination is to the aspiring lawyer.

While pre-certification is not mandatory to becoming USDF certified, it is an extremely valuable segue toward achieving USDF certification. In theatre vernacular, pre-certification is the *dress rehearsal* for trainers to perfect the presentation of their skills and talents; in horse world vernacular, it is a critical *leg-up* toward actual USDF certification.

Ann Guptill is a USDF Certified Instructor and serves as a faculty member for USDF Instructor clinics and workshops. Ann manages Fox Ledge Farm in East Haddam, Connecticut. "Each pre-certification participant should possess a strong understanding of the classical principles of dressage and an ability to focus that education to the task at hand," Ann stated. "They must be articulate, clearly expressing their assessment of where the horse/rider fit into the scale of training and how to help them progress correctly."

At the conclusion of pre-certification, each participant will know if they are fully prepared to undertake the rigorous USDF Certification Testing, which will take place in August 2010. "Having been through the Certification Process myself I certainly understand how the format can be stressful for a candidate," Ann added. "We try to keep an upbeat positive attitude and ask questions that will bring out the candidates knowledge."

This year's cohort of pre-certification participants represents some of the best up-and-coming talent in the field of dressage training in New England. They are: Marie Banks, Jayne Marino, Suzanne Markham, Rochelle McPherson, Nicki Noble, Alice Peterson, Paula Pierce, Lisa Pierson, and Lisa Weiss. In an effort to introduce the USDF Certification candidates to the New England dressage community, each pre-certification participant will be profiled in random order in this and subsequent CDA newsletters, beginning here with Jayne Marino and Rochelle McPherson.

Jayne Marino has been involved in the equestrian world professionally since 1984, after her graduation from Bryn Mawr College. She has in depth experience teaching and competing in all the sport horse disciplines, including hunter/jumpers, combined training and dressage. In 1994, Jayne was certified by ARICP in combined training. Jayne has turned her personal focus to dressage and is a USDF Bronze and Silver medalist. She currently trains with Roel Theunissen, Henk van Bergen and Maryal Barnett and also participates in local clinics. Jayne is the Director of Mistover, a state-of-the-art horse boarding and training facility located in New York, 90 minutes north of New York City. At Mistover, Jayne makes the well-being of the horse

a priority. As a teacher, she enjoys supporting the growth of partnership between horse and rider using a consistent training program.

Rochelle McPherson holds a BS degree in Equine Business Management from Johnson & Wales University. In 2000, she opened Grand View Stable in Columbia, Connecticut, which began as a combined-training facility. In 2004, she opened an additional facility 'up the road' from the original business: hence, each barn is now known as "Grand View Downtown" and "Grand View Uptown," with Uptown serving as the dressage training facility. Rochelle currently manages both barns with her business partner, Alena Meacham. Rochelle has trained and taught all different levels of horses and riders. She has brought along a wide range of students, from those taking their first lesson to students competing at Fourth Level. Rochelle has competed professionally through Fourth Level and is striving to ride her first *Prix St. George* in 2010 or 2011. She derives her greatest satisfaction from seeing her students succeed. Rochelle currently trains with Roel Theunissen, Dee Loveless, and Lou Denizard. One of her major goals is to achieve USDF teaching certification.

During the pre-certification process, Jayne, Rochelle, and the other participants shared with me some of their philosophies about the art of dressage, from many different perspectives:

What led you to pursue dressage as your discipline of choice?

ROCHELLE: *I started at a young age learning to ride at a backyard hunter-jumper barn. There was a woman there who rode dressage and I remember watching her and trying to understand the way she rode and the way her horse moved. Those early days lit the spark for me. I began riding a quarter horse mare with a western reining background that I eventually schooled through 2nd level. That work transformed this mare's body from a lean, dull form to a muscled, graceful moving machine. I was hooked.*

JAYNE: *I have always studied dressage, even while being an eventing and show jumping rider. In the winter of 1996, I had a show jumping experience in Ocala, FL that satisfied me on so many levels, that it was as if I had permission to pursue something new as a rider. Later that spring, I made the decision to focus on dressage. Pursuing dressage as my discipline fits me in so many ways. It stretches my mind, allows for a good balance in my life, and develops a bond with a horse in a way that I enjoy.*

Who are the trainers with whom you have worked that have most influenced your career and why?

ROCHELLE: *Linda Schroder was my first trainer, and I will always be thankful for the way she taught me through all my green rider insecurities, lack of confidence and skill. She was the first person who taught me how to feel connection to the horse, and partnership of the horse and rider. I began riding with Lou Denizard when I was a student at Johnson & Wales, and he has most influenced my career as a trainer of riders of all levels. Lou is very real and authentic; he*

has ridden horses of all calibers and has taught me to appreciate the value of each individual horse, no matter their level of schooling or ability. I always learn from him. What I love most about working with Dee Loveless is that she is so focused and driven to push the rider to move up the levels. Dee has been the strongest influence in teaching me how to ride strategically.

JAYNE: *Catherine McWilliams of Brewster, NY was the first dressage rider that influenced me. Cathy and her horses have always noticeably enjoyed their work together. She encouraged me to participate in dressage as a teenager, and still does today. Karen Sergey (now also at Mistover in Pawling, NY) guided my first steps as a “dressage only” rider with the enthusiasm that she shares with me on a daily basis now. Her passion for teaching and learning is infectious. Simply put, we have fun. Susan Blinks, Nancy Later, and Susanne Handler all contributed to my first opportunities to learn from horses that had FEI-level knowledge. Without the help of these women, my education about what came after training level would not have begun. Their patience and enthusiasm for learning was confidence-building for me. With their help, I was able to achieve the USDF Silver Medal Rider award. Roel Theunissen continues to broaden my horizons in so many ways. He has the unique ability to instill confidence in a rider, who is learning just outside of his/her comfort zone. With Roel’s help, I have had the opportunity to take three educational riding trips to Europe which opened my eyes to a whole new level of expertise and expectation for the dressage horse and rider. Roel is creative in business as well and he is an excellent networker. In addition to Roel Theunissen, other clinicians who teach at Mistover regularly share their knowledge and passion for dressage. Maryal Barnett, Henk van Bergen, and Jane Savoie also motivate riders (and non-riders) to learn. Each has their own style of teaching and way of communicating, which opens up my understanding and creativity.*

Tell me about the horses in your life, past or present. Which stand out in terms of making the most impact on your desire to become a professional trainer?

ROCHELLE: *I learned to ride on a remarkable schoolmaster who was solidly trained through FEI. Rariaet, was an Oldenberg mare by Rubenstein, and I credit her as being the first horse to teach me that wonderful feel of collection. In looking back, I was so fortunate to have learned on her. I now own a wonderfully talented mare, Regalia. She is a Danish Warmblood by Rambo and I consider her to be my FEI re-school project. Regalia is a highly sensitive and hot mare that came to me in a very anxious state of mind as a result of having been over-pushed as a youngster. She is an international quality horse with personality issues that constantly challenge me to bring her along in a way that fully supports her mental and emotional well-being. We’re making great progress together. What I love most about Regalia is that she will not tolerate anything less than correct riding and clear communication. She keeps me honest in my riding.*

JAYNE: *Each horse brings something to the table. I have learned that it is all the little experiences with many different horses (and riders) that keep my passion for training alive. To answer this question most honestly, I would say that the first horse I ever met had the largest*

impact on me. I was four or five years old. All I remember was that his eyes were big and brown, and he smelled so good. And I liked the sound of him chewing. Time stopped. Even at that age, I knew where I was supposed to be.

How do you envision your career in 5 years? What do you hope to achieve?

ROCHELLE: *Oh, that's a hard question! I will still be the owner-manager of Grand View Stables in Columbia, Connecticut, where I hope I will be teaching the same students that are currently at my barn. This is a great group of dressage students and horse lovers at all levels of training, ages, and life circumstances. We have been able to create a tremendously supportive environment together and I am so thankful for that. I see my students in 5 years as working happily and at their full potential. I imagine Regalia and I will be successfully competing at the FEI levels by that time. My ultimate goal is to be riding Grand Prix one day.*

JAYNE: *I imagine my daily routine as a teacher of horses and riders will be similar in 5 years, but I know that my knowledge and understanding of horse care and training will be larger. I hope to gain more experience as a rider at the FEI Level. In 5 years I hope to have achieved the USDF Gold Medal Rider Award. Setting this goal has been good for me as it encourages me to stay creative and find ways to learn and grow. This can only be good for my career.*

Finally, green riders really want to know: how does one achieve a balanced seat? And why does it have to take years to accomplish?

ROCHELLE: *Practice really does make perfect in dressage. The best advice I can give to riders of this discipline is to ride as often as possible and train with a really well qualified, knowledgeable instructor who is also very sensitive and caring. Work with a trainer who really understands the body mechanics of both the rider and the horse. Dressage is a sport and the rider must bring to his or her work the same level of commitment as any other athlete. I want my students to learn to 'dance' with their horses, to learn how to lead in that dance and then follow with graceful movement and in total harmony with the horse. This kind of work makes the horses happy. And happy horses are able to teach happy riders! Green riders are like green horses – they have to learn to communicate, beginning with the alphabet, moving on to simple phrases, and then talking to each other at a sophisticated level of language exchange. Students just learning to ride so often come to it with a wonderful passion for horses. They simply love horses and want to be with them and that's terrific, that's a great place to start. But it is equally important to understand that the process is long, it can take years to learn to ride well. So take the time to enjoy the process, to appreciate the success of every little baby step. And be sure to work with a trainer who recognizes both the strengths and limitations of each individual horse-rider pair. This is the kind of trainer who will help you and your horse reach your full potential.*

JAYNE: *This is always a good question and it has so many good answers. First, I would encourage the green rider to find an experienced teacher that has an atmosphere at their stable*

that offers a good environment for learning. Learning to ride takes time, focus, commitment, and confidence. Accepting these things will make all the hours in the saddle more productive. Each rider will have different challenges when it comes to developing a balanced seat. I encourage riders to study non-riding activities that will help them study their timing and balance in addition to their regular riding lessons. Most often, trainers recommend that riders spend supervised time on the lunge line in the beginning of their education.....and in the middle.....and yes at the end. I agree with this approach. Time in the saddle with knowledgeable horses and teachers is the way to go.....enjoy!