Secrets of Top Dressage Grooms

Elite horses’ caretakers shoulder enormous responsibility. Here’s how they do it—and what you can learn from them

BY AMBER HEINTZBERGER

IN GOOD HANDS: Groom Dawn White-O’Connor attends to Steffen Peters’ mount Ravel at the 2012 London Olympic Games
If you’re an amateur rider with limited time to spend at the barn, there’s nothing wrong with knocking the dirt off your horse and keeping the grooming routine simple so that you can spend more time in the saddle. But keeping a top dressage horse looking its best is a detailed affair that requires time, elbow grease, and an eye for detail. To learn how it’s done—and to pick up a few tricks of the trade—we talked with two grooms who work for elite riders and trainers.

Meet the Grooms

Stefen and Shannon Peters’ assistant trainer, Dawn White-O’Connor, 24, has accompanied Stefen’s world-class partner Ravel to FEI World Equestrian Games and Olympic Games. A native of Colorado, White-O’Connor started as a working student for the Peterses at their Arroyo del Mar, San Diego, CA, when she was 17. Shannon Peters gave her lessons, and today White-O’Connor herself is an FEI-level competitor whose most significant accomplishment to date is an eighth-place finish aboard Aristo at the 2014 USEF Intermediate I national championship in Gladstone, NJ.

White-O’Connor began grooming Ravel in 2011, and she traveled to Germany with Ravel and with Weltino’s Magic, Steffen Peters’ 2011 Pan American Games gold-medal partner. In 2012, she was Ravel’s groom at the 2012 Olympic Games in London. Today White-O’Connor still juggles grooming and riding: She’s now in charge of Stefen’s mount Rosamunde, the 2014 USEF Intermediate I national champion, while fellow Arroyo del Mar groom Eduardo “Eddie” Garcia cares for Legolas 92, Steffen’s 2014 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games mount.

Our second groom, Lauren Keeton (née Donahoo), earned an equine-science degree from William Woods University in Fulton, MO, and has groomed for top rider/trainers Lyndon Rife, Anne Gribbons, Jan Ebeling, and Tina Konyot. She accompanied Konyot and her Danish Warmblood stallion, Calecto V, to the 2012 London Olympics. Today Keeton has her own teaching and training business in southern California and specializes in starting and training young horses. Her husband, Jonathan, is a professional chef, and they have a beagle named Lola.

The Importance of Time Management

Keeping things on schedule at home and while traveling is the first key to success as a professional groom. Horses are creatures of habit and thrive on a regular routine. At home, a typical day for White-O’Connor starts early and follows a consistent pattern: “In the morning I groom all the horses early, and ride a few horses—a couple young horses and a couple FEI horses—every afternoon. We all have our own horses that are training too.”

Stefen Peters climbs on his first horse at 7:45 a.m. “Between Eddie and me, we get most of Stefen’s horses ready,” says White-O’Connor. “There are four other people for all the [other] horses. We do feeding and turnout; then I hand-walk my first horse of the day before Stefen arrives at the barn. The first horse is usually Eddie’s, and then I get one ready. Steffen’s done riding around ten and teaches a couple of lessons, and then I start on the horses that I will ride.”

At a show, of course, schedules can vary wildly, and a groom’s job becomes especially complicated when there are a lot of horses involved. Even the best-laid plans can change, so a successful groom has to be able to roll with the punches.

Teamwork, says White-O’Connor, is key. “We have a really good group of people—we’re taking 17 horses to a show next weekend—and we have a good system. Obviously you have no control over the schedule, so you may have four or five horses in the same class, but there are four of us and we’re good at helping each other. I’ll braid four or five while Eddie brushes, like a little assembly line; we’re good at helping each other out and making sure it gets done on time.”
The Challenges of Travel

Packing for overseas travel was a learning curve for Keeton, who groomed for Konyot at the 2012 Olympics. As Keeton discovered, although she wanted to be sure she’d have all the equipment and tools she needed, all the freight was assessed by weight, so she couldn’t just throw in everything she thought she might need.

“You debate whether you need one or three rolls of Vetrap,” Keeton explains. “I had to remind myself that London isn’t in the middle of the desert; things were available!” Moreover, “Consolidating everything is important; when you pack for Europe, it just has to fit. You’ll stuff wraps into tall boots, anything you can think of.”

Grooms tend not to relax until their charges arrive safely at their destination. “Loading and unloading on trailers and airplanes makes me nervous because of the inherent risk of injury to the horses,” says White-O’Connor. “Attention to detail is important during the trip: checking their legs, paying attention, making sure you’re not missing anything. You have to be so, so particular about making sure little things are okay all the time.”

The Olympic Experience

It sounds exciting to groom for an Olympic rider, but as White-O’Connor points out, a groom has only one horse to look after but everything has to be taken care of, from early morning until late at night. And believe it or not, boredom can be a factor.

“You’re there longer with less to do,” White-O’Connor explains. “The Olympics in London were fun because everything was close by, and the hotel was inside security, so we could see the barn from our hotel, and we were right in Greenwich so we could walk out the gate and have lunch or something like that. A lot of the big European shows are in the countryside, and there’s nothing else to do. There’s only so much tack cleaning and grooming you can do in a day!”

Keeton concurs. “During the Olympics I had to plan my whole day, but of course nothing goes to plan so it’s a lot of hurry up and wait.”

Preparation for the Olympics takes a lot of advance planning, though. “Something like the Olympics makes you prioritize the horsemanship 110 percent of the time. It was all about what the horse needs at the time—on a daily basis, three weeks from now, three months from now,” Keeton says. “I groomed at CDIs [FEI-recognized dressage competitions] in Gladstone and London, and it really changed how I look at the horse, be it fitness, feeding—everything it takes to bring horses to their full potential at the right time.”

The first thing Keeton had to hone when she began grooming Calecto, she says, was her observation skills. “With an Olympic horse, they may be telling you in the most subtle way something’s not perfect for a 10: with their body, their attitude. I used to just pick up a brush and go, but I had to learn which brush my horse preferred and keep things so clean to prevent illnesses.” And sometimes she thought Konyot was asking her the strangest questions, but then she realized that the rider was so in tune with her horse that the groom’s observations were an essential part of his training program.

“Right after we shipped in to the Games, he went right in the box and slept until 8:00 am the next morning,” Keeton says of Calecto. “Then he was on fire; he wanted out of that stall so bad! It was really obvious; he was impatient with me and bossy, so she took him out that day and let him really do his own thing for a bit. That’s important with these upper-level horses, to let them do their own thing sometimes. The young horses have to submit to the program and learn how to do their job, but sometimes the upper-level horses just need to hack out for 20 minutes.”

Keeton also learned to take care of herself while on the road. “The time that I had to rest was really time to rest up, not go out and have six beers!” she says.
Know the Rules

Professional grooms must be well-versed in the rules of the sport, especially regarding drugs and medications.

“The rule book is so hard to keep track of, I always call one of the vets before I give the horses anything,” says White-O’Connor. “Rick Mitchell, the [US dressage] team vet, is always at team events and knows everything like the back of his hand. Rules are always changing, and there are so many medications, it’s hard to know what’s in different products. The best thing is to use what you know is legal and stick with it. I think it’s easiest to stick to the least amount of stuff that you can, and then use only what you know.”

At the Olympics, she adds, Mitchell advised grooms to avoid the common and often automatic response of putting out your hand to let a horse lick you. While it may seem like a friendly and innocuous gesture, it’s all too easy for a horse to ingest something he shouldn’t, she explains.

“Don’t let horses lick you; don’t let your horse lick anyone. It gets kind of impossible to control everything, and you start to worry about what’s on the stall walls!” White-O’Connor says with a laugh. At the same time, “You can’t control every little thing the horse touches, so you have to kind of let go. I’ve heard a lot of crazy stories, but you just have to try your best.”

No Shortcuts to a Shiny Coat

That show-ring shine is the result of good health, excellent nutrition, and lots of elbow grease before the horse ever canters down the center line.

“The best way to get the horse really shiny is lots of brushing but not lots of baths,” says White-O’Connor. “Bathing strips the coat of its natural oils and makes it dull.”

“I worship the curry comb!” Keeton concurs. “I would curry that horse 45 minutes to an hour every day; there’s something sweet to make the horse’s mouth foam—a sought-after indication of proper acceptance of the bit—but not striped peppermint candies, whose red dye can make the foam pink, which can look as if the mouth is bleeding. Keeton recommends plain sugar cubes instead: “I can ignore a little green foam [from grass or hay] on the horse’s mouth, so I don’t run into the warm-up ring in the middle of a transition or something just to wipe it off. But I’ll use a clean sponge to rinse the mouth before I put the bridle on, and then give him sugar. Then you’re all set.”

Ringside Tips

We asked professional groom and trainer Lauren Keeton what she can’t live without in the warm-up area.

“A tail brush is always great, because after horses work the tail can get sweat in it and get tangled. I keep a big paddle brush handy.”

“A massive bag to carry everything is another thing I can’t live without. A bucket is too small; you have a hot horse and a bunch of boots and a towel and helmet and whip…a massive bag or backpack is perfect to keep your hands free.”

“Clean towels, one of them damp.”

“A spare battery for the com-tech radio. It’s terrible when the rider gets stressed because the rider or coach’s battery died.”

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no better way to bring out the shine in his coat, especially when they have to get bathed a lot. It’s also so relaxing for the horses to whip out a curry comb or two. You learn about their muscle structure, their skin, what makes them sore, or what makes them feel amazing. [For the Olympics] I wanted to pack six curry combs, but Tina made me only bring two!

Oh, and go easy on the coat-polish products, Keeton advises. In London, the only product that she applied to Calecto’s coat was a minimal amount of fly spray.

“Both fly spray and coat polish have a bad tendency to make dirt collect on the horse’s coat. It really zaps the shine,” she says. “When I do fly spray I curry the horse, then put the spray on the brush and brush it in. Then your horse is nice and clean and will go in the ring shiny. The coat shine starts with how they eat, their health. If your horse isn’t giving you a shiny coat, you need to evaluate, maybe do blood work to establish a baseline and figure out if he needs supplements in his diet. There’s no better feeling to me as a groom than to send the horse into the ring looking fabulous, so I worship the curry comb.”

**So You Think You Can Groom?**

Becoming a professional groom clearly takes a lot of hard work, but it can result in experiences—not to mention horsemanship savvy—found nowhere else. Is it the right job for you?

“I feel like I’m a good groom and learned a lot, but when I got my degree in equine science I never in a million years thought I’d be a professional groom,” says Keeton. “I think the skills are really necessary, but I hope to do more riding. There are some people who live to groom; they don’t want to ride or train, they just want to be around the horses. [British Olympic and WEG team medalist] Carl Hester’s groom, Alan [Davies], is famous! He follows him everywhere, and everybody knows he’s just the most genuine, trustworthy person and has all the answers. Some people gravitate toward other aspects of the horse industry: I think [British Olympic and WEG gold medalist] Charlotte [Dujardin] was a groom at one point, and that’s really inspiring, too. [Thoroughbred racehorse] California Chrome’s groom is happy to groom for the rest of his life. There’s admiration for every aspect of a groom’s career—sticking it out, or moving on when you know you’re better off elsewhere.”

According to White-O’Connor, “Grooming is a lot of work and kind of weird hours, but it’s very rewarding. The more you can train yourself to pay attention to details, notice things, and be on top of things, the better. Doing things before someone asks you goes a long way. The more someone just helps out, the more you feel things are under control, and as a groom you don’t feel like you’re being ‘nagged’ or just constantly asked to do things. Also, if you notice little things, don’t hesitate to point them out. Lots of things might not be a big deal, but if you don’t mention something, it could be a very big deal! Nobody minds having something not be a problem.”

### A Top Groom’s Tail Tip

Here is top groom Dawn White-O’Connor’s secret to achieving that lush dressage-horse tail:

“I’m always cutting the bottoms off the tails—not so they’re super short, but if you keep trimming the tails, they start to grow out really nice. Keeping the top part trimmed also helps make the bottom look thicker, when the top is tight to the tailbone. Steffen won’t let us brush their tails every day, and that really helps; never brush it unless it’s clean and easy to brush, or it rips too much hair out.”

TAIL BY EDDIE: The attractive caboose of Legolas 92, ridden by Steffen Peters and groomed by Eddie Garcia

JENNIFER BRYANT
A good groom has excellent communication skills, too, says Keeton. “You need to be comfortable with your rider to get their attention right then; you need to tell them if something needs to be cleaned or fixed, and have very clear, open communication—with the technical delegate too, and keeping your rider on schedule.

“If the horse looks great, the rider is relaxed, and everyone is on time, it’s going to be great.”

Amber Heintzberger is an award-winning equestrian journalist and co-author with Anna Ford of the 2009 American Horse Publications book of the year, Beyond the Track: From Racehorse to Riding Horse (Trafalgar Square, 2009) and of Modern Eventing with Phillip Dutton (Trafalgar Square, 2013). She lives outside New York City with her husband and children.