

## A Tale Of Two Horses

Jacquelyn Stapel

I have been fortunate enough to have been blessed with the opportunity to own and ride an extraordinarily talented dressage horse. Never having had deep pockets, I have spent much of my career riding whatever was available, whatever everyone else did not want to ride; and while I'll admit that it has taught me well, and made me a versatile rider, competitively, there is only so far you can go that way. After nearly two decades of shopping for horses for clients, in June of 2004 I stepped on a plane bound for Amsterdam to embark on my first ever horse shopping trip for myself. The result has been a whirlwind of competitive successes, regional and national championship titles, invitations to ride with world-class clinicians in very public forums, and even a little bit of press. Atticus has opened many doors for me and has given me a little taste of the spotlight that I have never been exposed to before. However, he does not realize how lucky he is that his predecessor trained me so well, not only as a rider, but as a horseman and owner. When I returned to New Jersey from Holland, I learned that my FEI mount, and friend, Rainier, had died in my absence.

I found Rainier for a client who was looking for a small, educated dressage horse on which to learn. At the time, in the early '90's that was even more difficult to find than it is today. He was 16'1, although heavily built, third level (with one flying change that was late behind), very mannerly and quiet. I rarely sit on any horse for the first time and really like the way he feels, but Rainier was an exception. Having been owned all his life by a professional, he was well connected, quiet but responsive, solid in the movements - I thought he was perfect. The first year with his new owner went very well, but after that he seemed to lose patience with being an amateur's horse and gradually the relationship went sour. It wasn't until Rainier was put on the market that I realized how attached to him I had become. I still found him quite fun and easy to ride, there was just that special 'kismet' between he and I that only occasionally happens in a professional's career.

As luck would have it I had a new and very enthusiastic client who had the time and the means with which to throw himself headlong into his new hobby. Although not pre-planned, Rainier became his and I was able to stay with him a little while longer. He brought his new owner (who had never ridden a day in his life) successfully through First level in their first year together, at which time my client decided it was time to move on. In the blink of an eye Rainier was gone. His owner had decided to train with a more high-profile, international trainer (as certainly was his right) and we parted on good terms. I tried bravely to hide my embarrassingly unprofessional tears and finally bid farewell to my chestnut friend. Such is the life of a professional.

During my career I have kept a mental list of 'horses that should have been mine.' Of the hundreds of horses that I have been called upon to ride over the years, occasionally I will meet one with which I just 'click.' It's the story of every working-student the world over.

**You develop a very personal relationship with a horse who belongs to some one else. You know him better, you ride him better, he likes you better, but some one else pays the bills, makes the decisions. You always loose the horse. Eventually another one comes along and the cycle repeats itself. It's all part of the industry. I added Rainier to my list.**

**Several months later, I received a phone call from Rainier's owner. He felt that he had learned a lot from his horse, but once again it was time to move on to something fancier, with more potential. He had just bought a young, international prospect that was a little more his style than 'old reliable,' and that, as a token of appreciation for getting him started, and knowing how I felt about the horse, he would like to give me Rainier.**

**He was now 16 years old, had a bad hock and a bit of an attitude, but he was all mine!!!**

**Surviving in this industry with very limited funds turns you into an opportunist. I had never actually owned a dressage horse of my own before, and although Rainier, by today's standards, wasn't brimming with natural talent and ambition, he had more ability than I had had access to at that time in my career. Besides, when you have a good relationship with a horse, you can normally scrape together enough 60% scores to continue up the proverbial ladder, however slowly.**

**I competed Rainier for the next five years. I truly believe that they were the most educational years of my life. He taught me about dressage. He taught me about relationships, horsemanship and life. Rainier had developed the happy faculty of not giving you anything that he did not feel you deserved. He never 'acted out,' however; passive resistance is even more detrimental in competitive dressage than aggressive resistance. The fact of the matter was, he demanded to be appreciated. He demanded respect. He demanded just and sympathetic treatment. No more than you and I expect in our daily interactions with the human race. Should I ever get so focused on achieving a particular competitive goal that I should momentarily become unappreciative, disrespectful or domineering, he shut down cold. Don't get me wrong, I could still make him do the movements, but it was forced, contrived, anything but harmonious and beautiful. It wasn't fun for me, because it wasn't fun for him. However, when we were 'in the zone,' working as true partners, each allowing the other to raise the bar in small increments, there was no greater feeling in the world. He taught me how to allow a horse to develop underneath me. He taught me when to ask for a little more and when to wait for him to offer it. He taught me patience, empathy, sportsmanship and responsibility. He taught me how to behave. He set me up for success. And when it became too difficult, at 22, for him to teach me very much more, he stepped aside, and let the next horse come in to teach me the one thing that he was never capable of teaching me – what it feels like to win.**

**It's a National Velvet kind of story. Hardworking girl with no money inherits the horse of her dreams from a generous and eccentric millionaire. Rainier gave me many, many firsts. Not blue ribbons, but experiences. We did our first FEI test together. He brought me to my first Regional Championships. He brought me to my first Devon where he taught me a life**

lesson that I carry with me to this day (but that's a story for another time.) He gave me my Bronze and Silver medals. He gave me the scores necessary to enter the "L" judge's program and beyond. Although we never went Grand Prix, he allowed me to practice all the Grand Prix movements on him and absorbed all of my mistakes as long as I remained sufficiently grateful.

On Rainier I qualified for Regional Championships. On Atticus I win them. On Rainier I worked, sometimes for several years to earn a performance certificate. On Atticus I win All-Breeds and Horse of the Year titles. On Rainier I dreamed of my Silver Medal, on Atticus I dream of selection trials. Someday, you may see Atticus and I on the cover of Dressage Today, but under a tree in his favorite paddock, lies a horse whose name will never be familiar to anyone but me. If Atticus someday took me to Olympic gold, I don't believe that he would have given me any more than that little chestnut horse that "should have been mine."