

Arabians Earn USDF Gold Medals in Dressage

By Jennifer Walker

Watching a skilled horse and rider perform Grand Prix dressage is a treat. The pair moves together as one being, performing movements with seemingly little encouragement from the rider. Canter pirouettes, changes of lead on every stride and piaffe (a highly collected trot in place) may seem effortless, but these movements require years of training and preparation. In fact, Grand Prix dressage is so difficult that only about two percent of all horses who begin dressage training ever attain this level. Those who are able to accomplish the training and perform well and consistently are awarded with USDF Medals to mark their achievements.

Does this mean Dressage is only for the highly gifted? Of course not! Every single horse and rider can benefit from basic Dressage training, and any horse can perform the movements required at the lower levels. Not every horse will be able to perform them well enough to do well in competitions, but they can build the strength, suppleness and lightness that will make them better at any other job you choose for them.

Although Arabians have been used in Dressage for many years, they have often been discounted on the open circuit by those who prefer large Warmbloods for the job. However, Arabians are gaining more respect, thanks to some dedicated riders who train hard and show their horses to excellent scores. Many long-time devotees of the main ring Arabian disciplines are finding out that Dressage is an exciting challenge and a great way to bond with your horse and improve your riding.

What does it take to achieve a USDF Gold Medal?

The United States Dressage Federation recognizes riders for their achievements through their Medal program. Riders with two scores of 60% or better from two different judges during two different rides at each of the first, second and third levels earn a Bronze Medal, those who earn two of these scores each at fourth level and Prix St. Georges earn a Silver Medal, and those who earn two scores at Intermediate I or II and Grand Prix earn their Gold Medal.

While a well-trained horse and rider should be able to earn a 60% fairly easily in the lower levels, it gets increasingly more difficult as you move up. By the time you get to Grand Prix, it is unusual to earn a 60% if you have mistakes in your test, such as taking the wrong number of strides or going off course, or if the movements are not performed correctly. Not only have the movements become more difficult than what was required at the lower levels, but a higher level of quality is expected and mistakes and improperly performed movements are marked down more harshly.

In order to reach the Grand Prix level and compete at a level sufficient to earn these scores, there are several things that all have to come together: the right horse, a talented rider, and a lot of training, discipline and perseverance. I spoke with three USDF Gold Medal recipients, Patience Prine-Carr, Samantha Hodgson and Kim Lacy, all of whom trained their horse themselves to get there, about what it takes to attain this award.

It Takes a Horse

In order to even be able to perform the movements required at the Grand Prix level, a horse must be tremendously talented, sound and willing to do the work. Being athletic while in turnout is a good start, but he needs to be able to perform these movements while being ridden, when asked, and in the proper manner.

Patience Prine-Carr earned her USDF Gold Medal with OKW Entrigue+++// this summer. “The horse first has to be an athlete, but more importantly it has to have the mind to handle the rigors of the training,” she says. “The Grand Prix test asks so much in such a short time, some horses just get too stressed. Some horses can do each movement in schooling—passage, piaffe, one tempis, etc., but when you put it all together they just can't handle it.”

“Ricky” was Patience’s first Grand Prix horse. He came to her for training only five years ago, when his owner, Mary Jo Wertheimer, thought he might be more suited to Dressage than English Pleasure, which he was bred for. Ricky had been unhappy with his job in the main ring, but he took to Dressage immediately and soared through his training, showing in Third Level by the end of his first year and FEI by 2005. As Patience says, “My trainer Heidi Gaian calls Ricky a ‘freak of nature,’ kind of like Michael Phelps! He just gets better and better!” Most horses take at least a year to move through each of the lower levels, sometimes more, and the FEI levels can take even longer. However, Ricky moved through very quickly and rises to each new task with enthusiasm.

“For a horse to get to the Grand Prix level, they should have a great mind and a good work ethic. Most horses at this level need to be more sensitive or on the ‘hotter side,’” says USDF Gold Medal recipient Samantha Hodgson. “Most importantly, a horse needs to have the heart and willingness to be successful at this level. Physically, a horse needs to have three good gaits and be naturally talented at the difficult movements such as the piaffe and passage.”

Samantha earned her USDF Gold, Silver, and Bronze Medals riding three different Purebred Arabian horses, all by the age of 20. She earned her Gold Medal on Scrabble+//, who was 17 at the time, but she also trained BeyMoon Zela+/ and E.A. Helen+ to the Grand Prix level. “Scrabble was very successful at the Grand Prix level for many reasons. He was very naturally talented at all the hard movements. The piaffe, passage, pirouettes, and tempi changes were easy for him. Scrabble was always full of fire and ready to go. He had great endurance and stamina. He had a great work ethic and never quit.”

Samantha has competed successfully at prestigious shows in both the Arabian and Open Dressage circuits. “I have found the Arabian breed to be great candidates for upper level dressage, because of their great stamina and ability to stay sound through the hard work,” she says.

Kim Lacy began Dressage training in 1995 with her horse, WH Dallas+//, and it has always been her goal to train him herself to the Grand Prix level and earn her Bronze, Silver and Gold Medals. As she says, “Dallas definitely has a high opinion of himself; he has quite an ego! He loves his job and always gives 110% of himself. I believe his arrogance is what has taken him to the top. A horse has to have that ‘look at me’ attitude to reach this level of competition.”

It Takes a Rider

Of course, the horse is only one part of the equation. The rider is equally important—she must be able to cue the horse with highly precise timing and placing of the aids through over 30 movements during the course of a ten-minute test. Many dressage riders ride several horses per day to build up the skill, strength and coordination needed to show at this level.

Good coaching is highly important, because not only do you need someone to teach you what to do, but you need the feedback from someone watching from the ground who can tell you if you and the horse look and move correctly.

As up and coming rider MaryJo Hoepner, owner and rider of Made In The Shade+/, says of earning her Silver Medal, “This award is only an indication of a relationship between Shade and me, those I train with and have trained with, the amateurs and professionals that inspire me, and the person that bred Shade. It takes a village. None of us can accomplish anything on our own.” MaryJo is an amateur, just like many of us, who is working toward her own Gold Medal.

Kim says, “Gwen Blake has been my coach and mentor for the past several years. She has been instrumental for Dallas and me reaching the Grand Prix level.” She goes on to say, “I have learned a lot from Dallas as I worked to rise through the levels. With the lessons I have been taught by him and others I have gained knowledge that would have been impossible to learn without this continual effort.”

However, coaching and physical ability are not the only things a rider needs. She also needs the drive and desire to excel.

“For a rider to get to the Grand Prix level, personality wise, they should have some of the same traits a horse has,” says Samantha. “They must be a hard worker that is not going to give up easy. They should have determination to not give up when things get tough or go wrong. A rider at this level must have plenty of patience and an extreme compassion for their horse.” Samantha has been riding since she was five years old, beginning dressage at the age of eight. From day one, the goal of getting her USDF Gold Medal was always in her sites.

Patience adds, “For the rider it's a commitment. I tend to live and breathe Dressage; I have a test booklet next to my bed and memorize tests to put myself to sleep at night. I have a trainer I ride with at least a couple times a month and clinic with Olympic riders whenever I can. I watch videos, watch high level dressage (World Cup) any chance I get—you might say I am a little obsessed! I also try to stay very fit and eat very healthy to keep up my energy and strength.” Patience was 50 when she earned her Gold Medal and says she will continue riding Dressage for as long as she can. In addition to training with Heidi Gaian regularly, Patience works with Olympian Juan Matute once or twice per year.

It Takes a Commitment

As Dressage judge Creeky Routson once said to me, “Dressage is a harsh mistress.” A rider entering Dressage training can expect a lot of hard work; unlearning old habits, building the right muscles and analyzing each movement. Does it require sacrifices? Some may think so, but it depends on your

perspective. Patience says, "Sacrifices? People may think I sacrifice a lot—like a "real life"—but to me it's my life and I wouldn't change a thing!"

Samantha agrees. "It takes a lot of time and dedication to get to this level, because sometimes things can get hard and be frustrating, but you must learn to not give up and to keep trying. I wouldn't say that I have made any sacrifices, because horses and dressage have always been a major part of my life and I enjoy every minute of it. To get to this level it takes a lot of hard work, dedication, and devotion. Overall it has been a very rewarding experience."

Is Dressage for You?

"A wise person told me a long time ago there will always be someone richer, thinner, prettier, more talented, more...fill in the blank," says MaryJo. "So, the answer is to do your best with what resources you have."

The wonderful thing about dressage is that you can participate at any level, according to your abilities, time, money and dedication. You can learn some basics to improve your main discipline, or you can make the huge commitment to work your way through the levels and earn your USDF Medals. Whatever you choose to do, our beautiful and athletic Arabian horses are more than up to the task.