

Tribute to Hilda Gurney

By Charlotte Bredahl

I have known Hilda for as long as I have been in this country, about 24 years. When I first arrived, I looked in the paper to find a job with horses. I saw an ad about Hilda Gurney giving a lecture at Agoura High school. I had never heard of her or anybody else in dressage at that time, but the ad said she was an Olympic medalist, so I thought it would be a good idea to go there. After the lecture, I went up to Hilda and asked her about a nice place to work with dressage horses. My English was pretty bad, since I had just arrived from Denmark, but Hilda was very nice and told me to go to Bell Canyon Equestrian Center in Woodland Hills. This is where I got my dressage start. Hilda gave clinics there and helped me train my first Grand Prix horse. His name was Copenhagen and it was the blind leading the blind, but with Hilda's help it all worked out.

After Copenhagen, she helped me train Monsieur to Grand Prix. In 1990 Hilda and I both made the top 12 to go to the National finals at Gladstone. About a week before we were supposed to leave, Hilda and I went out to dinner and she told me about flying with horses. She told me all the things that could possibly go wrong. I had nightmares for a week after that talk. Then she said "Oh by the way, could you please fly with both Willy and Monsieur, so I can stay home and teach for a couple of more days"? As always, Hilda had 30 more lessons scheduled at home and couldn't leave with the horses. For me, flying with Monsieur was bad enough, but flying with somebody else's top Grand Prix horse was something else. To top it off, Hilda asked me to ride Willy for two days before the National Finals. No pressure! I have never been so happy to see Hilda as when she arrived at Gladstone.

In 1992 Hilda and I both were in the running to make the Olympic team. At The Olympic Trials in Orlando, Hilda and I both made it onto the shortlist of 6 riders going to Europe. Carol Lavell, Michael Poulin, Hilda and myself chose to stay at Gabriella Grillo's in Germany. Hilda and I shared a car and stayed in a hotel with very little sound proofing. Every morning I would wake up to Hilda's voice in the hallway at 6:00am. I never could figure out why we had to get up so early, since all we had to do was ride two horses a day. Of course, for Hilda 6:00am is sleeping in. During our stay, Hilda and I shared many pounds of European chocolates. At the shows in Germany, Hilda would lend me Willy the Great for awards if I needed it, since Monsieur was suicidal in awards ceremonies.

In more recent years, Hilda has also been my mentor in the judging department. She was one of my instructors during my S judges training. About 4-5 years ago Hilda and I were judging together at a big show in Golfport Mississippi along with 6 other judges. Unfortunately, the rain started pouring down and the show had to stop. I remember sitting with the other judges, in a horse show trailer looking out at the rain. And there was Hilda with about 10 inmates, dressed in orange (they were volunteers from the local jail) moving all the arenas out to an area with better footing. Hilda was soaking wet, but

determined that, the show must go on. The show manager had lost control of her show, and next thing I remember was sitting in a car with the wipers going and judging away.

I could go on forever about Hilda's professional accomplishments, but I would rather talk about all her other great qualities. She is a dedicated teacher and has probably started out almost every California Grand Prix rider. She is very devoted to her students and I have seen her give quite a few of her young horses away, to help somebody out and to make sure her horses would go to the right homes. She is a wonderful horsewoman who truly loves her horses and to this day gets excited about a talented three year old. Hilda doesn't know how to say "no". She will teach any student and ride any horse at any time. Her dedication to the sport is unsurpassed.

With Hilda everything is black and white. Sometimes she will tell you that you are going to the Olympics, and on a bad day you might as well take up gardening. I remember after my first Grand Prix, Hilda told me Monsieur looked like a hunter. She couldn't understand why I started crying. If you can't handle the truth don't ask Hilda. She will always say it exactly as it is and she is not always diplomatic about it either.

Hilda has a brain that way surpasses most people. She can easily manage five things at one time. Her memory is even more impressive. While most of us can't remember what we had for dinner the night before, she can ride 10 different tests in one day, and never look at a test book or go off course. She never stops learning and educating herself. When she is at a show, either warming students up or warming up herself, she always takes the time to compliment everybody around her.

Her enthusiasm is incredible. Her work ethic and energy is beyond super woman. No 20 year old can keep up with her. Compared to her, the rest of us fell like lazy bums. Hilda, you are one of a kind and an inspiration to all of us. I am truly honored to be your friend.

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