

For Charlotte Bredahl-Baker, Fulfillment Has Come Since The Olympics

Lynndee Kemmet

For competitive riders, the ultimate goal is a spot on an Olympic equestrian team. Most devote years—decades—of their lives to achieve that goal. And once attained, they seek it again.

Charlotte Bredahl-Baker aims to prove, however, that post-Olympic life can be truly fulfilling without driving oneself into the ground in search of another medal.

Bredahl-Baker, 46, came to the United States from her native Denmark in 1979, and in 1992 she was the key lead-off rider who helped propel the U.S. dressage team to its historic bronze medal at the 1992 Olympics, the first U.S. dressage medal since 1976.

Bredahl-Baker had ridden since she was 8, mostly working with show horses and trotters, and she came to America with no job awaiting her. But she met Hilda Gurney at a lecture, and it was Gurney who helped her get her start in the United States.

In her new country, Bredahl-Baker worked long hours, rode lots of horses, and—like most dressage competitors—struggled to find, and afford, the horses she needed

to advance her competitive career. Her life was consumed by the drive to reach the top in international competition—the Olympics.

But in the last 11 years, Bredahl-Baker has dedicated her life not toward another Olympic run, but rather toward the development of youngsters, both equine and human.

“She’s always been a person with diverse interests,” said Gurney, whom Bredahl-Baker credits for her riding success.

“Charlotte is one of the loveliest people I’ve ever met.”

Although still active as a competitor in California, Bredahl-Baker is lately more

devoted to the breeding and training of her own young dressage horses and to her work as an S-rated judge than to the stress of competition. What seems most to satisfy her is watching the progression of her young horses and contributing to the improvement of the lives of young children through her work as a mentor, foster parent and Big Sister.

Although she still enjoys teaching lessons to a range of students at her farm in Solvang, Calif., Bredahl-Baker is far more interested in developing her work as a coach to young riders. Her interest in

children has caught the attention of the dressage world.

In 2002 she was the chef d’equipe for the top 12 junior riders at the USEF Junior Dressage Team Championships in Oregon.

And last spring, the U.S. Dressage Foundation officials contacted Bredahl-Baker to ask her to serve as chaperone for the four young riders who’d earned a trip to Europe in the summer to train with top European-based dressage trainers, including Klaus Balkenhol.

“I was very honored to be asked,” she said. “I thought, ‘Oh, let me think about that for five minutes.’”

► Young Riders, Young Horses

The experience as coach and chaperone is one that Bredahl-Baker has relished and one she hopes to continue.

“That’s the kind of role that I see myself moving into more in the future. I see myself in a mentoring role for young riders and children in general,” she said. “The idea of going with a young team to competitions really, really appeals to me.”

Bredahl-Baker has also found great satisfaction in developing and breeding dressage horses. She bought her first stallion—a black Hanoverian named Windfall—in Denmark several years ago.

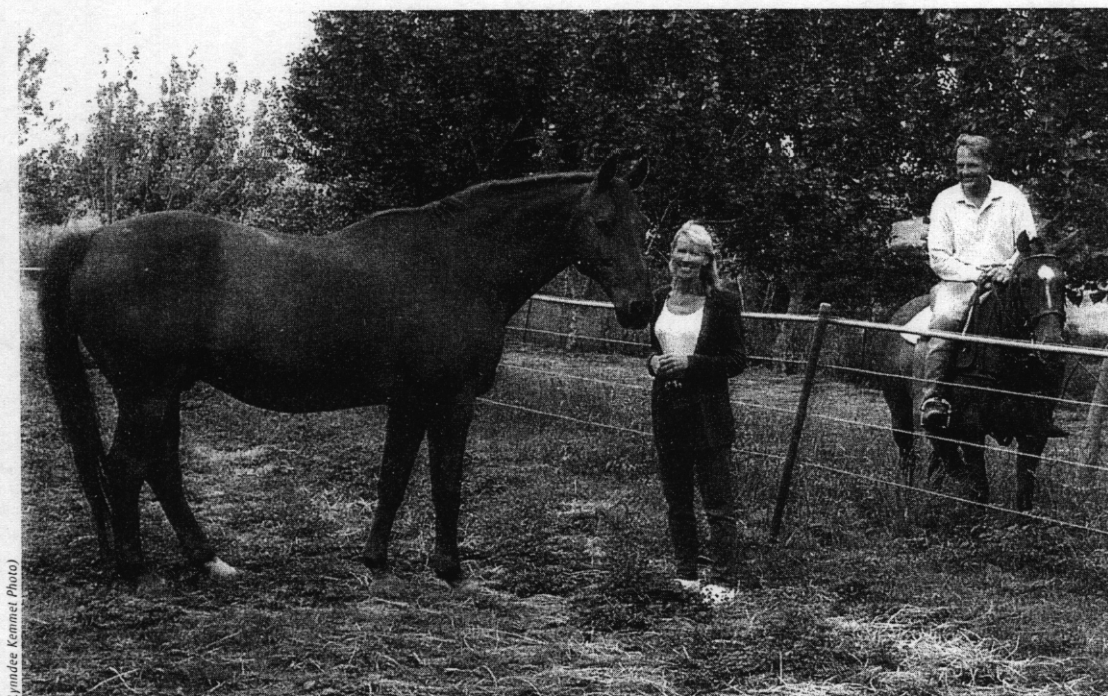
“I wanted to start a young horse and was looking for a 3-year-old gelding, but I couldn’t find anything in my budget. I called a friend of mine in Denmark, and she told me of this 5-year-old stallion. I thought, ‘I don’t want a stallion.’ But I saw him, and it was love at first sight. He’s stunning.”

So she bought him. He’s now 8 and stands at 17 hands.

“And then I had to learn about this whole breeding thing. After I bought him, I learned that he had fantastic bloodlines and was incredibly potent. I was totally prepared to geld him, but he’s not a typical stallion. He’s as sweet as can be,” Bredahl-Baker said.

Windfall, who is out of St. Pr. St. Fergie by Weltmeyer, was the 2001 USDF Third Level Horse

Monsieur, Charlotte Bredahl-Baker’s partner in the 1992 Olympics is now 21 and retired. He spends his days watching the farm’s activities, which includes Charlotte’s husband, Joel Baker (right), schooling his polo ponies.



(Lynndee Kemmet Photo)



(John Strassburger Photo)

Charlotte Bredahl-Baker and Monsieur contributed a key score to the U.S. team's bronze-medal effort in 1992.

of the Year. In 2002, he was the Hanoverian Horse of the Year at fourth level. Bredahl-Baker brought him up to Prix St. Georges last year to get him approved as a breeding stallion by the American Hanoverian Society, one of four registries that have approved him.

"I had to push him rather quickly because they wouldn't even look at him if he wasn't at Prix St. Georges," she said.

In 2003, Bredahl-Baker bred Windfall to 21 mares and continued to show, scoring in the 70s in Prix St. Georges and Intermediaire I. At this year's Dressage Association of Southern California Championships, he took the Prix St. Georges and Intermediaire I championships.

"I want to get him to Grand Prix for sure, but I'm not aiming for any particular competition or goal, other than to do some Grand Prix with him," Bredahl-Baker said.

► New Priorities

For Bredahl-Baker, one of the biggest changes in life is that she is able to own the young dressage prospects in her barn. In her pre-Olympic days she either rode horses owned by others, or, as in the case of her Olympic partner, Monsieur, had to form partnerships to afford the horses.

She was eventually able to buy full ownership of Monsieur, who is now 21, happily retired and spending his days in his pasture with a couple of playmates. She admits this is a luxury that not all riders have.

While most riders who make it to the Olympics feel pressure to duplicate their suc-

cess, Bredahl-Baker said that she feels no such pressure.

"My priorities in life have changed, even more so after the events of 9/11. I don't feel any pressure whatsoever with my horses," she said. "I don't worry about anyone's expectations. They are my own horses, and I'm simply enjoying them. I love the riding, and I get great satisfaction out of the training. But the competition—it's not what it was to me. I enjoy it, but

it's just not that big of a deal to me anymore."

Although she didn't know anyone who was killed in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Bredahl-Baker said that hearing the stories of families left behind after the immediate loss of a loved one made her even more aware of the importance of being with family. So, she decided she'd rather spend time with her husband and adopted son than be on the road.

Bredahl-Baker Has A Dream

Charlotte Bredahl-Baker had once hoped to move on from being an S-rated judge to become an I-rated judge, but that plan's on hold for now.

"Becoming an 'I' judge involves a lot of travel, and that isn't something that fits my life right now," Bredahl-Baker said.

The reason is that her interest in helping youngsters extends well beyond her work with young riders. For the past several years, Bredahl-Baker has been active as a mentor, Big Sister and foster parent, and she and her husband, Joel Baker, are now making plans to create a group home for children on their ranch in Solvang, Calif.

"What we'd like to do is build a new house for us on a three-acre section of the property and then turn our current house into a group home," Charlotte said. Having spent the past few years actively involved in children's programs, she knows of the great need for such a home.

"It'll be a slow, gradual process—not something where you would have 25 children at one time," she said.

A home on the property would give children a chance to interact with the couple's horses and three family dogs. Charlotte believes that interacting with and caring for animals is important for a child's development.

She and Joel are in the process of adopting a child whom they first took in several years ago as a foster child—a 13-year-old named Zachary, who has quickly become the love of their lives. Joel admitted that he'd never considered adoption before, but Zachary, a bright, articulate youngster, stole his heart within weeks.

"I had wanted my own children, but Zach changed things," said Joel.

Charlotte is also a Big Sister or mentor to several other children. Some of them are interested in riding, others aren't. It matters not to Charlotte, whose main goal is to give these children an opportunity to do things they might not otherwise be able to do.

To help in this endeavor, she recently leased space in a strip mall near her ranch to open a studio that offers classes in ballroom dancing, ballet, children's music and karate. Her original plan was to create a dance studio to satisfy her own passion for dance. But she later decided to expand by adding all these other programs, which she often makes available to the children with whom she works by paying for any classes they wish to take.

Charlotte even teaches the ballroom dancing classes and some tennis classes herself. She's hired instructors for the other programs, but she's tried the ballet and karate classes. Zachary takes the karate classes and has shown a real talent for the art.

"I believe in life-long sports like dancing and tennis and riding. These are things that you can do all your life. It's a wonderful thing to at least know how to ride," Charlotte said.

These are the sorts of activities that Charlotte seeks to share with children, including those who will one day be in her group home.

"They'll all learn to ride and dance and play tennis, do some karate—everything," she said with a laugh. "The lazy ones probably won't want to stay."

"It will be a slow, gradual process—not something where you have 25 children at one time," said Charlotte Bredahl-Baker, with adopted son Zachary and husband Joel Baker.



(Lyndee Kennel Photo)

"Charlotte has found a healthy balance in her life. She greatly enjoys her horses, but she balances that with her time for her family," said Ellie Stine-Masek, a competitive rider and S-rated judge from Benson, Ariz. Stine-Masek has trained with Bredahl-Baker for years, and she credits Bredahl-Baker for teaching her to balance her own life and not let the horses take over.

"The pursuit of the competitive dream causes people to give up a lot. Sometimes it's worth it, sometimes it's not," Stine-Masek said.

But Stine-Masek added that doesn't mean Bredahl-Baker doesn't drive herself or her students forward. "She does know how to drive you, in a kind way. Whenever I work with her, she pushes me to move on to the next level."

Bredahl-Baker still competes, but she tends to stay rather close to home, where she can be near her family and manage her dressage business, Bredahl Dressage, and equestrian real estate businesses she calls Santa Ynez Valley Properties. "We have so many good competitions here in California, there is no need to travel," she said.

Although she has acquired an interest in the breeding side of the sport, Bredahl-Baker admitted that she's unlikely to become a large-scale breeder of dressage horses. With one exception, the mares bred to Windfall have all belonged to other people.

"If I bred to my own mares, I would keep them all," Bredahl-Baker said.

Her husband, Joel Baker, 56, shares this problem. He's a top U.S. polo player, and the bulk of the 35 horses on the couple's 50-acre ranch are his polo ponies. Charlotte and Joel were married in 1997, united by their shared love for horses.

"We have so many horses because Joel breeds his own polo ponies. He wants to make sure he'll always have horses because he thinks he'll still be playing polo when he's 100," Charlotte said with a laugh. "He never sells any of them, and they all live well into their 30s."

Charlotte also has one of Windfall's sons—a 16.1 hand, 4-year-old gelding named Windsor whom she bought in Denmark two years ago.

"He is the easiest, most trainable young horse that I have ever had," she said.

Windsor also showed at this year's Dressage Association of Southern California Championships and cleaned up at training level, winning four classes, including the championship. He had the high score of the show with 76 percent.

Charlotte also has a 6-year-old, Oldenburg gelding named Prince whom she took in when he was 2 weeks old. She traded him for some training.

"He's a bit on the lazy side, but very kind," Bredahl-Baker said. "I've just played with him awhile, and I haven't really shown him, so there has been no pressure to do much with him."