



PROUD MOM: Owner Akiko Yamazaki pats Ravel after a winning performance at the CHIO Aachen 2009

# Made in America

Akiko Yamazaki, owner of Ravel, discusses the WEG, horse ownership, and US dressage

**A**kiko Yamazaki is arguably the most famous horse owner in the US dressage community today. Ridden by Steffen Peters, her twelve-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding, Ravel, is widely regarded as America's best hope for an individual dressage medal at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games, taking place now in Lexington, KY.

But there's more to Yamazaki's dressage and WEG involvement. A Grand Prix-level rider and competitor herself, she owns a second WEG mount: Kranak, who's competing

in the para-equestrian dressage discipline with rider Jennifer Baker.

Yamazaki lives in Woodside, CA, with her two daughters and her husband, Jerry Yang, co-founder of Yahoo! Inc. This busy woman is also heavily involved with her alma mater, Stanford University (CA); a board member of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco; and co-founder of the Wildlife Conservation Network. She talked with freelance writer Amber Heintzberger in August about the WEG, elite-horse ownership, and all things equestrian.

COURTESY OF AKIKO YAMAZAKI

**What is it like to be involved as an owner preparing for the WEG?**

For Team Ravel, this whole year was basically about preparing for the WEG. Every show he entered and his training schedule was based on having him be in optimal shape for the WEG. I communicate frequently with Steffen; Rafael Hernandez, his groom; and his vet, Rodrigo Vazquez, about Ravel's condition.

Now we are in the countdown. There are a lot of logistical preparations, such as arranging for travel for Ravel and the team, which includes the therapist, Tom Myers; the security person, Jon Zucker; and Dr. Rodrigo Vazquez. Luckily, we have a very experienced rider and groom combination in Steffen and Rafa, so I don't have to worry about Ravel's travel much. They handle their own and Ravel's mostly, and there is a lot of support from USEF [the US Equestrian Federation] as well.

Then there is the family! My family includes everyone from a two-year-old younger daughter to the two seventy-year-old grandmothers who travel with us, so it is a production. But now we have gained some experience, having gone to Hong Kong in 2008, Aachen in 2009, and two World Dressage Masters in Florida, so the planning has gotten smoother every time.

**Your horse, Kranak, will be used for the para team. How did that come about?**

The opportunity with Kranak came only a few weeks ago. My coach and trainer, Shannon Peters, who is Steffen's wife, asked a few of us if we had a suitable horse for a para rider who sadly lost her mount due to injury. Shannon had trained with the rider's mother many years ago. I had decided to retire Kranak from competition in May, as he turned eighteen years old and it seemed too much to keep showing him at the Grand Prix level. But he was not very happy in his retirement. When Shannon e-mailed, I asked if Kranak may be a possibility. Shannon had ridden Kranak for me when I was pregnant with my second daughter, so she knew the horse well and thought it may work out.

He is such a reliable and honest horse, and I have no doubt that he will do his best for Jennifer. Over his long career, he has adjusted successfully to many riders, including [2010 WEG competitor] Tina Konyot, who made him a Grand Prix horse; myself, a five-foot, four-inch rider who learned the Grand Prix on him; Jennifer, who is a six-foot-tall rider; and a few others in between. He always puts a smile on every rider's face, and I have no doubt that Jennifer will have a big smile on her face in Kentucky.

**Your daughter's vaulting club is also sending a couple of people to the WEG. What is your involvement there?**

I first got introduced to vaulting when my niece moved from France six years ago and we were looking for activities for her. When my daughter turned four, she wanted to ride horses, and I thought vaulting was the perfect thing for her. Luckily we have the Woodside Vaulters Club a few miles down the road from my barn, and my older daughter started vaulting two years ago. The club sent vaulters to Aachen this summer and will have vaulters in the WEG.

All the parents volunteer—it's mandatory!—for the various chores at shows, and it is a true team effort. I am enjoying being part of this world because my daughter is growing into a confident, technically correct vaulter while being able to enjoy a horse as any six-year-old should, riding it bareback and standing on its back!

**What is it that compels you to own a horse for someone else to ride? Is it just for the fun or it, or do you enjoy the partnership and the involvement at such a high level?**

I was browsing through *The Chronicle of the Horse* and found the perfect quote to answer this question. [Grand Prix-level competitor] Adrienne Lyle wisely said, "You can have as many lessons as you want, but until you sit there and see the best in the world and what you have to do to step up to their level, it's hard to imagine."

While I will have to live one or two more lives to even come close to riding at the world-class level, I feel that it is important to know what the "best" looks like so you know what you are aspiring to do. I am an amateur rider, but I want to be the best that I possibly can.

When you sponsor a horse and rider who can compete at the international level, you can also have access firsthand to observe the best in the world. You see the top riders in the world warming up next to you. You see them in the stable areas. You see them interacting with their coaches. You see what it takes to be the best, and it gives you a vision of what you need to do.

And obviously, you have to enjoy the partnership with the rider and the team. There needs to be respect for each other. You have to be in it for the ups and downs, and everyone in the team needs to buy into the vision. I have such a strong rider in Steffen that a lot of it just falls in its place. So my job is made easier, but I have to thank [Peters' previous] sponsors, such as Lila Kommerstad and the Brownings, who contributed greatly to his development as an international top rider. ⇨

**Tell us about your relationship with Steffen and Shannon Peters. What makes Steffen the ideal rider for Ravel?**

I have known Steffen for more than ten years. I met him because I bought a horse through him. Then came Lombardi, who became an international Grand Prix horse under him. I became an “accidental sponsor” through Lombardi because originally I sent him to Steffen because I could not ride him myself.

Steffen is the rider I wish I could be. His ability to create suppleness in a horse is truly unique, in my mind. Because he develops a horse in such a way that it can maximize the use of its own body and mind, the expression becomes a beautiful picture of partnership and harmony. The horse and rider are each giving 100 percent. Ravel is naturally a very supple horse, and with Steffen’s guidance, he was able to bloom to his true potential.

If Steffen is the master of maximizing the potential of a horse, Shannon is the master of maximizing that of the rider through her keen understanding of body mechanics. She is an elegant and accomplished rider herself, but her ability to develop a rider who can correctly influence the horse is also unique.

**Other than bringing home medals, what are your goals as an owner?**

When I think about what Ravel was able to accomplish in 2009, winning against the best in Europe, it was an amazing feat for several reasons. Steffen and Ravel are not exposed

week after week to the level of competition that exists in Europe. The judges see the horses often; Steffen and Ravel don’t have that exposure, and yet they were able to rise to the top.

While there is no doubt that we still depend heavily on Europe for our top horses, when they come to America, perhaps they get molded slightly differently. When I think of our top riders, such as Debbie McDonald with Brentina, Courtney King-Dye and Iocus, Steffen and Ravel, and now Tina Konyot with Calecto, there is an elegance and harmony between horse and rider that I will dare to call uniquely American. I think it is great for the sport that there isn’t just one way of riding. I am very grateful that the judges recognize the different attributes that make up for a beautiful ride, including power, suppleness, elegance, and harmony. As an owner, I want to show the world, through my horse and talented rider, that there is a way of riding that is “American.” The freestyle-music choices, for example, may be a little lighter-hearted; but the degree of difficulty is nothing to sneeze at. Changes on curved lines are a staple for the top American horses, as are the beautiful transitions between piaffe and passage. America, through its unique history, has been able to produce the best in every field because it draws from the best in the world. Ravel’s team includes a Dutch-bred horse, a German-born rider, a Mexican-born groom and vet, a French-born farrier, a therapist who lives in a town called Rough-and-Ready, a freestyle person of Italian descent, and an owner who is of Japanese descent, born in Costa Rica. Where else does something like this happen and create something greater than the sum of its parts? Only in America!

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