

American Dressage Legends: Graf George

The stunning gray gelding was only the third horse inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame

The remarkable Graf George helped to put American dressage on the map at two consecutive Olympic Games, under two different riders. Along the way he also made a star of a young Guenter Seidel, was touched by a scandal that rocked the horse world, and saw his last owners become strong supporters of the dressage sport.

Born in Germany in 1982, the gray Hanoverian gelding (Graphit–Mongolin, More Magic xx) was imported to the US as a three-year-old by Meg Hamilton of Hamilton Farms in Massachusetts. “George” was trained by Michael Poulin (himself a Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame member), and together they earned many titles, culminating with a team bronze medal at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games.

After the Olympics, George was sold to equestrian and cellular-phone-communications heir George Lindemann Jr. But in 1995 Lindemann was among those convicted of wire fraud in an infamous scheme involving the killing of high-dollar horses for the insurance money. Facing a prison term, Lindemann put George on the market.

A sale to a foreign country appeared imminent when Olympian (and now USEF dressage *chef d'équipe*) Robert Dover, concerned about the loss of a great asset to US dressage, contacted California-based dressage supporters Jane Brown and her late husband, Dick. The Browns purchased the 14-year-old Graf George and gave the ride to the then 35-year-old Guenter Seidel, a native of Germany who had immigrated to

the US and who was slowly making a name for himself in southern California and beyond.

Seidel and George clicked, and their partnership became one of the more celebrated ones in the dressage world. Just five months after their pairing, George took Seidel to his first Olympic Games, in Atlanta 1996, where they won team bronze and finished eighth individually. The pair went on to finish eighth at the 1997 Volvo World Cup Dressage Final and ninth at the 1998 World Equestrian Games in Rome. George also won US Equestrian Team National Dressage Championship titles in 1993 (under Poulin) and 1998 (with Seidel), and he was the 1993 and 1998 USDF Grand Prix Horse of the Year—the first horse to earn that title twice at that level.

In 1998, Breyer Animal Creations immortalized the handsome gray with a model likeness, and Graf George was inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame in 2000. A photo of George and Seidel at the 1996 Olympics also graces the cover of *The USDF Guide to Dressage*.



LONGEVITY: Graf George (with Michael Poulin at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, left; and with Guenter Seidel in Atlanta 1996) was a two-time Olympic team bronze medalist and the first horse to win two USDF Grand Prix Horse of the Year titles

Graf George died of organ failure at his retirement home in Rancho Santa Fe, CA, in 2008, at the age of 26.

In 2007, the Browns and Seidel reminisced about the great horse for the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame record. Read on for excerpts from their conversations.

According to Dick Brown, Graf George gave them cause for concern during the prepurchase exam—in fact, he said, a veterinarian advised them against buying the horse because George's legs appeared to be in bad shape.

"The day we bought him, if you knew nothing about horses, you'd say, 'This horse is a wreck,'" Brown said. "We never gave up, and no one will ever know the pain he went through, performing. But nothing would stop him."

Graf George was famously high-strung. Said Jane Brown: "We had heard stories about him and the fact that smoke came out of his ears when he went to a competition. We sort of didn't believe it was possible, but it was more than possible. He grew as he went into a competition."

It was Robert Dover who played matchmaker for the partnership, according to Seidel. Dover, who knew the horse, thought Seidel would be a good fit. He was right.

"My temperament combined [well] with his temperament," Seidel said. "I think I'm a very calm, patient person—at least on a horse—and Graf George was very high-strung, full of himself, with a lot of attitude, and he needed someone who would just sit back and let him do his thing."

At the time of their purchase of Graf George, the Browns were new to horse ownership, particularly of

one with a resume like George's. Jane Brown recalled the day he arrived at their facility in Rancho Santa Fe, CA:

"I remember the day they opened up the van. I thought, maybe we should salute, because this was an Olympic horse. We were very uncomfortable. Guenter was out of town, and George had been flown out with a groom. He was so imposing when he came down the ramp that we just didn't know what to do."

As hot as he could be under saddle, George endeared himself to all in the barn as an attention-seeking imp who would pin Dick Brown against the stall wall in order to get his withers scratched.

"He was a bad boy with a fun side to him," Seidel said. "He was never a mean horse. He was always up for a joke. If he found an excuse for a little buck or a nip, he would do that. He loved interaction with people."

Because of George's questionable legs and hot temperament, Seidel took care never to overtrain Graf George at home. But in competition, he learned the hard way not to back off.

"Robert [Dover] said, 'When you warm up the horse for the show, when you think he's tired and ready to go, gallop and warm him up another half-hour until you feel he's too tired. Because when you go around the ring and you hear the whistle or the bell, he will buck and get really fresh.' We went to the first show, and I warmed up the horse. He was just beautiful; just perfect. And I thought, 'I don't want to do more with this horse. Why stress him more?' I went in around the ring, the bell rang,

NEW TEST CENTER NOW OPEN! \$15.95

Neue Schule

- Ergonomic.
- Warm, soft metal.
- Consistent contact.



Richard Davison & Artemis


Dressage Extensions

DRESSAGEEXTENSIONS.COM
1-800-303-7849

PETRIE
High Quality Riding Boots

Bootmakers since 1857

PETRIE ANKY ELEGANCE
CUSTOM OPTIONS AVAILABLE



Podcast Alert



Check out podcast 74 and 75 about Graf George at usdf.podbean.com.

Get more from USDF Connection magazine.

Go online and login to access bonus features.

WWW.USDF.ORG

Thank You for Supporting USDF



Great American Insurance Group/USDF Regional Dressage Championships and Great American Insurance Group/USDF Breeders' Championship Series



800-974-9247
www.adequan.com



800-942-4258
dietrich-insurance.com



800-989-1500
www.doversaddlery.com



dressageatdevon.org



800-303-7849
www.dressage
extensions.com



402-434-8585
www.dressage
foundation.org



www.equisearch.com
www.dressagetoday.com



888-637-4251
us.merial.com



800-553-2400
www.platinum
performance.com



800-611-6109
www.dressagearena.net



800-461-8898
www.smartpakequine.com



800-398-0819
standleeforage.com



866-270-7939
www.succeeddcp.com

and sure enough, he exploded; and he went in the ring and had some mistakes because he was too fresh."

But George rallied for his most well-known appearance with Seidel, at the 1996 Olympic Games, at which the horse was the seasoned veteran and the rider was the neophyte.

"Going up to Atlanta to the Olympics, I had no international experience," Seidel recalled. "I'd done the Pan American Games a couple of years before, but that was my only big experience. He did not do one thing wrong. Obviously the atmosphere at those kinds of shows and events is very electric and very hard for horses to take sometimes, but he really gave it the best he could at that time. He went in and just gave it all."

For Seidel, a career highlight with Graf George was the Grand Prix Special at those Games. "I thought it was so beautiful to ride. I felt so one with the horse; I could have ridden him all day long like this. It just felt so great."

Graf George, said Seidel, was an incredible entrée to the world of international dressage competition.

"When you first arrive on the international scene, it really puts a stamp on your riding; and your peers, judges, everyone looks at you as a rider. I thought people looked at me as a good rider because of Graf George." ▲

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

- Tick-borne illnesses: Not just Lyme disease
- Freestyle music: A guide for the do-it-yourselfer
- Strengthen your core using technology
- Meet USEF dressage athlete representative Catherine Haddad Staller