

Five Questions for Heather Bender

By Sarah Eakin

Heather spent her younger years in a western world. She shone early in equestrian competition as a champion barrel racer – she won the Open California State Championship at the age of 12 setting a time record that stood for 10 years. Later this skill translated into a fruitful career as a trick rider and stunt rider. But it was not until she began to explore the world of show jumping that she discovered her true niche in life as a dressage trainer, judge, writer and competitor. Heather and Winwood, a 13-year old Hanoverian gelding sponsored by Joan Wurtele, are currently showing in the Grand Prix and have moved up from the USET developing FEI horse list. Winwood is another example of a horse she has brought up from Training level to Grand Prix. Heather has been a USEF judge for over 20 years and is a USDF Certified Instructor certified through the top level offered.

Heather is head trainer and owner of Treasure Coast Dressage and based at Martin Downs Equestrian Center in Palm City, Florida. Heather has traveled to Brazil multiple times over the last five years to help Interagro Lusitanos select horses – to help get them started and trained – for the International market and the 2009 Lusitano Collection, an exclusive horse auction held in Wellington in February.

Sidelines: When did you start to ride?

HB: I was riding before I was walking. First my dad would put me up on the horse in front of the saddle then behind the saddle until I was able to ride by myself. I grew up on a ranch in Camarillo, California. I started riding western and barrel racing in 1976, and won two Open Division State California Gymkhana Association championships. I decided it would be more fun to do trick riding so my barrel racing horse became my trick riding horse. We performed at rodeos throughout the west. I performed Cossack drags where you hang down by the horse's feet; Hippodrome – stand on top of the horse; Stroud layout where you stand on the side perpendicular to the horse's side; climbing under the neck of the horse; Roman riding – standing on top of two horses straddled with one foot on each horse. We also rode trick horses when our featured movement was rearing straight up for the crowds. (We did this in parades on concrete and in rodeos.)

Sidelines: How did you switch from Western to English?

HB: I had the opportunity to travel a lot as a child and I really wanted to do something that was more 'international'. In 1976, I watched the Olympics and saw the show jumping. I was about 12 and decided to add jumping to my abilities. I trick rode all my teenage years to pay for it. I started to jump my trick riding horse – the one that had won the barrel championship and speed records – he loved to jump, turn and run. I rode him through the junior



Heather Bender and Winwood

Photo courtesy Heather Bender

jumpers and the trick there was to not let him turn out from under me because he could!

I worked at Foxfield Riding Academy in California and then became an instructor for them. I learned at Foxfield I had more guts than good sense. Running down to a high fence I looked the part far before I had the real knowledge and finesse required to be a show jumper. I had done the high end speed things and learned to be brave – jumping off a horse at a dead run. As long as things went really well, I looked good but I didn't really have the tools when things went wrong.

One day I tried to solve the problem on the course when I should have pulled up. The horse jumped up off the bank and then flipped over and upright. It shook me up and made me realize I needed more technique. Hilda Gurney [American dressage Olympic medal winner] was teaching dressage classes at Foxfield once a week, and I signed up.

Sidelines: Why did you choose dressage over show jumping?

HB: Hilda Gurney set it up for the legendary dressage trainer Georg Theodorescu to watch me ride. I went to Germany in 1984 to train with Mr. Theodorescu at Lindenhof and returned to Germany in the late 80s. I seemed to find more financial support to get started in dressage. I continued my show jumping while competing seriously in dressage. I worked as a professional jumper rider for Jimmy Williams; his dressage flat work was legendary, and he really encouraged and developed my talent and love for training.

I still love jumping but that was the beginning of my interest in dressage. I did it to be a better hunter/jumper rider and competed in show jumping up to the Open level and through the Junior jumpers and Hunt seat medal divisions. In the 1980s there were a lot of extra grants and money for the dressage riders that made it so easy to compete. In show jumping I didn't have that finan-

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