

Two Giants of the Dressage World

Honoring Michael Poulin and Ravel

By Kim Sodt

Michael Poulin and Ravel need little introduction to the dressage community. Poulin's multifaceted roles—rider, trainer, Olympian, instructor, and judge—have made him one of the most influential figures in the sport. With rider Steffen Peters, the KWPN gelding Ravel puffed his way into our hearts and broke new ground for the US in the international arena.

These two American dressage greats will be inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame at December's Salute Gala and Annual Awards Banquet at the 2012 Adequan/USDF Annual Convention in New Orleans. Let's meet them here.

Michael Poulin: A Trainer's Trainer

Michael Poulin tried everything from trick riding to driving before eventually focusing on dressage, drawn by our sport's intellectual complexity and by the feeling of satisfaction he got from seeing horse and rider develop.

Like many dressage enthusiasts, Poulin admits that he is never satisfied. He sets a goal, meets it, and then looks for the next goal to tackle. It is this drive that may best explain his many diverse accomplishments in dressage as well as in other areas of his life.

One of eleven children, Poulin was born in Newport, RI, in 1945, where his father worked as a machinist in a shipyard. Shortly after the family moved to roomier quarters on Hillside Farm in Fairfield, ME, Michael Poulin's father died of a heart attack. Michael was just four years old.

The Poulin family remained at

the farm, and the children grew up around animals, including horses. When Michael was around the age of ten, his sister Lucy approached Skipper Bartlett, the riding instructor at a nearby private girls' school, for lessons. Bartlett encouraged the Poulin children to be disciplined in their riding, and soon Michael was hooked.

As his equestrian education progressed, Poulin trained with many dressage greats: Captain Andros Solarzano, a dressage expert from Equador; Franz Rochowansky of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna; Herbert Rehbein; Wolfgang Niggli; Col. Bengt Ljungquist; Waldemar Seunig; and Gabriella Grillo. From Robert Thibodeau, a ballet master who devised a system called Body Control and Discipline, Michael learned isometric dancing and ballet. Thibodeau also helped Poulin to develop his seat as a rider. Along the way Poulin developed a keen "feel" for a horse and an uncanny ability to read a horse and



OLYMPIC DREAMS: Michael Poulin and his 1992 Olympic Games partner, Graf George

zero in on its training challenges and how to fix them.

His equestrian skill brought Poulin a reputation as a "trainer's trainer." Poulin established his own riding school and training facility at his family's Hillside Farm, where he would live with his wife, fellow dressage rider/trainer Sharon Poulin, and their four

The Roemer Foundation/ USDF Hall of Fame

The Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame honors people and horses who have made major contributions to dressage in the US, through educational and training efforts, competitive achievements, or achievements in the field of sport-horse breeding.

To learn more about the Hall of Fame and its past inductees, visit the Hall of Fame website at usdf.org/halloffame.

The USDF welcomes nominations to the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame. The criteria for individual nominations are online at usdf.org/halloffame/nominations/individual.asp. For the criteria for equine nominations, refer to usdf.org/halloffame/nominations/equine.asp.

The nomination deadline for 2013 is May 1, 2013. Contact usdressage@usdf.org with any questions about the nomination process or the criteria.

children for more than 35 years. During that time many future dressage stars came to Poulin's School of Dressage to study, including Lendon Gray, Carol Lavell, Kathy Connelly, Michael Barisone, and Pam Goodrich. Poulin's daughters Gwen and Kate (now Kate Poulin-Neff) followed in their parents' footsteps and also became accomplished professional dressage trainers and riders.

Michael Poulin's legacy is also that of a trainer of numerous Grand Prix-level dressage horses. Perhaps the best known of Poulin's own mounts is Graf George, who won Olympic team bronze under Poulin at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and a second team bronze under Guenter Seidel in Atlanta 1996. A teammate of Poulin's in Barcelona was Carol Lavell, whom Poulin helped to train her legendary mount, Gifted. Both horses are members of the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame.

From 1989 through 1991, Poulin held the title of US national Intermediate I champion with three horses: Watch Me, Lighten up Jack, and Zambó. In 1991, he was a member of the gold-medal-winning US Olympic Festival team alongside student Lendon Gray.

Poulin, who now calls DeLeon Springs, FL, home, holds USEF "S" and FEI 4* judge's licenses and serves on numerous US Equestrian Federation and USDF committees. He is a co-founder of the USDF Instructor/Trainer Program, which was established in 1992. Poulin remains a certification examiner in the flagship USDF educational program. And through The Dressage Foundation, Poulin launched the Advanced Young Rider Olympic Dream Program, which provides young riders with an opportunity to travel to Europe to meet and learn from top riders and trainers.

Michael Poulin's endless energy and drive to tackle new goals have made a tremendous impact for the betterment of dressage, and we are reaping the benefits today. ➔



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Ravel: "We Owe Him Everything"

In the fall of 2006, the KWPN stallion Ravel (Contango – Hautain, Democraat, bred by H. de Man) arrived in the US from Edward Gal's stable in Harskamp, the Netherlands. Tim Coomans, Ravel's owner, had just sold him to California-based dressage rider and sponsor Akiko Yamazaki and her husband, Yahoo! founder Jerry Yang.

With upcoming 2008 Olympic Games equestrian events scheduled to be held in Hong Kong, Yamazaki and Yang thought that it would be special to have a horse represent them, as they are both of Asian heritage. With that goal in mind they went horse-shopping with fellow Californian Steffen Peters, Yamazaki's instructor, whom the couple had sponsored for more than a decade. A week before the 2006 FEI World Equestrian Games, Peters rode Ravel several times and came away with a big smile. They'd found their horse.

Ravel's life in America got off to a rough start. After having to cover two mares while in quarantine, he became "a fire-breathing dragon," as Yamazaki put it. The owners and Peters decided

to geld Ravel, and all was well until, a few months later, the horse sustained a serious injury to a front leg that some feared would be career-ending. After eight months off in 2007, Peters brought Ravel back to work slowly. The careful rehab and stem-cell therapy worked, and at the relatively young age of ten Ravel made the 2008 US Olympic dressage team, where he and Peters placed fourth individually.

The following year, Ravel's career kicked into high gear. The gelding made a clean sweep of both the Grand Prix and the GP Freestyle at the 2009 Rolex FEI World Cup Dressage Final in Las Vegas. A few months later, Ravel won every Grand Prix class at the famed CDIO Aachen, Germany, at which no US rider had won the Grand Prix in more than two decades. Peters became the first US citizen to be named Grand Prix champion of Aachen—the rider with the highest score in all three Grand Prix tests.

Ravel was the Adequan/USDF Grand Prix Horse of the Year for three years in a row (2009-2011). He was *The Chronicle of the Horse's* 2009 Horse of the Year and the 2009 USEF Farnam/Platform Horse of the Year.

In 2010, Ravel made history again by earning two individual bronze



MAKING HISTORY: In one of their greatest performances, Ravel and Steffen Peters win individual bronze in the Grand Prix Special at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games

medals at the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games; no US horse had ever won an individual medal in dressage at a world championships.

Ravel's final competitive appearance was at the 2012 London Olympic Games, where he and Peters were the veterans and the team anchors. Strong performances unfortunately were not enough to put them in the medals, and Peters and Yamazaki announced during the Games that Ravel would be exiting the international arena.

"He owes us nothing," Peters said in London. "We owe him everything."

The USDF is honored to recognize Michael Poulin's and Ravel's extraordinary contributions to American dressage by inducting them into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame. ▲

Kim Sodt is the USDF staff liaison to the USDF Historical Recognition Committee, which oversees the Hall of Fame nomination process. Contact Kim at ksodt@usdf.org.

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