



Mixed Marriage?

Joel Baker and Charlotte Bredahl-Baker, seen here with
Monsieur, prove polo and dressage can co-exist

Photo by Lyndee Kemmet

Joel Baker and Charlotte Bredahl-Baker: Polo and Dressage Do Mix

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By Lynndee Kemmet

Solvang, Calif -- She doesn't play much polo and he doesn't ride dressage, but husband and wife equestrians Joel Baker and Charlotte Bredahl-Baker have found some common ground. He provides her with the emotional support that helps her succeed as an international dressage competitor. And she provides him with training tips that have given his polo ponies a whole new look.

"I studied the top polo horses of the past and discovered that they all moved the same way. Charlotte helped me understand why. Now I do a lot of early dressage training with my horses to strengthen their backs and topline," Joel said.

Glancing over at a group of future polo mounts, Charlotte commented on their unusual look. "You can tell in their necks that they are working differently," Joel's horses have a stockier build than most polo ponies. Their backs and necks are far more developed.

Charlotte Bredahl-Baker, 42, is one of America's top dressage competitors. She was a member of the 1992 United States Olympic Dressage Team that earned a bronze medal in Barcelona. Her Olympic mount Monsieur was twice named United States Dressage Federation Grand Prix Horse of the Year. Her current upper-level partner, Lugano, has also won several USDF honors and earned Charlotte a silver medal in the North American Dressage Championships. Her many other dressage accomplishments are too numerous to list.

Baker, 53, has long been a top American polo player. On the scale that rates polo players, with 10 being the top, Joel carried a 7 handicap. A former member of the U.S. Ski Team, Joel grew up around Southern California's Will Rogers Polo Club where he worked in the polo barns to finance his skiing career. He fell in love with the horses and the game and started playing polo in the late 1960s after graduating from college and starting work as a financial planner. He bought his first polo horse in 1968.

"All of the horses I have now are ancestors of that first mare I bought," Joel said. "I made 10 monthly payments for her."

During the years that Joel was building his career and gaining a reputation as a man one could turn to for help with problem horses, Charlotte was working to establish herself as a dressage trainer and competitor in her adopted country. A native of Denmark, she settled in Southern California in the mid-1970s. She had trained in dressage in her homeland, but didn't come to America with a job in hand.

Charlotte got her start when she attended a lecture by Olympic dressage rider Hilda Gurney, who later helped her train her Olympic mount, and asked Gurney for help finding a job working with horses. In her first job, Charlotte worked for free and didn't even get to ride. It wasn't until a wealthy boarder offered to pay her to groom his horses that she got to ride. "He took lessons and when he couldn't make the lesson he let me take it on his horses," Charlotte remembered. "That's how people at the barn discovered that I could ride a little." From there she went on to become an instructor and eventually a barn manager at Bell Canyon Equestrian Center in Los Angeles, which was a rather stressful position for a woman in her early 20s. During her years as manager she learned to deal with numerous personalities of horse owners, a governing board with members often in disagreement, and the many other catastrophes that occasionally hit a barn such as fires.

"We had a fire once on Halloween night. I had to evacuate 110 horses and all these owners showed up in costumes wanting their horses. I couldn't tell who was who. It was impossible to keep track of all these people taking horses. But when it was over, all the horses came back. I wasn't missing a one," Charlotte recalled.

From equestrian center manager, she moved on to full-time trainer and competitor by forming partnerships with others who financed the cost of buying horses in Europe and shipping them back to her in California. She trained them, showed them, and sold them. Her future Olympic partner Monsieur was one of these horses.

"I tried to sell him, but no one made an offer," she said of Monsieur. "I felt bad that my partner who had financed him got stuck with him. So I offered to take over his costs." It was a financial struggle, but that horse took her to the top of dressage competition when she made the 1992 Olympic team. Charlotte, with her husband's help, eventually paid off her partner and she is now sole owner of Monsieur, who is happily retired at the couple's 50-acre ranch.

Joel Baker bought the ranch, which sits high on a hill in the Santa Ynez mountains north of Santa Barbara, about 18 years ago. For most of those years the ranch's sole focus was polo, but today, while the ranch's name is still Circle JB "Polo Ranch," a dressage arena can be found among the polo fields.

The couple, both prominent in the area's equestrian community, had frequently met at social functions before their first date. That date came after Charlotte attended a polo match at her future husband's ranch. He took her on a tour and asked her out. That was in 1994. "After that date we talked on the phone for three hours a day. Then he flew to St. Louis where I had gone to compete in the Olympic Festival," Charlotte recalled. From that time on, the match was made and the couple married in 1998.

Charlotte has since learned to play some polo. "She's good," her husband said. "She's very competitive. She's also good in tennis."

And his admiration for her skills as a rider and trainer are evident. "She's so focused when she's riding that a bomb could go off and she wouldn't know it. She keeps the horse that focused too. She's great with pressure," he said.

For his part, Joel said he has since learned a bit more about dressage and the benefits of dressage training, even for polo ponies. Early dressage training has made his horses stronger and healthier.

"If you saw my vet bills now compared to 8 years ago, you would be amazed. I have so fewer leg, muscle, and back problems," Baker said.

Although he offers his wife emotional, and financial, support, he rarely attends her competitions. "She needs to focus on her horses when she's competing and I think that's easier when I'm not there," he said.

But while Baker may not share his wife's passion for dressage, he does share her passion for horses in general. And that, Charlotte said, is what makes their relationship work. "It's very difficult for someone who is not into horses to understand how all consuming it is. I try not to let the horses be all things, but I need someone who understands my love for horses. And we both really love our animals -- the horses and the dogs."

Joel's emotional support and love have helped his wife deal with a recent setback in her dressage career. She had high hopes that Lugano, her current grand prix mount, would be an Olympic contender. But recent problems with passage and piaffe led to the discovery of a back problem that may end Lugano's grand prix career.

But Charlotte said that her happy marriage has given her a different perspective on life. "Going to the Olympics again is a goal, but I have learned that there are other things in life."

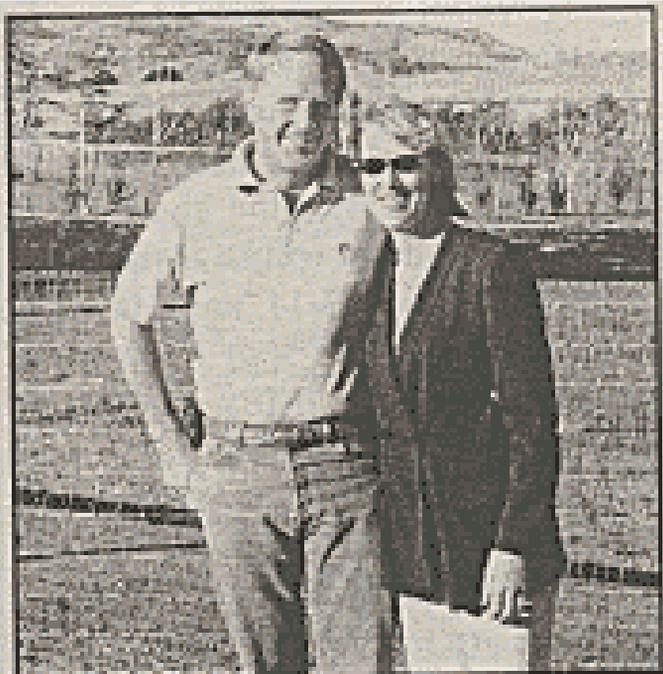
With this new life philosophy, she has expanded her interests. She recently joined up with Big Brothers and Big Sisters in hopes of sharing her love of horses with a young girl. She also spends time on two other activities she has long enjoyed -- tennis and ballroom dancing. The tennis her husband shares with her, but the dancing is another story.

"I'm tone deaf," Baker admitted. "I do great until the music starts."

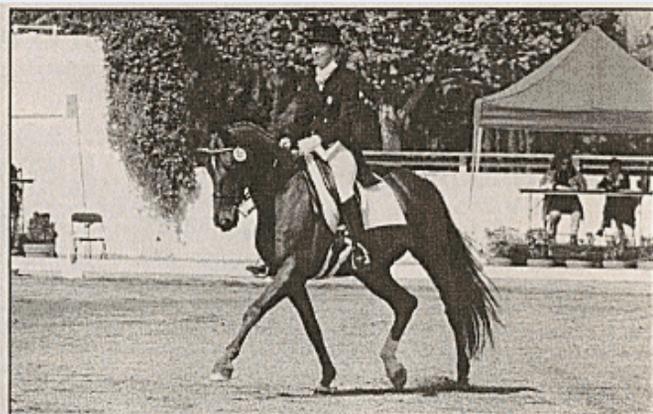
"And he won't let me lead," grinned his wife.



"I love it here more than anywhere else on earth," admits Charlotte Bredahl-Baker, seen here with Lancelot and her German Shepherd, Bandit
Photo by Lyndee Kemmet



Joel Baker and Charlotte Bredahl-Baker at home at the Circle JB Ranch
Photo by Lyndee Kemmet



Husband Joel Baker rarely attends Charlotte's shows. "She needs to focus ... and I think it's easier when I'm not there," Charlotte Bredahl-Baker says her grand prix hopes for Lugano may be dashed due to back problems
File photo by Sheri Scott