

U.S. Young Riders Get a Boost from Top Dressage Pros

Renee Isler Gathers Support from Kathy Connelly, Lendon Gray, Anne Gribbons, Courtney King-Dye, and Gil Merrick at JR/YR Symposium May 1-3, 2009

By Jennifer Koppy

The dismal economic conditions haven't dimmed Renee Isler's drive and determination to provide quality instruction and vision for U.S. Young Riders. And her enthusiasm has been contagious within the dressage community, with many top dressage riders, trainers, and equine businesses joining her in supporting a vision built around the theme of "giving back."

In Isler's view, the outpouring of generosity shows that the U.S. has a dressage community with the desire to drive the art and sport of dressage in hard times as well as good, saying, "I'm ecstatic about the level of support and commitment I've seen thus far for the clinic and entire event. It's amazing and heartening to me that we have a strong core group of talented professionals who want to improve the sport and focus on the future – our Young Riders."

Kathy Connelly is a recent addition to the expert lineup of trainers and judges for a symposium organized by Isler, including Lendon Gray, Anne Gribbons, and Courtney King-Dye. Connelly says she loves working with the Young Riders and donates her time whenever possible to teach clinics, including the USDF Young Riders clinic series that also features George Williams, Sue Blinks, and Jan Ebeling. In 1995, she coached the winner of the NAYR Championships. Her facility is open to Young Riders to provide training and exposure to the caliber of horse shows on the Florida circuit. Connelly has been involved with Young Riders since she was 9, participating in U.S. Pony Club (USPC) events on borrowed horses. She credits her early success to trainer Jan Conant, who brought her Glastonbury Pony Club to shows throughout the East Coast to team competitions. The first horse Connelly owned was Desert Song, who had been donated to the Pony Club. "When I won the A division of the National Pony Club Competition (equivalent to today's Young Rider 3-Day Championship), he was given to me. It was such a proud and happy moment for me. I really loved the horse." Connelly said, "Because of all my Pony Club experience and beautiful memories, I try to help Young Riders however I can."

During the May 1-3, 2009 Symposium, 11 fortunate Young Riders will receive instruction from, Gray, and King-Dye at the event, held at Settlement Farm in Townsend, MA. USDF "O" judge Anne Gribbons and Kathy Connelly (S) judge will evaluate the riders' tests on Friday and Sunday to provide feedback to the riders and the audience. The symposium will be open to auditors on May 2 and 3. Along with the clinic, the event will feature an evening of dinner and dancing on Saturday, May 2, with featured speakers Gil Merrick, Isler, Gray, and King-Dye. A silent auction with many donated items will benefit the Young Riders as well.

Everything for this event has been donated, ensuring that the Foundation receives the maximum amount of monetary support. The clinicians have donated their time, many trainers/instructors and businesses have made donations to be sold at the Silent Auction, Dot and Nick Demis from Settlement Farm in Townsend, MA have donated their facility to serve as the symposium venue; and Phil and Orintha Silva from Ten Broeck Farm are hosting a dinner for riders and clinicians on Friday evening. In addition, Dover Saddlery has donated \$10 gift certificates to be given to the first 100 auditors who sign up. Isler is appreciative of all the donations, and especially the clinicians, who are not only donating their time, but are not earning any income from their own businesses as trainers and instructors during that week.

As a businesswoman, Isler sees today's economy as an opportunity for equine-related businesses and professionals to differentiate themselves from the competition in a positive way. Across all industries, challenging economic conditions put pressure on businesses to provide high value and excellent service because consumers are carefully considering all expenditures. Especially in the U.S., declining spending will ensure that only the most committed will survive. Isler is happy with the attitude of giving and commitment demonstrated by clinic sponsors, and she believes that their support through thick and thin will drive more business and expand the sport in the long run.

Gribbons will be judging and providing feedback and an explanation of scoring to participants and auditors on May 3. Gribbons is an "O" judge, an accomplished competitor, and very involved in FEI and USEF committees. In 1995,

Gibbons earned a team silver medal at the Pan American Games in Argentina. She represented the USET at the North American Championships in 1985 and the World Championships in 1986.

King-Dye is the youngest member of the clinician lineup, and is expected to inspire the young riders with her teaching style and story of hard work leading to her success. At 15, she became a working student for two-time Olympian Lendon Gray and later was assistant trainer at Gray's Sunnyfield Farm. King-Dye has earned many national championships, and most recently represented the U.S. at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. She has competed in two World Cup competitions – in 2007 in Las Vegas and in 2008 in The Netherlands.

Among Connelly's professional achievements numerous national titles at all FEI levels and has represented the U.S. at the World Cup in Gothenberg, Sweden. She was a member of the bronze medal team at the North American Championships. Isler and Connelly have been friends for years, and Connelly found two competitive mounts for Isler over a span of 10 years – first River (a 20 year old Hanoverian Gelding Schoolmaster on whom Isler earned her USDF Bronze Medal in 2008) and more recently Lightning (14 year old Hanoverian Gelding). Connelly's instinct and patience in selecting a suitable mount for Isler has certainly paid off. At his first show in the United States, Lightning won the Fourth Level class with a 70% at the Winter Equestrian Festival Dressage Show, Wellington, FL in March with rider Ryan Yap, who trains with Connelly. Of Connelly, Isler says, "Kathy truly cares about creating a good match between horse and rider. She will take her time, walk you through the process, and stand by you."

Isler has supported dressage in several venues, including being a premier sponsor at major east coast shows and the annual Wellington Junior/Young Rider Clinic organized by Dr. Cetty Weiss in Florida and the Palm Beach Derby. She has worked with the Dressage Foundation for two years and established the "Renee Isler Dressage Support Fund," which provides grants for Young Riders accepted to the USDF FEI JR/YR Clinics. In the future this fund will support the USDF JR/YR clinics taught by Kathy Connelly, Jan Ebeling, George Williams, and Sue Blinks to name several. Isler has sponsored several riders, including King-Dye, Jocelyn Wiese and Luis Denizard, who competes for Puerto Rico. Her method of choosing who and when to support is rather unconventional. Instead of looking at the competition record and probability of future success in the show ring, she chooses riders who she believes have similar core values as herself, such as a solid work ethic and the desire to help others.

Donations for the Silent Auction include but not limited to: lessons with Robert Dover in Florida, lessons and stabling from Chris Hickey and Hilltop Farm, lessons with Luis Denizard from Delante Equestrian Center, Sharon McCusker, Pam Goodrich, Dot Demis and a one way trip from NE to FL from Phil Silva's Equine Valet service. Many more services and items will be available at the event. Symposium sponsors include the following:

Advanced Saddle Fit
Axial Financial Group
Brigitte Voelk Photography
Centerline Events
County Saddlery
Cunningham & Cunningham Livestock Inc., Equine Insurance
Delucena Construction
Dover Saddlery
Elise Genest Artwork
Essex Equine
Euro American Saddlery
HavenStone Marble and Granite
Horseman's Yankee Pedlar
Katja Eilers
Mary Phelps and Dressage Daily
New England Dressage Association
Settlement Farm
Equus Mediation. Mary Sue McCarthy, CPF, CTM
Superior Heating and Air Conditioning
Ten Broeck Farm
Withers and Withers Healthy Horse Products

Registration for the dinner May 2 and auditing on May 2 and 3 is required; forms can be downloaded and mailed by visiting www.islerdressage.com. Audit/dinner tickets and vendor space still available!!!



Kathy Connelly and Zoe
Photo Credit: Brigitte Voelk



Anne Gribbons and Alazan