

9 TIPS TO DEVELOP YOUR DRESSAGE RIDER

Lendon Gray explains her methods for helping kids reach their full potential as riders and as horsemen.



The Youth Dressage Festival focuses on rewarding those who have a well-rounded equine education with a three-phase competition that includes a written riding-theory and stable-management test, a group equitation class and a dressage test.

COUNG RDERS

By Lendon Gray with Lindsay Paulsen

Lendon Gray's talents as a horsewoman extend far beyond her ability to perform in the ring. Although she is well-known for her success with *Seldom Seen*, her 14.2½-hand Grand Prix dressage pony, and for her participation on two Olympic teams, she also has made large contributions to developing the next generation of American dressage riders.

Gray is somewhat of a mastermind when it comes to helping kids excel in dressage. In an effort to encourage youth with an interest in dressage to be better all-around horsemen, she founded the *Youth Dressage Festival* in 1999.

The program focuses on rewarding those who have a well-rounded equine education with a three-phase competition that includes a written riding-theory and stable-management test, a group equitation class and a dressage test. The program also explores riding beyond the dressage ring with a *Prix Caprilli*, which is a dressage test that incorporates jumps, and even a dressage trail class. The success of Gray's approach to training young dressage riders

"I teach a talented, determined, ambitious and focused kid pretty much the way I teach my good professionals."

speaks for itself, as she regularly works with more than 100 students at a time and has trained several national and regional champions, including the youngest North American Young Rider gold medalist. Here she shares some advice for trainers helping young dressage enthusiasts develop into the best possible riders and horsemen.

1 Try New Things

I think kids tend to be braver than adults. You don't usually have such confirmed bad habits with kids, as opposed to an adult who has been working on that bad habit for years and years and years. They're perhaps a little bit more willing to try new things, again, because of the lack of experience.



Katrina Sadis and Poldy 10 won this year's USEF Pony Rider Dressage National Championship.

2 Don't Water It Down

I teach a talented, determined, ambitious and focused kid pretty much the way I teach my good professionals. I don't water it down for them. I don't water down the theory, particularly. I've had two young kids that I've brought up—one from age 5 and one from age 7—both ambitious, determined, bright kids. I taught some of my most technical lessons to those two. Not so much when they were at the age of 5 but more like when they got closer to 9 or 10. These lessons were even more technical than I would teach some adults. They were remarkable kids.

3 Create Challenge

I feel that kids aren't challenged enough. Look at the kids in this country versus the kids in Europe. The difference in the sophistication of their riding is absolutely unbelievable.

This is sort of my pet peeve. I find that trainers don't think kids can ride as well as they can ride or can ride as well as they are taught to ride. There is a phenomenal difference in the riding between American kids and the pony riders in Europe, whom we see first at age 12 when they are competing in the FEI pony divisions.

I find that when I do clinics and meet some children for the first time, nobody has challenged them. We sort of have a sense in this country of a very slow progression that I personally don't think has to be quite so slow.

Of course, this kind of faster progression would be appropriate for the talented, determined kids as opposed to the ones who do a little dressage just because mommy makes them when they'd really rather be out jumping.

4 Make It Fun

You absolutely try to make it more fun, especially for the kid

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who wants to ride and the one that you hope will realize that dressage is part of his or her life.

Turn things into games. Make it a little shorter and more intense and find what it is that keeps their attention. The first thing that comes to mind in my experience is one kid who wouldn't pay attention to her diagonals. I walked into the ring one day with 10 Hershey Kisses. I set them on the railing and said, "These are yours. I brought them for you," and her eyes lit up. But then I said, "Every time I catch you on the wrong diagonal, I'm taking one away." So naturally she didn't lose one.

If you make things a little bit competitive, that often encourages them. Even with the Hershey's Kiss thing, there was a bit of a competition with the lingering question of "Are these going to be mine or yours?" It's definitely important that kids find a level of success, but that's important for adults, too.

5 Mix It Up

The one thing that I feel makes a strong difference in a kid's riding education is that those who are interested in dressage also do other things: trail ride, ride cross country, jump, ride bareback. Get a full education that way. I'm not necessarily going to push the adults that I teach to do that, beyond trail riding. I feel so strongly about kids not totally specializing. The same is true for kids in any other discipline, like jumper riders. All of these kids who are galloping around on these ponies—what they could gain from a little dressage education! And likewise, what these dressage kids could gain from jumping cross country.

I know some students who are galloping racehorses. I wish everybody would do that because I find that so few dressage riders are willing to go

Finding Opportunities

For a kid, finding the right opportunities can sometimes be incredibly difficult. As an adult, you can go off and train with somebody for a little bit, but when you're a kid it's not quite that easy. I have one teenager who can drive but who lives in the middle of nowhere. I set her up with a good trainer who lives quite a ways away, but she makes it work. She goes and stays with the trainer for about a week per month. As a kid you can't necessarily do that because you depend on mom to drive you.

My biggest piece of advice is to find a place that you can reach where you can make yourself indispensable in some way. Be willing to muck stalls, to clean tack, to pick rocks and then maybe someone will be willing to give you some opportunities. But you have to be willing to do the grunt work. I find so many now have this feeling of entitlement: "I have some talent, therefore you should help me." But if you're willing to show me that you're working your buns off, I'll do everything I can for you. There are a lot of people out there who are like that.

If you're a working-student type of person, you have got to find a place where, if you don't have a horse, you have opportunities to ride. And it can be riding anything—it doesn't have to be riding fancy things. If you do have a horse, he needs to be at a place where you're going to get the help that you're working for. And the trainer needs to be someone who is going to be invested in you in some way and not just taking you for free or cheap labor and doing the minimum for you. Having said that, there's a huge advantage to being able to be a working student for someone like Jan Ebling or JJ Tate or Scott Hassler, or whomever, where you can be around elite dressage, watching, soaking it up and learning stable management, even if you're not getting a lot of riding out of it. I'm not saying that these people wouldn't give you the time. I'm just saying any big name with a lot of horses where you can learn the business would be beneficial. Learn the horse care. Learn the horse management. Learn the training strategies. Hopefully, the next opportunity will give you the chance to put it all to use.

So many of the very, very successful riders, even those who aren't brought up with money, have fascinating stories of how they got there: living in grungy conditions, working their butts off, freezing in the winter, you know, whatever. But always soaking up the knowledge. You've got to be willing to do that. You can't do that as a young child necessarily, but as soon as the time comes. I've had kids come and stay with me in my house. Rachel Chowanec first came and spent a weekend with me as a "working student" when she was 8 or 9. Not a lot of people offer that opportunity, but I've had kids very young who started with little working-student opportunities at a young age. But generally you've got to be at an age where you can be pretty responsible for yourself. More than anything, you just have to prove that you want it.

forward and gallop. I feel strongly that they've got to learn to jump. They've got to learn how to have a good, solid jumping position.

They've got to learn how dressage can help balance the horse for jumping. They've got to learn how to move with the horse and go forward with the horse. I'm adamant about that from day one.

6 Create a Well-Rounded Education

Incorporate reading and attention to fitness in the routine. Fitness is incredibly important. I think it would help if the kids started early doing that. These are also all of the things that I would tell a serious adult. It can also be helpful if you start early with the riding theory. Find some books that are somewhat interesting and start talking about it.

7 Manage the Pressure

The pressure that kids face can be a huge problem. This isn't so much because of the kids themselves but more a result of the parents and is a question of how much pressure is put on competing and success.

"As a trainer, the pressure doesn't come from me. If they want to go for it, I'm with them. But if they want to back off, that's absolutely fine with me."

I grew up in Maine, and we had a 2½-month showing season and a 9½- to 10-month training season. This means that you showed in the short summer and you trained in the winter. Nowadays, people are being encouraged and nearly forced to show almost year-round. If you

want to qualify for anything, especially in my region, it's almost impossible without going south.

I think the pressures are there, but I find many parents make it more difficult because they are putting so much pressure on the kids. Then the kids feel

the pressure, either because it is actually being put there or sometimes they put it on themselves because they are aware of the money and resources that are being invested in them. Sometimes they are bought really fancy horses and lots of fancy training, and they take on the



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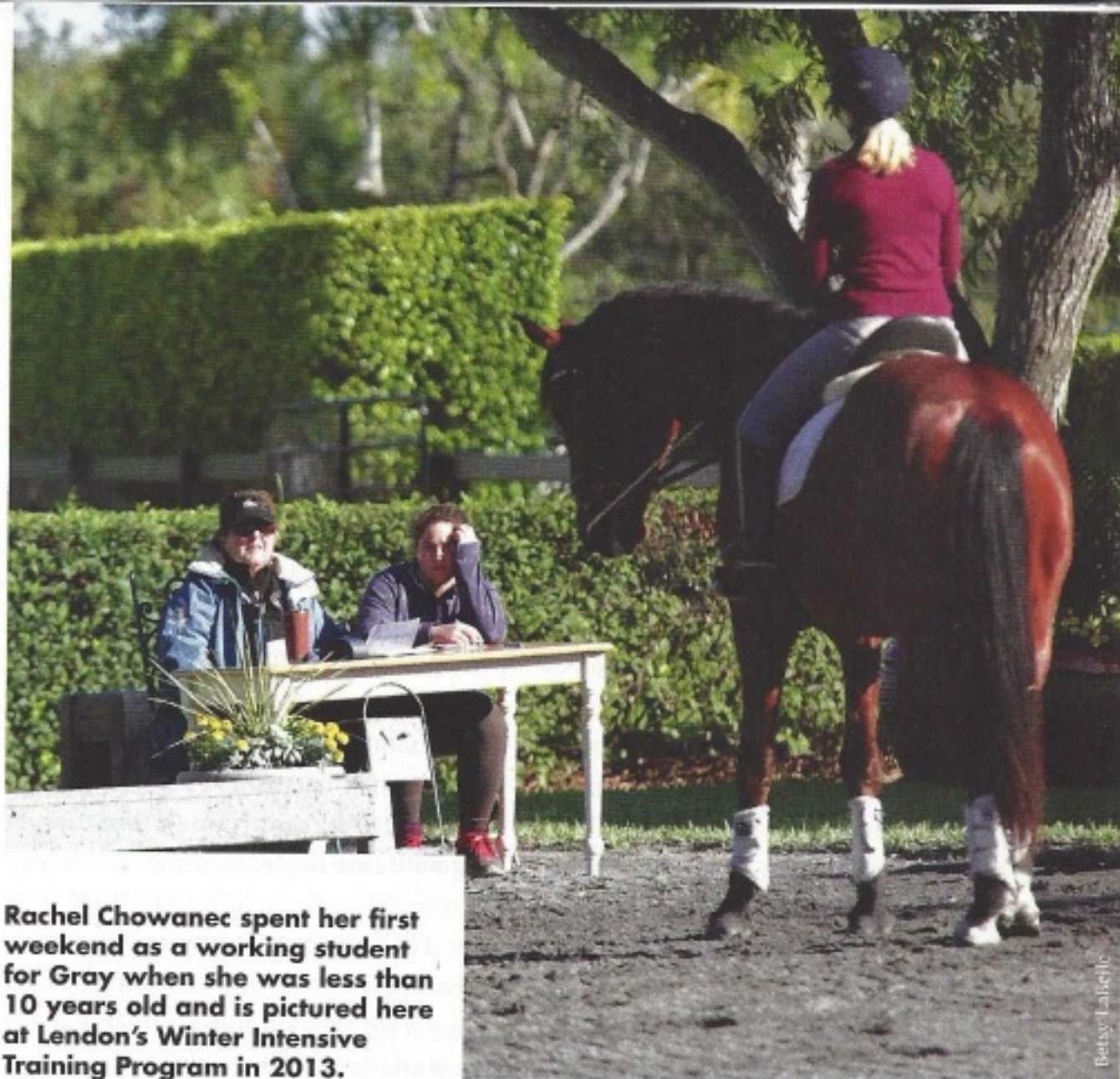
In the end, I've known many kids who didn't want to be competitive on that level or they wanted to do other things—they wanted to play sports, they wanted to be with their friends—and it turned out that they didn't want to be so tunnel-visioned about the dressage and that all of the competitive drive actually came from the parents.

As a trainer, the pressure doesn't come from me. If they want to go for it, I'm with them. But if they want to back off, that's absolutely fine with me. The pressure has got to be carefully, carefully watched.

8 Act in the Best Interest of the Kid

Parents can be very strong-minded about their children's performance and

Rachel Chowanec spent her first weekend as a working student for Gray when she was less than 10 years old and is pictured here at Lendon's Winter Intensive Training Program in 2013.



Betsy Labeille

success in the show ring. I've had kids come to me, asking me to help them talk to their parents. That's how bad it gets. It's tricky.

When dealing with parents, I'm honest. I'm very upfront and clear about my opinion and I always try to give options. I think from the beginning you've got to be honest. I think in some cases, trainers want to be as ambitious as the parent because they're getting a name made for them by this talented kid. I think you've got to make sure that as a trainer, you're always looking out for the best interest of your horses and your clients, whether they are adults or kids. But kids usually have a harder time speaking up for themselves than adults do.

9 Find a Quality Dressage Mount

Dressage is a sport where the horse

is the one that's judged. And in many cases, you're only as good as your horse. That's not to say that you can't overcome certain things or that a bad rider can't ruin a good horse—but a good rider that doesn't have a good-quality horse isn't going to be highly successful, certainly at the international level. This applies to both kids and adults. But I see it so much with kids who become discouraged because they are working hard and perhaps are even talented and are doing everything right, but they don't have the horse that makes it possible for them to show off their talents.

I think that parents often take too long with one horse. In some situations, the horse is really holding the child back. That means that now we're getting down to a game of who can afford to buy a really good horse, which is unfortunate. It's a little bit like someone

who wants to compete sailing yachts. You have to be able to afford the yacht. Particularly at a young age, kids are at the mercy of their parents.

You read stories about kids who saved up all of their pennies for a long time and bought a \$500 horse. Those stories happen, but you also know that there are incredibly talented kids out there who just don't have the opportunity.

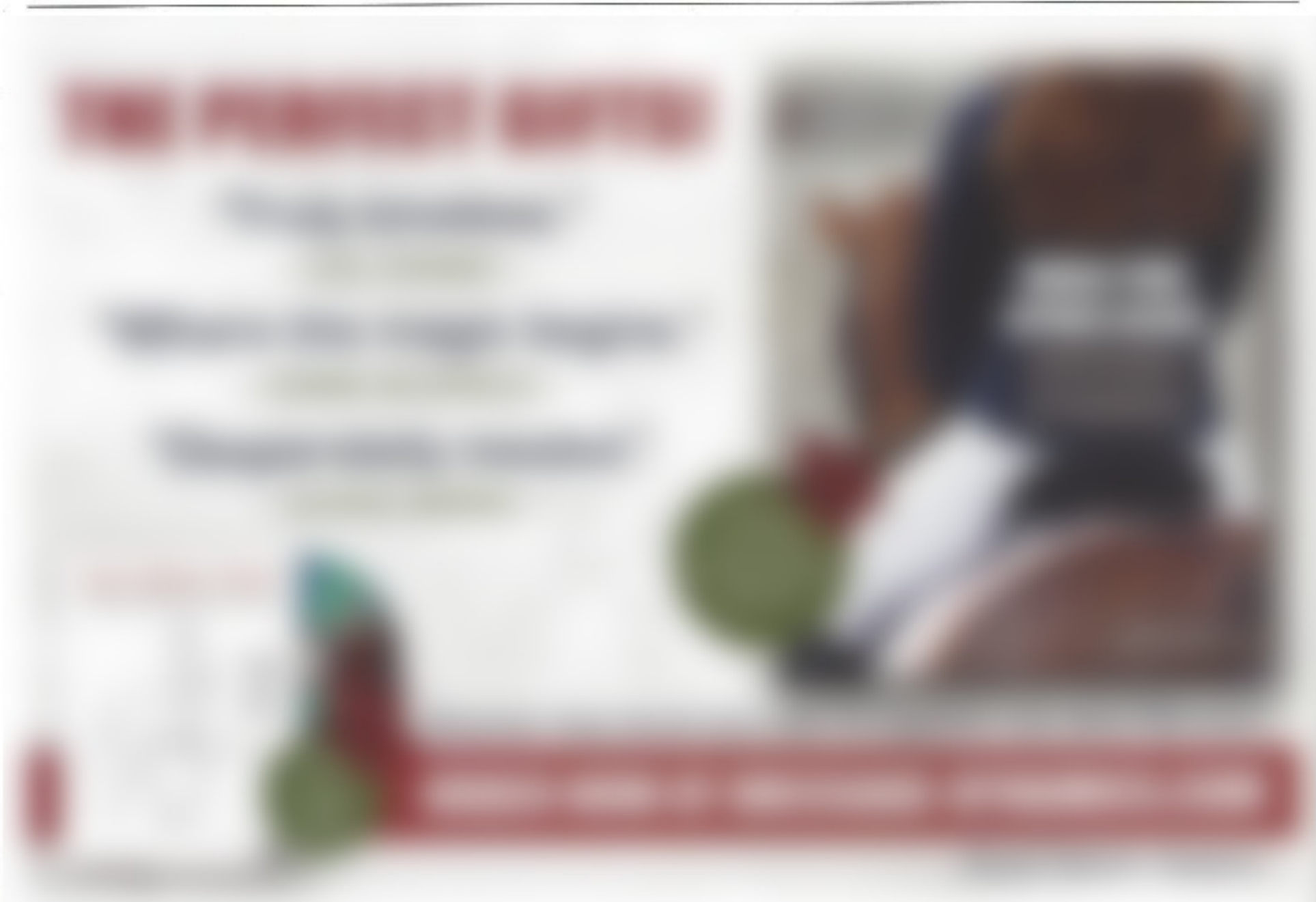
If you're bringing up a child, it often means switching horses moderately regularly. In a perfect world, a kid could be brought up on a pony and then moved to the next one, which ideally is sort of a Junior horse that could take her or him to Young Riders, and then move on from there. Then there are also some that are fortunate enough to get a good horse at a fairly young age that can carry them through.

One young rider in particular comes

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to mind: Katrina Sadis, who won the USEF Pony Rider Dressage National Championship this year with scores in the 70s. Eight months before, she was showing Training Level. In this case, Dressage4Kids received a pony, Poldy 10, whom we leased to her. He is a good

Here was a kid who, if that horse hadn't come into her life, might not have ever gone anywhere. And now she's had that success and she's moved on to a horse—and now she has attention and opportunities. That's terribly, terribly important. Again, if we want these kids

"If we want these kids to ride the best they can, they've got to be put sooner on quality ponies when they are young."

pony with good training.

She got him in October, showed him for the first time in January and scored in the high 60s and six months later was getting 70s in Florida.

If we want our young kids to ride well, we've got to get them suitable horses.

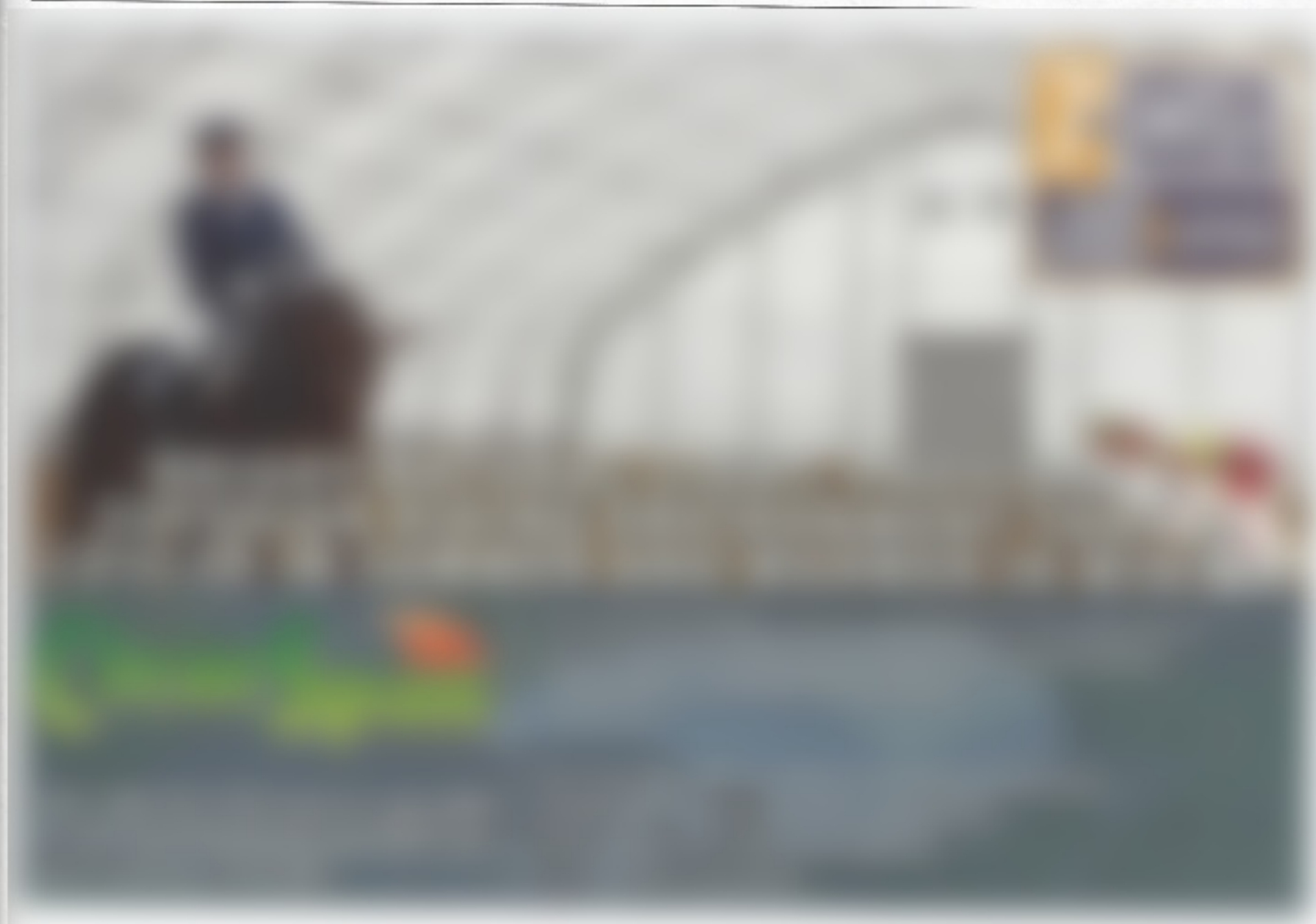
to ride the best they can, they've got to be put sooner on quality ponies when they are young.

Whether you are teaching kids or adults, if you're riding dressage, you must find a horse that's easy on the aids. If the horse is a tank and has a

thick, heavy neck with a thick, heavy jawl that makes flexion difficult, or if the horse won't go and you're kicking and pushing and shoving all of the time and he doesn't know how to go sideways, the rider is going to be up against a wall.

If you want to do dressage, you have to have something that is suitable for dressage. I think so often the kid's first horse is not suitable for dressage—it may be a perfectly safe pony and the kid can have great fun on it—but that doesn't mean it's a dressage pony or horse. It's got to be a dressage pony or horse. 🐾

For more information about the Youth Dressage Festival and Dressage4Kids, visit YouthDressageFestival.com.



More than a Sport

Newcomers to the world of dressage discover the beauty of the discipline and the warmth of the community.

By Lisa Nelson

When my daughter, Emma, decided to start riding horses at the age of 5, the last thing she wanted was to ride dressage. The reasons were typical. She thought it was pretty boring. There were too many circles. There were no jumps. Now, four years later, she's qualified for the regional championships at Training Level. At a time when the dressage community is trying to find ways to entice young riders to compete in the sport, some might find her reasons for switching to dressage familiar. But her reasons for staying with the sport might be both surprising and reassuring.

Like most dressage converts, she switched to riding dressage for the challenge of it. When she first started riding, she was in lead-line classes, where the greatest requirement was being cute and everyone received a blue ribbon. Needless to say—I am her mother, after all—she did a great job at being cute. Later on, when she wanted more of a challenge, she competed in division after division of trot crossrails with a bevy of other girls who wore identical braids and hair ribbons. They trotted over the rails in one direction and then trotted over the rails in the other direction. After two show seasons, Emma decided that she was ready for something more.

The transition to dressage was not easy. She quickly learned that riding all those circles was harder than she had thought, and her pony, who had never been asked to bend before, was sometimes less than willing. But interest in her progress along the way, especially by established people in the sport, encouraged her to keep trying. When George Williams took the time to ask Emma about her pony and shared some of his own stories of riding when he was young, Emma was in awe.



Courtesy, Lisa Nelson

Emma Lammert and Tilt a Whirl, an 11-year-old Shetland/Quarter Horse gelding

When Kate Poulin prepared a special gift bag for her at a clinic and made a point to ask her how her riding was going, Emma was even more determined to succeed. For Emma, having accomplished riders show some interest in her had an enormous influence on her, encouraging her to work hard at a sport that was sometimes difficult and trying.

There were important teachers along the way who made the process of learning dressage both fun and instructive, especially when it might have been

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only frustrating for a 9-year-old girl and a stiff 12-hand pony.

At her first show, she had high hopes of easily winning ribbons as she had done in the walk-trot division. But the show was a difficult one. Her pony didn't always do everything that she asked him to do. He whinnied. He tried to run out of the arena. He bent the wrong way. He broke. As she started to walk out of the ring with tears in her eyes, I was ready to comfort her, expecting to hear from her that she wanted to go back to riding walk-trot crossrails.

But just as she walked out of the ring, the applause started, and her face lit up. Much to her surprise and mine, people were clapping for her. They were complete strangers who had watched her struggle with her pony through the test. Several people called out to her, telling her she did a good job. Numerous people came up to her and complimented her on the effort and on her pony. Her tears disappeared, and there was a huge smile on her face. She said to me, "No one ever did that at the other shows!"

The small acts of kindness did not stop there that day. Everyone in the show office knew my daughter's name the minute we walked through the door. In a special effort to make her feel welcome, the facility operators asked her questions about her pony and riding. The technical delegate for the show even made a trip to our barn to talk to my daughter before her ride, offering to answer any questions she might have. Adult competitors were quick to share stories of their first dressage shows.

One might chalk up the kindness of the dressage community to an isolated event, but it was not. As we traveled from Ohio to Michigan, attending different shows, the experience was always the same. In Michigan,



Compiled by

when we attended the dressage shows at Waterloo, all of the staff treated Emma like she was a star even before she hit the show ring. They knew her name by the end of the first day and gave her a special memento to remember the show. There was always someone close by to wish her good luck and to ask about her ride. She was wide-eyed when she told me that they knew her name. We all know how important it is to be recognized for our accomplishments, even small ones. The event organizers of each show managed to do this for Emma over and over again.

As the stakes started to get higher for achieving Emma's goal of attending regional finals, many of the rides were hard for her. There were the errors for going off course or mistakes in geometry that took away points. After one particularly bad ride, she came out of the ring feeling like she was the only one who had ever received a bad score. But seasoned dressage competitor Roberta Creek Williams was quick to lift Emma's spirits by telling her that she had officially entered the "49 Percent Club," which included many other dressage greats. Emma smiled from ear to ear when she understood that all dressage riders—even professionals—have those kinds of days.

I realized then that one of the most valuable assets for drawing young riders and keeping them interested in the sport is the community itself. Dressage is much more than a sport. It is a community of riders who are supportive and kind. This is our best asset for encouraging young riders to continue to ride. Emma attended the Region 1 Championships, but for her, the first year of dressage had already been a great one because of all the people who helped her in ways that they might not have even realized. 🐾

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