

Dressage Is 4 Everybody

Meet Lendon Gray, the 2011 Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame inductee

By Kim Sodt

This year's Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame inductee is widely known as an advocate for youth and ponies—all equine breeds, actually—in dressage. In fact, the best known of her pint-sized partners, the 14.2-hand Connemara-Thoroughbred cross gelding *Seldom Seen*, has been a Hall of Famer since 2005.

We're referring, of course, to Olympian Lendon Gray, whose Gleneden

Dressage in Bedford, NY, has been home to numerous top dressage horses over the years and whose working-student program has produced some of today's top riders and competitors, the best known of whom is 2008 Olympian Courtney King Dye. In recent years, many of the headlines concerning Gray have been about her Dressage4Kids organization and its annual show, Lendon's Youth Dressage Festival, which

tests horsemanship knowledge as well as equestrian skill. Somehow Gray also found the time to complete a stint as CEO of the philanthropic organization The Dressage Foundation. And she remains an advocate for instructor/trainer education through her work as an examiner in the USDF Instructor Certification Program.

Growing up on Horseback

Corinne Fentress Gray placed her younger daughter on a horse before she could walk. Young Lendon and her older sister, Marshall, shared the family pony—although as Lendon tells it, it was Marshall who was the more serious rider at the time.

Growing up in Maine in the 1950s, the Grays had limited equestrian opportunities, so they did a bit of everything, from English equitation to driving, Lendon recalls. When Lendon was seven, Corinne Gray established the Penobscot Pony Club, the first US Pony Clubs affiliate in the area. A whole new world opened up for Lendon and Marshall, who began to focus on the sport of eventing.

With the Appaloosa *Shavano's Pride*, Lendon moved steadily up the eventing ladder, using her newfound aptitude for flatwork to grab ribbons. At a Pony Club clinic, the Gray sisters were invited to train with the US Equestrian Team three-day squad. Lendon reached the advanced level but left the USET training roster in 1971, fear of a bad fall having left her nervous about eventing competition. Marshall remained, training with the late legendary US eventing coach Jack Le Goff until an illness sidelined her competitive riding career.

In 1967, Lendon Gray enrolled in Sweet Briar College (VA), attracted by the strong riding program at the small women's college. She majored in Greek and Latin but planned a career with horses—what kind of career, she wasn't quite sure. After her graduation in 1971, the college asked her to become its hunter-seat instructor, and Gray took the job.



FAMOUS PARTNER: Lendon Gray riding the Connemara-Thoroughbred *Seldom Seen*, who was inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame in 2005

Digital Edition Bonus Content



Watch Lendon Gray's pas de deux aboard *Seldom Seen* with championship reiner Marc DeChamplain on the Quarter Horse mare *Reining Holly* at *Dressage at Devon (PA) 1988*.

Dressage Takes Center Stage

Eventually Gray decided to move on from Sweet Briar, and she found a position working for breeder Peggy Whitehurst in Alabama. Gray started Whitehurst's mare Crown Juel in eventing. After a successful year at novice level, Whitehurst reconsidered the mare's career and suggested that her trainer explore dressage instead of eventing. By the end of the following year, Gray and Crown Juel were the American Horse Shows Association (now US Equestrian Federation) Second Level senior champions—and Gray was hooked on dressage.

While in Maine for the summer, Gray met a dressage trainer named Michael Poulin, who had just returned from the American Dressage Institute in Saratoga Springs, NY. (He would go on to ride on two Olympic teams.) Poulin became Gray's first official dressage instructor, and he helped her to reach the Prix St. Georges level with Crown Juel.

Another big break for Gray came in the form of Beppo, a Grand Prix-level Holsteiner owned and ridden by Michigan-based dressage rider Michael Sutton. Sutton's brother Geoff, a hunter rider from Tennessee, had met Gray in his forays to the Whitehurst farm for clinics. When Michael Sutton died suddenly, Geoff Sutton had the task of locating a new rider for his late brother's horse.

Several top riders were eager to take over the ride on Beppo, and Geoff Sutton consulted with Whitehurst and with dressage notable Maj. Gen. Jonathan Burton. Both recommended Gray. In February 1978, Sutton asked Gray if she would be willing to try to qualify Beppo for that year's upcoming dressage World Championships. Although Gray had never even seen a Grand Prix test performed live, she agreed to the challenge.

The pair had just a few months to prepare for the qualifier. Gray embarked on an intense Grand Prix crash with Poulin: daily lessons on Beppo and other horses, accompanied by



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long hours studying dressage books and video footage.

The hard work paid off: That summer, Gray and Beppo headed to Europe. They represented the US at the World Championships and took part in other European dressage competitions. Gray's international career would gain momentum over the next two decades. She was a member of the US dressage squad at the 1980 alternate Olympics in Goodwood, England, riding Beppo; the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games with Later On; and the 1991 Dressage World Cup Final in Paris (Later On).

Nationally, Gray continued to rake in the awards, as well. Always open to

riding equines of all breeds and sizes, she gained a reputation for successfully training and showing ponies, Arabians, and other "nontraditional" mounts to the highest levels of dressage. She earned numerous USDF Horse of the Year awards at all levels, from Training through Grand Prix. She won five gold medals at US Olympic Festivals on five horses of varying breeds, one of which was Seldom Seen, a Grand Prix-level, 14.2-hand Connemara-Thoroughbred gelding. Other well-known equine partners have included the Connemara-Thoroughbred cross gelding Last Scene and the Dutch Warmblood stallion Idocus.

Protégés and New Projects

Not surprisingly, Gleneden Dressage became a sought-after destination for serious students of dressage. The first student of Gray's to receive big-time attention was Gwyneth McPherson, who won the individual gold medal at the 1987 North American Young Riders' Championships. Besides McPherson and Dye, other well-known students Gray has helped to develop include dressage pros Christopher Hickey, Nancy Later, Elizabeth Britten Hendrix, Alison Sader Larson, Elisabeth Austin, and Jessica Rizzi.

Gray's work as an instructor and as an examiner in the USDF Instructor Certification Program evolved into a new direction and focus for her dressage career: helping all riders, and especially youth, to learn correct equitation and horsemanship basics, similar to those she had acquired through Pony Club. In 1999, she established the Northeast Junior/Young Rider Dressage Championships, later renamed Lendon's Youth Dressage Festival, an annual competition that tests kids' theoretical and horsemanship

knowledge as well as their riding skill. She is the founder of the nonprofit organization Dressage4Kids (dressage4kids.com), which organizes educational and competitive events for youth, including the Youth Dressage Festival.

Gray has also found the time to serve as a committee member or chair for numerous equine organizations, among them the USDF, the US Equestrian Federation, and the US Equestrian Team. She helped oversee and was instrumental in the development of the USEF Dressage Seat Medal program, which focuses on dressage equitation; and the USDF Young Rider Graduate Program, a "bridge to the pros" for former Young Rider competitors. She continues to teach, speak, and give clinics worldwide. Many students of dressage have read her book, *Lessons with Lendon*, a compilation of a longtime dressage-training series in *Practical Horseman* magazine.

Gray's induction into the 2011 Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame showcases the many significant contributions she has made toward the growth and development of the sport of dressage in America. Through her dedication and devoted energies in improving all riders and horses, she has and continues to provide numerous opportunities for others to learn and improve. ▲

Kim Sodt is a USDF senior education programs coordinator and the liaison to the USDF Historical Recognition Committee.



YOUTH ADVOCATE:
With a young winner at Lendon's Youth Dressage Festival



FROM PONIES TO WARMBLOODS: *With the Dutch Warmblood stallion Idocus*



Digital Edition Bonus Content

Watch the video of Seldom Seen's retirement ceremony—both whimsical and moving—at Dressage at Devon.