

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

For new USDF Adult Clinic Series headliner Charlotte Bredahl-Baker, it's all about the relationship between horse and rider

BY JEANNIE BLANCQ PUTNEY



Improving the relationship between horse and rider is the top priority for Olympian Charlotte Bredahl-Baker, the 2009-2010 Platinum Performance/USDF Adult Clinic Series clinician. Beginning next month, her nine clinics (one in each USDF region) will focus on “the quest of the pyramid” (the pyramid of training, that is). That journey is one that the Danish-born Bredahl-Baker knows well, having ridden nearly every day of her life—sometimes up to ten horses a day—since the age of eight.

Bredahl-Baker, who now calls Solvang, CA, home, won a team bronze medal at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Horses she has trained and ridden have earned numerous championship titles, including USDF Grand Prix Horse of the Year (Monsieur, 1994 and 1997). She is also a USEF “S” judge and an FEI “C” judge. Her passion for horses and all animals remains strong, but this wife and mother also finds the time to sell real estate, to mentor children, and to enjoy ballroom dancing and tennis.

We caught up with Bredahl-Baker at the 2009 Rolex FEI World Cup Finals in Las Vegas, where she was competing in a pas de deux challenge and in the International Reining Celebrity Challenge, riding for the US team against none other than Dutch dressage star Anky van Grunsven. Bredahl-Baker took time out between reining lessons to share her thoughts on dressage and on her upcoming clinic series.

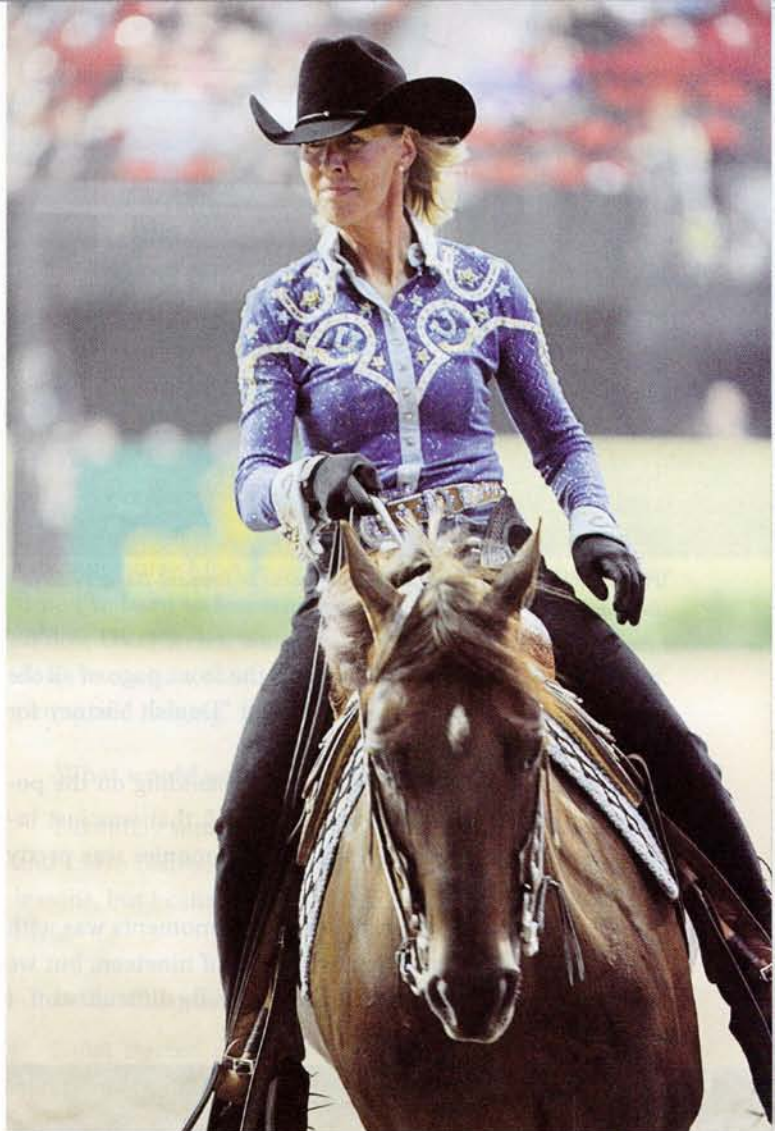
USDF Connection: How do you define success in dressage?

Charlotte Bredahl-Baker: I think you are successful when you have a wonderful partnership with your horse at any level. That’s why some of my most memorable moments were so memorable for me. You should feel at one with your horse, regardless of the level you ride at.

What are some of those memorable moments?

I have four. Number one was at the [1992 US] Olympic trials in Florida. I just had my first ride of four tests. It was the worst test of my life. Just as I was going around the arena, there was a school next to the arena that let out, and all my horse, Monsieur, could see were these kids flying out of the school, and he had a total meltdown. I ended up eleventh out of twelve the first day. So that was not a good moment, but it was memorable.

The next day, everybody had totally discarded me, including myself, and I felt very defeated. Robert Dover was in the warm-up arena with me, and he really got me out of feeling defeated. He got me to an OK place, and I went in and had one of the absolute best tests of my life. It was like the horse was guided by a higher force. I remember com-



COWGIRL UP: At the International Reining Celebrity Challenge during the 2009 Rolex FEI World Cup Finals in Las Vegas

ing out and crying, and I had never felt anything like that. (The ride put Bredahl-Baker and Monsieur in third place and helped them qualify for the Olympic team.)

The second memorable moment for me was shortly before I was going to the Olympics. I had already been picked for the team. The US Equestrian Team allowed me to go and compete in Denmark at a World Cup qualifier. My family had never really seen me compete except in “back yard” shows, and they had no concept of how I was really doing. The show was at the Danish castle in Copenhagen, and my entire family was there. I won the Volvo World Cup Grand Prix Freestyle qualifier, and it was just the most amazing feeling. I was sitting there in front of the Danish castle on my Danish horse, and my entire Danish family was there. They were all crying, and the American flag went up and the American anthem played, and it was just one of the most surreal moments of my life. I’ll never forget that. It was just incredible. Even the judges were teary-eyed because they understood that it was a special moment. After that, the Danish princess invited me to lunch, and that made my



HOMECOMING: *Victory aboard Monsieur in Bredahl-Baker's native Denmark in 1992*

mom's week. The next day I was on the front page of all the newspapers, and [the headlines] said "Danish Victory for the US." It was so amazing.

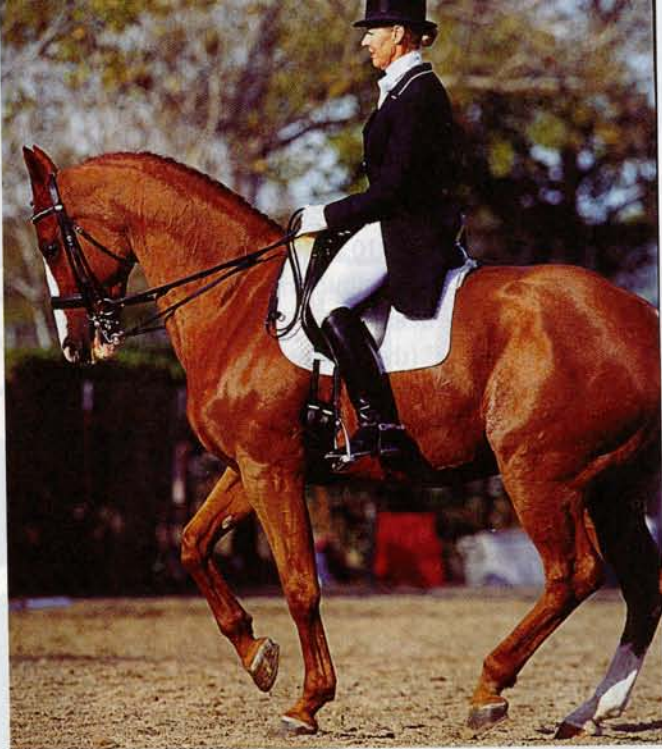
The next memorable moment was standing on the podium in Barcelona with a bronze medal; that was just incredible. Walking into the opening ceremonies was pretty special as well.

The last of my four very memorable moments was with Monsieur. I had retired him at the age of nineteen, but we still kept him in work, but not doing really difficult stuff. I



MEMORABLE MOMENT: *1992 Olympic team bronze medalists (from left) Bredahl-Baker, Robert Dover, Michael Poulin, and Carol Lavell. At left is US dressage chef d'équipe Jessica Ranshausen.*

had been asked by the Del Mar National Horse Show [CA] to ride in Night of the Horse, which is a big deal where everybody comes in and does exhibitions. They had actually called me about Lugano, my other Grand Prix horse, but something had happened to him so I couldn't take him. I



DANCE PARTNERS: *With Komo in 2006*

was contracted to do this, and I felt I really had to do it, so the week before I tried to do some of the Grand Prix stuff with Monsieur to see if we could pull it together, and he was right there. I ended up riding him, but I was the only person who knew this was my last performance on him, so it was very emotional for me. He was so good that he got a standing ovation from the whole crowd at Del Mar.

So I guess I don't have to ask what horse has had the most impact on you.

No, it's definitely Monsieur. I owe him everything. However, I have had many other special horses, including Copenhagen, Lugano, Baryshnikov, Komo, Eskada, Windfall, and Windfall's son Westpoint. Except for Komo, I have trained them all from scratch.

Which instructors have had the most influence on you?

Honestly, I have to say the horses have taught me more than any person, because since I was eight I've ridden every day of my life. I've ridden many, many horses, and up to ten horses a day early in my career. I think every horse gives you instant feedback, and they teach you more than a person could (if you listen). Early on, I had some very good help in Denmark, and his name was Captain Nielson. He was in the military, and he was very good. He was my first dressage influence when I was a teenager. Then in California—I moved here when I was nineteen—Hilda Gurney was my early influence, and then Guenter Seidel, Robert Dover, and then [the late] Herbert Rehbein when I was in Europe for

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE BRED AHL-BAKER

three summers. More recently, I have worked with [former] US national dressage coach Klaus Balkenhol in numerous USET-sponsored clinics aboard four long-listed horses over the past ten years.

What do you look for in a dressage horse?

The older I get, the more temperament comes highest on the list. Also, trainability and three decent gaits. If you have three decent gaits and trainability and a good temperament, then you're in good shape.

Did you always want to be a judge?

No, not really. I started [earning] my judging credentials early on, in 1985. I just wanted to add to my education. That was really the number-one reason for doing it, and also to have something to fall back on when I wasn't riding any more. One of the things I love about judging is the continuing education and being able to discuss things with very knowledgeable people. It's just a thrill.

I got my international status [FEI judging license] in January, and in February I judged my first CDI on a panel. I judged with three of the judges who are judging here at the World Cup. For me it was tremendous pressure to do that for the first time at the Palm Beach Dressage Derby [FL]. But it was such an incredible learning experience to be able to be with them and have dinner with them and talk to them and ask them questions. I learned so much just being with them for five days. That's what I like best about judging, that I am always learning.

If you could change one thing about dressage, what would it be?

I think it would be the criticism of judges. I think it's easy when you're sitting and watching a class on the side to want to criticize, but when you're right there and you have to make split-second decisions nonstop throughout a test, it's a whole different story. I think what people don't realize is that all of us judges, we try so hard. We try our absolute best all the time to be fair. I certainly have sleepless nights if I feel like I haven't done the best job possible. Even leading up to a competition, the pressure and the responsibility that you have is huge. Riders need to appreciate how difficult it is and how much the judges do care in general.

What are your goals for the Platinum Performance/USDF Adult Clinic Series?

Obviously, with each horse, it is going to be all about trying to have a better partnership with that horse. I think the advantage I have is that I've done it all. I've ridden and

trained all my life, every day of my life, pretty much. I have had experience with most breeds and can appreciate them all. I've judged for over 25 years, so I think I have the whole package. I also think I have a positive approach and try to be as encouraging as possible.

Have you ever thought about writing a book?

Yes, it's in my plan. One of the things I want to do for sure is a collection of short stories. I've already written a whole lot about my life with horses. I did a tribute to my Olympic horse Monsieur, and I've written something every time I've been to something special. At some point I want to do a DVD series, and there'll be a book to go with that. I don't know how soon. It's just been so busy between competing and judging.

What would you do as a career if it wasn't in horses?

Definitely something in music or dancing. I love music, and I love ballroom dancing. I still take ballroom-dancing lessons, but I cannot imagine my life without horses or animals.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I just started competing my young horse, Westpoint, and I am very excited about that. His father is my breeding stallion, Windfall, and I have owned him since he was six months old. He is the most wonderful young horse I have ever started. He is five years old, 17.3 hands, dark and handsome, with the most wonderful temperament and trainability. I really didn't think I would start another youngster, but I can't wait to get on him every day. ▲

Ride with Charlotte!

Olympian Charlotte Bredahl-Baker will lead the 2009-2010 Platinum Performance/USDF Adult Clinic Series. Over the two years, she will conduct one symposium-style clinic, including a lecture, in each of USDF's nine regions.

Each clinic is open to eight riding participants aged 22 and older, as well as to auditors of all ages. The purpose of the clinics is to educate adult riders at all levels.

At press time, the first of Bredahl-Baker's clinics was set for October 17-18, 2009, at Magnolia Farms, Live Oak, FL (Region 3).

To apply for rider selection, for auditing information, and for complete details about the adult clinics, visit usdf.org/education/clinics/adult/index.asp.