

Snowbird's Paradise

Dreaming of training in Florida this winter? Here's how some riders make it work.

BY D. J. CAREY LYONS



FLORIDA DREAMING: Scores of dressage enthusiasts (including many top trainers) go south each winter to escape the Northeastern and Midwestern winter weather

Snow. Ice. Bitter wind. Frozen ground. Early darkness.

That's the winter forecast for many dressage enthusiasts—an exception being those who find their way to southeast Florida while the Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington and environs is under way.

Each year the Florida winter season draws top riders and trainers and generates a whirl of top-flight shows, clinics, conferences—and opportunities to hang out and watch some of our country's best at work. In this article, we'll introduce you to two adult-amateur riders and two dressage professionals, all hard-working realists. They'll tell you how they manage—and what, for each of them, makes the experience worth the effort and expense of a stay in “Wellie World.”

Meet the Florida Foursome

Margo Marano, of West Chester, PA, has been training for four years with Tim Mellott, who relocates each winter to a Florida barn belonging to the same owner as his Pennsylvania base. Last fall, Marano and Mellott agreed that her mare, Waimea, was close enough to Prix St. Georges to benefit from training in Florida.

“She'd be working with Tim every day instead of getting a lesson or two a month all winter—and she'd be in a facility managed and run exactly the same way as at home. It was kind of like the stars had all lined up,” Marano says.

Thanks to a flexible boss and co-workers willing to trade shifts at the Philadelphia radio station where she's a DJ, Marano also managed three stays—five days, ten days, and two weeks—to work with Mellott in Florida. And, as hoped, she and Waimea “did our first Prix St. Georges there.”

Since Jackie Duke bought her ten-year-old Hanoverian gelding, Winston, as a three-year-old at the Verden auction in Germany, “he's allowed me to go up the levels unlike any horse I'd had previously.” After riding in clinics with Pan Am Games gold medalist and USDF-certified instructor Christopher Hickey at her home trainer Linda Strine's barn near Lexington, KY, Duke (who's special projects editor for Blood-Horse Publications and editor of *Keeneland* magazine) arranged to train with Hickey in Wellington for two months during winter 2010 and 2011. Then last fall, she approached Olympian Tina Konyot, whom she'd met just before the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games; Konyot agreed to train her this past winter.

Among the highlights of Duke's latest Florida training stint: Because Konyot always rode her Olympic partner Calecto V before Duke's lesson, “I'd have that close-up experience of watching her train him.” And, thanks to



GOAL REALIZED: Amateur rider Margo Marano achieved a dream when she and mare Waimea rode their first Prix St. Georges during a Florida training/showing stint

Konyot's being based in Palm City, about an hour north of Wellington, “At least once a week we'd go out on the trail. It was great to have that different dimension of training,” Duke says.

USDF-certified instructor and 2012 Olympics long-lister Jennifer Baumert grew up riding at mother Beth Baumert's Cloverlea Farm in Columbia, CT, but chose to locate her own branch of the family's Cloverlea Dressage several states farther south, just outside Charlotte, NC. In winter, she moves her center of operations to Wellington. The horses in training and the riders who bring their own horses include some Cloverlea regulars, a few others who “come to Florida with me every year,” and an occasional New Englander or two. However, not all Baumert's Cloverlea clients are snowbirds, so “I run home one weekend a month to work with them,” she says.

For Baumert, as for practically everyone (more on this later), wintering with horses in Florida is “a *very* expensive endeavor. Shipping is a significant cost; a single dry-stall fee—that's without hay, grain, shavings—can run \$3,200. I'd do better in terms of income if I didn't go to Florida, but it's what I do to keep *my* standards up: Being around people like [Olympian] Debbie McDonald and [international trainer and coach] Kathy Connelly, I get to watch the trainers being trained.”

USDF-certified instructor/trainers Adam Gershberg and his sister, Emily Gershberg Wyman, partner in running Apple Hill Farm Dressage Center in Hudson, NY. “We're two hours north of Manhattan,” Gershberg says, “and in really cold weather it's hard to get a lot of training done.” So the siblings decided, several years ago, that giving clients a Florida winter-training option made sense. The two “split



SPECTATOR'S DREAM: *Amateurs and pros alike relish the opportunity to raise their standards by railbirding in Florida. Spectators at the 2012 World Dressage Masters Palm Beach scrutinize the warm-up of Charlotte Dujardin and Valegro, who would go on to win double gold at the 2012 Olympics.*

the season: I go for two months, and Emily goes for two months. We basically have the same background, so we can teach each other's students without a lot of disruption." In Florida, "because we're doing all the work, four or five students at a time is our maximum." Although some students and some horses stay for the whole four months, two weeks at a time is more likely for adult amateurs. Gershberg says that being in Florida and away from running their home barn "lets us focus on the riding. We can be a little more relaxed. Many times we're surprised at how well the horses and their riders do."

That's our foursome. Here's what they have to say about . . .

Wellie World Resource Guide

Find south Florida shows, trainers, facilities, and more in these sources. These are just a selection of the many available.

The Barn Book (thebarnbook.com), Florida edition: An online directory with categories ranging from boarding facilities to real estate.

Palm Beach Dressage Derby (pbderby.com): Shows including the Palm Beach Dressage Derby and Dressage at Equestrian Estates, Loxahatchee.

USDF Region 3 website (usdfregion3.org): Guide to the USDF region that encompasses Florida. Includes links to Region 3 USDF group-member organizations (GMOs).

Wellington Classic Dressage (wellingtonclassicroadshow.com): Organizer of the shows at the Jim Brandon Equestrian Center in West Palm Beach, including the World Dressage Masters Palm Beach.

Winter Equestrian Festival (equestriansport.com): Website of the events at the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center, including the Adequan Global Dressage Festival.



THE COST OF ADMISSION: *Many Florida-bound riders ship their horses professionally—just one of the expenses of a "Wellie World" stay*

Expenses

"Everything in Florida costs at least two or three times more than at home," says Jackie Duke, "because people there can charge more. I know that, so I plan and save." Even so, "I practically had to sit down this year when having my horse reset—not reshod, re-set: a little trim, then slap the same shoes back on—cost \$300." Resignedly, she adds, "I have a really nice horse; I decided to just go for it. You make sacrifices; you cut expenses in other areas."

Margo Marano says that her Florida fixed board-and-training cost "was only slightly higher than it would have been at home; there was more training cost because I couldn't be there the entire time. The total for training and board was at least \$10,000. And of course I had to pay for things like shipping."

Higher costs hit trainers, too. Not owning their own Florida facility, Gershberg and Wyman contract for stalls in barns with trainers they think their clients will benefit from observing. "You pay for a dry stall, sign a contract for four months," says Gershberg. "Then you have to get your hay, grain, shavings. Everything costs a lot more; everything has to be shipped in." Clients, in turn, sign a contract of commitment to get on the Florida list; "we don't want to find at the last minute that a space we're counting on isn't filled. A student who signs the contract knows exactly what we'll be charging. Our basic training-board rate is higher than at home because we try to get a good idea up front of what hay, grain, shavings, and such will cost, then figure that in. We bill monthly for anything over." He adds, "We don't have the luxury of being able to offer attractive short-term training packages—because most barns are looking to collect a whole season's rent."

"Training board is more than at home," Jennifer Baumert agrees, "because all the fees the trainer pays are higher. So the cost of running the training operation goes up, and



LEARNING FROM THE BEST: Amateur rider Jackie Duke (right) took her horse, Winston, to Florida to train with Tina Konyot (pictured aboard her Olympic partner, Calecto V). Duke benefited not only from formal lessons but from opportunities to watch Konyot ride and train.

that cost trickles down. When I rent a barn in Florida, I'm paying for twelve stalls; if you want to come with me, I need a commitment of four months."

Finding the Right Trainer

You're intent on finding a way to train in Florida despite the high price tag. Now—way before you start thinking about travel plans—if you're not already working with a dressage pro who winters in Wellie World, look for a trainer to help you make the most of your time there.

"Find a trainer you'll enjoy working with," Jennifer Baumert says. Ask around for recommendations. Talk with other riders you know. Better yet, Baumert suggests: "If you're thinking about training in Florida a year from now, visit Wellington *this* winter: no horse; just you. Go for a week when there's a big horse show. Stand by the rail at warm-ups; visit barns; watch and listen and talk with people. When you find a trainer that you get a good feeling about, ask if you can spend a day in her/his barn; you want a barn where there's camaraderie among the students. And when you talk with the trainer, be realistic in describing your skills." She adds, "Priority One is a trainer who cares about you and gives you time."

(At the same time, Jackie Duke says, "Understand that if you end up training with someone who's an active competitor, you'll have to be a little flexible. For example, you might not ride with your trainer at the same time every day.")

Planning Your Training

Once you've committed to a Florida stay, spend time with your trainer defining your goals and planning how to get

there. "We talk with each student individually, setting and discussing what would be realistic short- and long-term goals for her and her horse," says Adam Gershberg.

Jennifer Baumert wants "every student to be really clear in her own mind, and with me, about what she wants. It's important to have a set of realistic goals, and to reevaluate them in the light of how her training is going." The conversation includes "strategizing for showing—because there are almost too many choices." For example, "there's a show called Welcome to White Fences that's less intimidating than some of the big shows. The stabling is limited, but it's within easy hauling distance, and the facility is great. It's a good choice for a first show in Florida."

First-timer Margo Marano agrees with the importance of "a detailed plan that everybody's on board with." She and her trainer "talked extensively about what he wanted to do with my mare, how much I'd be able to come down, and how he'd be preparing her for me to come and compete. Then we kept the lines of communication open."

Marano also suggests working on your own fitness before you join your horse. "When my mare is home, I might work out three days a week; while she was in Florida [and I was home], I tried to ratchet it up to five days a week, a mix of cardio and weight training. If I didn't, I figured, I'd need a week in Florida to get my fitness back up. If I was spending the money to send her down there, I had to keep up my end of the bargain."

Lodging

If you'll be training in Florida, you'll need housing. "Condo owners want a year's rent, even if you're staying only four months," says Adam Gershberg. He and Wyman "usually share a rental with people we know. Seasonal condo rent-

als are more expensive but more comfortable—a nicer space. We work with brokers who know about rentals. And it's a fairly close-knit community, so there's often word-of-mouth information; we tell our students about people we know who have rooms for rent."

Jennifer Baumert has "several clients who share a rental every year. Trainers may know clients with places they're willing to rent space in. And there are websites listing everything from condos to campers to spare rooms in people's houses."

Before paying top dollar for a Web-listed offering, "Work your connections," Marano advises. She learned of a room for rent, with kitchen privileges, in the house of another trainer with horses in Mellott's barn; the rent she paid helped defray her "landlady's" Florida costs.

Location has helped Duke's housing budget. Training with Chris Hickey, she found "a little place one town over from Wellington; it was much more reasonable." This past year, housing options in Stuart, a fairly large community near Tina Konyot's home base, were yet more affordable.



WATCH AND LEARN: *The Florida winter scene teems with educational opportunities. Olympian Steffen Peters rides at the 2013 Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers' Conference at High Meadow Farm in Loxahatchee.*



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JENNIFER BRYANT

Maximizing Your Learning Options

Students soon realize that in Wellington “you’re not just taking lessons,” says Jennifer Baumert. “There are trainers’ conferences, clinics, symposiums; you get to sit by the ring and watch world-class riders and horses. It’s a dream come true.”

Marano remembers “one great day: I sat on top of a little hill and was able to watch both a Prix St. Georges class in the USEF ring and competitors warming up for the Dressage Masters [CDI] competition.” She adds, “You can only ride your own horse for so long in a day; then you find out that this person riding this FEI horse will be in that warm-up ring. You get to spend your entire time focusing on the riding. It’s great.”

Adam Gershberg suggests asking friends to ask their trainers if you can come and observe a lesson. “And sometimes one of our students is able to step in and take an open spot in a clinic, especially if the clinic is happening where we’re stabled.”

“Some training sessions are closed,” Baumert says, “but many are open to observers. For example, [USEF national dressage young-horse coach] Scott Hassler comes to my barn to teach me; my students are welcome to watch. There

was a trainers’ forum [the Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers’ Conference] last year, with Scott and Steffen Peters; as a trainer, I could take along two students. I find most adult amateurs are eager watch everything they can; they really take advantage of their opportunities. They want to be in a program where they feel they’re being lifted up.”

“The things you can learn just from watching elite trainers make it well worth the fare,” Jackie Duke agrees. “With Tina, for instance, I observed how very detail-oriented the care and management of an athlete like Calecto is. Nothing is left to chance; the training arc to get the horse competition-ready is very specific and detail-oriented. I’d thought I was a reasonably good horsewoman, but being exposed to that level made me realize I had a lot to learn—even about horse care.”

So . . . is winter in “Wellie World” expensive? Yes. But with rider and horse ready to take advantage of the situation, with the right trainer in your corner, and with adequate forethought and follow-through, it’s an investment that can pay dividends for a long time. ▲

Writer D. J. Carey Lyons affirms that “work your contacts” advice. A chat with a sculptor at an open-air art show led her to her favorite no-frills Florida lodging.

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