

# Warmblood Whoas

By Scot Tolman

**W**hy is dressage one of the fastest growing sports in the world? It's because of people like us. Hopefully, it doesn't offend you to be part of an "us" with a 51-year-old, overweight, somewhat-delusional, horse-obsessed me, but chances are, other than gender, you and I are more alike than not.

We are the middle-aged, previously horse-deprived masses who were somehow circumstantially denied our equine fantasies. Maybe our families were too poor to buy us the horses of our dreams. Maybe our condo association didn't allow any pets that don't either use a litter box or need an air-filter for survival. Maybe the need-to-muck-stalls-and-buy-silly-colored-leg-wraps gene simply remained latent until we came face to face with the blaze of 40 candles and a pile of over-the-hill cards. Regardless, we now have more money (or at least access to higher credit card limits), fewer kids in the house, and spouses suddenly wearing their baseball caps sideways or making statements such as, "No, this is not menopause. It's just hot in here and you are really starting to piss me off."

The population of people drawn to dressage presents a conundrum few sports face. You don't see snowboard makers designing wider boards for better stability and treaded undersides to create more friction for less speed. You don't see basketball manufacturers creating balls that dribble more slowly to accommodate delayed reflexes, slipping bifocals and the absence of cartilage in aging knees. And, unfortunately, you don't see many breeders focusing on creating horses with an easily accessible red button which can be pushed for emergency stops or yellow tabs at the withers which when pulled release an automatically inflatable air mattress for softer landings. We are the somewhat plump, myopic, hormonally-challenged, middle-aged versions of our former selves, suddenly jumping on the backs of the most athletically gifted horses any population has ever produced. Do you see a potential problem here?

I will readily admit that I have spent the last 20-plus years as the idealistic, somewhat-snobby breeder who

methodically analyzed, painstakingly researched, and psychotically obsessed over almost every single breeding decision. For what purpose? To produce the perfect horse. The perfect horse for whom, you might be asking. It's a fair question. The honest answer is probably for my ego. Why go through all the expense, the long hours, and the hard work of breeding and raising horses unless my horses have that elusive "wow" factor? After all, similar to the function of children for some people, my beautiful horses are a reflection of beautiful me; their beautiful accomplishments are my beautiful accomplishments. (I did admit being "somewhat delusional" in the third sentence of this very column...)



Well, one of the re-prioritizing decisions I made during my six months of chemo-therapy-induced vegetative stupor is that I would return to the real reason I started breeding horses in the first place: to breed the kind of horse for myself TO RIDE that I couldn't afford to buy. Therefore, in May, I loaded ZaVita SSF, aka, Princess, onto the trailer and dropped her off with Grand Prix rider and trainer, Jane Hannigan. In August, almost a year to the day after my first surgery and a month before I had clearance

from my doctors to start riding, I braved the what-I-incorrectly-perceived-to-be critical eyes of the DQs of Littleton, Massachusetts, and got on the mare who was bred to be my riding horse. Why this Dickensian, self-pitying rant? Because, after riding three to four days a week for almost four months with eventual competition in mind, I now realize that I need to stop breeding for my ego...and start breeding for my derrière.

The other day, my daughter, home for the holidays, joined me on one of my hour and a half treks to Littleton. At the end of my ride, Jane insisted that Michaela hop on and walk out the lovely Ms. Princess. It's always debatable who will be steaming more after our ride, her or me. While I spent an hour bouncing around on my overly-fit and ever-more-opinionated mare (I am no where near as fit as she...and I find myself more humble and significantly less opinionated with each progressive lesson), Michaela

and Jane began a conversation about breeding and riding. Jane continued it from the side of the arena once Michaela was on the mare, and, now that I was less focused on my equine fantasy's latest lateral evasion and more focused on getting my nasty, sweaty helmet off my head, I could pay attention to the conversation. Michaela is using one of our mares to produce a horse specifically for her, so she's weighing her stallion options. I came into the conversation just as Jane was saying, "Breeders and riders look for different things. If riders were doing the breeding, we'd be breeding for what's between the ears, first and foremost."

I can't say that this was an "Oh, my god, of course!" moment for me. It was more of a "tightening of the girth" on a philosophy toward which I've been leaning. It's also not something I've ignored in our breeding program, but it certainly hasn't been the priority—movement and type have. Well, I'm too big to look good on many of the horses I've bred, too much of an amateur to handle the movement of more of them, and admittedly too afraid of making an abrupt and unexpected landing in the expensive footing of Larkspur Farm (footing which I'm sure isn't as cushy as it looks) to handle the athleticism of our very best ones.

As it happens, we did, in fact, breed Princess specifically for me. My wife, Carol, gave me a breeding to Contango

for Father's Day in 2003, with the understanding that I keep the resulting foal for me to ride. Just over 11 months later, Princess was literally born on my feet when I ran home between classes to check on her dam. She's grown into a 17-hand, close to 1400-pound mare. She's more talented than my riding abilities deserve; however, other than an occasional moody and over-sensitive, "I understood the half-halt the first time...I just chose to ignore it" buck and a propensity for (and creative initiator of) lateral evasions, she puts up with me. I can't chalk this up to my breeding prowess, however. I just got really lucky: I picked the right wife.

By the time Michaela eventually gives one of my yet-to-be-born grandchildren the opportunity to breed a horse for him or herself, hopefully, the future Tolman horse fanatic will be as lucky as I to make a good spousal decision—and luckier still to have a more rider-friendly breeding base from which to work. **WT**

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