

WHIT WATKINS

Biography/Background

I have always been crazy about horses, growing up in Memphis, TN, horse-obsessed from the age of three. My dad would take me to ride any friend's horse, pony, or mule that would tolerate my attentions. My dad rode with me on Thursday afternoons, after I got out of school, and continued to support my interest in horses throughout his life. My passion continued, and grew as I galloped, jumped, fox-hunted, and competed my way through junior high and high school, and had my first brush with dressage during college.

Since two semesters of physical education were required for my college degree, I checked the catalog and found horseback riding! Figuring I had to be advanced since I'd been riding most of my life, I signed up for the Advanced English section and met Colonel Donald Nance who had received his formal riding instruction in Germany while he was stationed there with the U.S. Air Force. He gave all of us brushes and set us to work on the school horses, and when he watched me, I was using two brushes and lots of elbow grease and he commented that I had obviously done that before. My skill with the riding got me off to a good start with the class and he soon asked me to compete his private horses in a couple of season end hunter shows, where our success put his horses in the year end awards. Of course, he had learned a lot about dressage training in Germany and he shared the basics with his students. I learned a bit about half halts and stretching; years later I would realize exactly what those lessons had actually covered!!

I happened on my first dressage competition soon after college graduation and was instantly hooked. I transformed my hunter into a decent beginning level dressage horse, competing him through second level, before passing him on to another aspiring dressage rider. Then there came the off the track Thoroughbred and the rescued "Thoroughbred" mare. From her, I bred two foals – one was a half Trakehner gelding, with whom I earned my USDF Bronze medal, and the other was a Holsteiner cross gelding, who became my first Grand Prix horse.

Dressage Resume

Not long after I got involved learning about dressage in the late 1970s, I became a member of the Rocky Mountain Dressage Society, which evolved into the lead organization with several different chapters around the state, the group I had initially joined became the Foothills Chapter of the RMDS.

Throughout my amateur participation in dressage activities in Colorado, I held various positions within the Foothills Chapter organization, including club vice president, club president, and club education chair. During several years in the early 1990s, I was closely involved with the organization and management of the club competition, recruiting volunteers, transporting and entertaining judges, and helping with parking direction and grounds maintenance.

In 1987, after a clinic in Colorado with Hilda Gurney, a friend and I decided to travel to Moorpark, California, to train with Hilda at her facility, Keenridge. This was the beginning of at least yearly, frequently twice a year, treks to Moorpark to train, compete, and observe Hilda as she taught a wide range of students on an even wider range of horses. Watching lessons was just as important as participating in them with regards to furthering my dressage education. When I began to notice horse and/or rider imbalances before Hilda commented on them, I realized I was developing an eye for understanding the goals of training. As I had opportunities to watch training sessions at home, given by the dressage instructors in my home barn, Janet Brown (Foy), Debbie Riehl Rodriguez, and Janet "Dolly" Hannon, I began to refine my understanding and to anticipate the instruction that would be directed to help the student regain the loss of balance in the horse, rider, or both. The trips to Hilda's continued through the spring of 2010, generating huge amounts of information received and many horses developed with her generous assistance.

During this period, I also had many excellent opportunities as an amateur in Colorado to be involved with instructor education, from being a demo rider for Regional Instructor Training Seminars with Major Anders Lindgren, to participating again as a demo rider for the National Instructors Training Session in Lincoln, Nebraska, 1990, with Maj. Lindgren, Eric Lette, and Bill Woods. Throughout the 1990s, I enjoyed numerous chances to train with national and international figures including Christine Stuckleberger, Leslie Webb, Hilda Gurney, Gunnar Ostergaard, Jan Ebling, Sally Swift, Hanna Valentin, Lilo Fore, Axel Steiner, and at the 1999 USDF Symposium held in Denver, as a demo rider for the Intermediare 2 with Conrad Schumacher on my homebred Holsteiner cross gelding Chado.

Another aspect of my involvement with the dressage community was my participation in demonstrations of upper level dressage freestyles at the National Western Stock Show in Denver, during the annual January horse show/rodeo program. While several chapters of RMDS sent volunteer riders for different years, my friend and Foothills chapter co-member, Dolly Hannon, and I presented a different Grand Prix Pas de Deux each year as part of the Evening of Dancing Horses from 1997 – 2000. One year we also did a preview of our routine as part of a presentation at a luncheon for the Denver Chamber of Commerce in 1998. Our ride was presented between the tables arranged on the floor of the arena for the lunch. This was a major outreach for the Rocky Mountain Dressage Society and greatly expanded knowledge and appreciation of the dressage community in Colorado and surrounding states. The Evening of Dancing Horses was a sell out every year, even outselling the rodeo on several occasions.

When my family and I moved to west Texas, and the closest GMO was in Region 5, in El Paso, three hours away. With the move, I declared my professional status and began to teach weekend clinics in Arizona and New Mexico, as well as in Texas. My location made it sensible to do demonstrations at my home barn rather than travel for several hours in uncertain weather, so my barn staff, local students and I usually put on a Christmas Gala for folks in Fort Davis, and Alpine, and the occasional visitor from outside the area.

During this period of business building for me, I was fortunate to be able to attend several USDF Symposia, and an FEI Trainers Conference at Lilo Fore's Sporthorse America Farm in northern California, conducted by Conrad Schumacher. Schumacher's down to earth approach and clarity of thought and expression gave me insights into horse and rider development that I use today to explain basic concepts to a wide range of my students. His description of the "falling down neck" as a result of relaxation and thoroughness of the warm up for any horse is a constant visual for me to share with my students. The USDF Symposia included the ones in Scottsdale, Denver, Dallas, and Los Angeles.

The USDF Symposium held in Scottsdale, AZ, with guest Kyra Kyrklund, in October of 1998 was a very special event for me, as I was selected as a demo rider with my then 6 year old Trakehner mare, Lilac, to participate at third/fourth level, demonstrating developing flying changes in the young horse. What an exceptional learning experience that was! Ms. Kyrklund is possessed of a very clear and understandable teaching style, such that both riders and audience were easily led through the steps of her experience to teach the young horse how to produce the flying change of lead at the request of the rider, as well as the timing for a rider who is just learning the aids for the flying change to set the horse up for success.

In 2005 and 2008, I did have two outstanding opportunities to participate in a couple of benefit performances for the San Angelo Symphony Orchestra; another participant was Pam Fowler Grace, who performed a Grand Prix freestyle both times, while I rode fourth level Pas de Deux with my friend and barn manager Margaret Fox. The delight of these performances was to have the Symphony perform our music while we rode to it live! It was a truly wonderful experience and garnered generous donations for the San Angelo Symphony. All of these demonstrations were performed for the joy of the performance and sometimes were recompensed for fuel.

The summer of 2005 found me signed up to participate in a two week introductory session to the Balimo teaching and training process. This program was designed and developed by Jill Hassler Scoop and Eckhardt Meyners. Assisting in that particular session was Hannes Mueller, head of student instruction at the German school for training and instruction at the Landgestut in Warendorf, Germany. I had ridden with Herr Mueller in a couple of clinics conducted in the Dallas area and was impressed with his straightforward approach and patience with struggling riders. I had heard of Herr Meyners and his work to help dressage riders find a balanced seat, and wanted to better understand his theories and exercises first hand. The two weeks flew past with new information and new friends, drawn together by sincere desire to better communicate the magic of human/horse connection. I continued to learn through the Balimo program until its discontinuation in 2010. Many of the concepts guide my riding and teaching today.

In 2008 my son graduated from high school and a chance to pursue a long sought dream presented itself. A graduation trip to the Netherlands & Germany gave me a chance for a side trip to visit my friend from the Balimo group who lives in Warendorf. She had set up interviews for me with four different trainers in the area, with the goal of finding one with whom I could travel to Germany with my horse to train! All four interviews went well, each trainer was very cordial and their facilities quite nice. The last visit was to Hubertus Schmidt at his Fleyenahof farm near Ettln, Germany, where the barn environment, the valley setting, and the focused persona of Herr Schmidt himself sold me on him as my preferred trainer. My friend helped me with the details of the travel and local arrangements and in November of 2009, I traveled with my then 7 year old Westfalen gelding, Cipriani, to Fleyenahof, to train until April 2010.

The year 2010 was full of travel and learning. Visiting Hilda in the spring included a trip to compete at the Del Mar National Horse Show, where the organizer, Regina Antonioli, asked me to become part of the USDF Competition Management Committee, as the Region 9 and rider representative. I have been happily involved with this USDF committee ever since, enjoying the opportunities to have input to the competition experience, having spent time on both sides of the show office desk!

Our five months at Fleyenhof were among the most educational and the shortest months I have ever experienced. Every day that Herr Schmidt was in town I could have a lesson and I had a lot of little details to grasp. Details that Hilda had tried for years to get me to understand, with a tiny difference in wording, I finally got the idea - thinking - "Ah, that was what Hilda meant!" So, a more clear understanding of the importance of the inside leg to outside rein connection led to a better concept of throughness and even fed back to Conrad Schumacher's concept of the "falling down neck" that is inherent in Schmidt's philosophy of stretching in the warm up for every horse, regardless of its level of training.

The consistency and fairness of Hubertus Schmidt's daily training shows in the happy attitudes of all his horses and the success of his and his student's horses.

Lucky me, I was fortunate to return to Fleyenhof one year after my departure, a year that included Cipriani and me qualifying for and participating in the USEF Developing Horse PSG competition, finishing third overall. That year back in Texas was filled with successful competitions as well as an expanding client base, all benefitting from the months of dressage immersion, riding with the very classically balanced trainers and students at Fleyenhof.

My second trip to Fleyenhof was through the summer of 2011, and I consolidated and built upon the information I had absorbed in my previous visit. I had more opportunities to compete during my second visit and learned even further applications of my expanding knowledge base. The raw understanding that comes from constant exposure to correct riding is without compare as an educational tool. I came to understand from an internalized level how the connection between horse and rider is developed and nurtured into a sophisticated and subtle communication, beautiful to watch and physically compelling for the riders.

One of my greatest joys in my teaching is watching the riders I am instructing, when they have been consistent in application of a new tool I have clarified for them, as they feel their new information beginning to work through their equine partner. I am excited to share the information I have gathered through my years of riding research. I have tried to consolidate the information gleaned from years of instruction, participation, and observation into a comprehensible approach to communicating the techniques as well as the theories behind the tools. The theories of how people and horses learn, the patience to explain these ideas over and over, in different ways, and the enthusiasm for the process have helped mold my approach to teaching, and, I believe, given me a clear and consistent message that connects the classical theories to the realities of horses and riders who are not classical in their origins or conformation, building a path to harmony and happy athletes.