

Junior Equestrian

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Up & Coming Dressage Rider: Lauren Sprieser

by Valerie Conner



Sprieser and Bellinger demonstrating an extended canter. Photo by BobTarr.com.

Lauren Sprieser of Illinois is already an accomplished equestrian at the age of 21. On track to graduate from Sarah Lawrence College in May 2006, she has also managed to keep a highly successful riding career going on the side, training with Ken McGrath and Lendon Gray. She also relished the opportunity of spending three incomparable months in training with Monica and George Theodorescu in Germany with her horses Bellinger ("Billy") and L'Etoile ("Struppie").

The Junior Equestrian last heard from you when you were in Lindenhof. After you returned you won the gold medal at Young Riders. How did that feel?

Amazing! There is nothing like stepping onto the top of that award podium, hearing your national anthem play. The best part was that I really love my teammates, so to win with such a stellar group of people made the victory extra-sweet.

What's it like to compete at the North American Young Rider Championships (NAYRC)?

It is a blast to end all blasts. Any international competition is fun from a riding perspective, but the NAYRC is secretly one big party. I've made so many amazing friends from all over the country, which is not only fun, it's a great network for business down the line; if my trailer breaks down in any of about 20 states, I know a former Young Rider somewhere who I can call for help! It's also a really big, important horse show. The judges

are all FEI licensed. Spectators come from all over the place. It truly is a big event, and I felt so honored to ride there once, much less three times. (Plus, coming home to horse show with that USA Young Rider patch on your shadbelly makes you feel pretty hot.)

When you're at an important show such as NAYRC, how do you keep nerves from affecting the way that you ride?

I have to remind myself that the best I can do is the best I can do. Realistic expectations are so important in riding, not just in the showing, but in training at home. Truthfully, a little nervousness helps me; I tend to get a little too chill in the ring, and I zone out.

What opportunities have enabled you to become so successful in your riding?

I wouldn't be anywhere at all without the unyielding support of my family, both fiscally and emotionally, espe-

cially my mom. She's a rider, too, and she knows the emotional ups and downs of training and showing.

The rest is really a story of chance. It was a total coincidence that I fell in love with a college half an hour's drive from two-time Olympian Lendon Gray's facility; I had no idea she was here until I'd been on campus for at least a month. Belinger, my first international FEI horse, had only been in the barn we found him at for two weeks, and the owner wasn't sure if he was ready to show to prospective buyers yet. When I met Monica Theodorescu and L'Etoile, he'd just had an injury, so I had to ride him in the snaffle with his mouth partially wired together, and I hated him; my trainer made me go back and try him again a month later. Sometimes, I guess, the fates collide in mysterious ways.

You've spent some time training abroad in Germany. How do their training programs differ from ours in the States?

The Germans that I worked with, or got to see work, were all extraordinarily concerned with the basics, both in horses and in riders. It didn't matter how super a horse's piaffe or passage were if his trot wasn't relaxed and supple. It didn't matter how successful a rider had been in the ring if her seat wasn't light and confident. I watched a lot of FEI horses work in snaffle bridles – if they could



Sprieser and her new upper level prospect 'Ellegria,' recently imported from Germany.

achieve the same collection and precision with less tack, they would be phenomenal in the double in the showing. The Theodorescus in particular also do a lot more lunging with their horses, and not in the way I see so many American riders lunging. The work on the lunge here is often used to run the energy out of hot horses. There, lunging strengthens and stretches muscles, depending on what equipment used; allows a rider to evaluate her horse's work from the ground; and dramatically improves a horse's focus.

When you're looking at a horse as an upper level prospect, what are the major deciding factors besides athletic ability and soundness?

Are there any particular personality attributes that you look for?

There are so many parts that have to come together in a great horse. I look very closely at their gaits, particularly the walk and the canter. The elevation and action of a horse's trot can be improved through collection, but the canter and, more than anything, the walk are what-you-see-is-what-you-get. If the prospect is old enough to ride, I want a good feeling under saddle – light in my hands and off my leg – partially because that means the horse is well started, but also because I want to be able to maintain those qualities through the levels. I also try to push them a little in trial, maybe do something they've never done before, like a leg yield or a rein back. It helps me see their temperament. Do they object to being challenged? Are they willing? Do they get distraught?

I also look for something that isn't really quantifiable, but I want to look at a horse and go, "dang." Sometimes I see it in the way they move and their expression under saddle, or when I look in their eyes. When I went to Germany this winter to look for a young prospect for myself, I rode a little chestnut mare with a long winter coat and some bald spots on her face from goofing off outside, who looked me straight in the eye and said, clear as day, "I'm a genius." I rode lots of other well-moving, sleek, well-groomed horses, but that little mare never left me. I took her home!

How do you manage to balance a competitive Young Rider career while still maintaining academic excellence?

In short: I never see my friends, and I don't sleep.

No, that's not totally true. I sleep... sometimes. It's like any goal – if it means that much to you, you find a way. I decided very early on that school meant more to me than the horses, so much so that I came to college horseless. I've grown to understand how much riding means to me, but through it all, having a degree is the most important thing. Logistically, I have to really plan my time well. I ask my professors to give me all the assignments for the next week, so I can get work done over the weekend, when I have the most time. I've planned my course load out so I have time to ride. It's a heck of a sacrifice sometimes, but the medals and ribbons on my wall next to my bed, and the look in my horses' eyes when I come to the barn, reminds me of why I do it.

Are there any particular dressage riders that you look up to? Why?

The list is long. In Europe, I really respect Monica and George Theodorescu. George was, and still is, absolutely vital in teaching me that the wellness and relaxation of my horse is more important than anything. What makes Monica so dazzling is how happy all of her horses are when they work; her Small Tour horse, Whisper, can work his tail off for an hour and a half and his expression is always soft and pleasant. Both Klimkes, Michael and Ingrid, are lovely, lovely riders who care deeply about horses. US Team Coach Klaus Balkenhol is one of the most gifted trainers I've ever seen. His face just lights up when a new horse comes into his ring. Stateside, I have dreams about Tuny Page's amazing Grand Prix horse, Wild One, and how flawless his piaffe-passage transitions are. I think Tina Konyot could teach a pile of bricks to make the Grand Prix, and they'd look awfully good doing it, too. I've only seen her teach a little bit, but I really like Sue Blink's approach – very much about thoroughness at all times. And if I can ever be half the rider that Steffen Peters is, I'll be a heck of a rider.



Lauren Sprieser and L'Etoile (photo by Suzanne Galdun).

Did you ever consider any other discipline of riding besides dressage?

I've done a little bit of everything, usually pretty badly. I finished three semesters as an intercollegiate hunter with a whopping 1 ribbon in Open Flat, although I was pretty handy over fences. I started Western. I thought about being a vaulter, but that dream was rather shortlived. I even rode a little saddleseat. What is incredible about dressage is how the tiniest differences in my body position or my horses' steps make the difference between a 9 and a 7. There is always something to be improved, and a quantifiable measure of how much so in the scores we get in the showing.

In another life, though, I want to be an eventer. It's too late now – I'm sane.

Many juniors aspire to be international competitors. Do you have any advice on how to make it to the top?

Patience, patience, patience. Easy for me to say now, but if it's one thing I've learned from Young Riders, it's that life does not end at Young Riders. It takes a tremendous amount of time, luck, dedication and, let's be honest, money to get a rider good enough and horse fancy enough to make it to Prix St. Georges by the time the rider is 21. That said, I think getting a rider to that level of competition is much more important than having a super horse, because a good rider can make a horse better. Work with good professionals; don't go at it alone. For those with money constraints, don't go the route that a lot of people go, and get a super quality young horse. Bite the bullet, get an older schoolmaster to learn on. Once you know your stuff, there are ways to get a horse and the funds to show it. Work at horse shows as in-gate stewards; it's the best way to meet a lot of riders. Introduce yourself to everyone, don't be shy. Big Name Trainers usually don't bite. Be ready to work your tail off, but people will notice. Never be afraid to ask for help – the worst that will happen is you'll be told

no. On that note, get used to hearing no. But where there is a will, there is a way. If you really want it, you'll find a way to get it done.

What are your goals for the 2006 show season?

Bellinger and I are aiming for the Passage Cup, a new competition this year for riders 18-26 at the Intermediare II. After that, we'll hopefully attend the Regional Championships at the I2, the Grand Prix, and the Grand Prix Freestyle, which should be really fun – I've never ridden a Grand Prix kur before. Ellegria, my little red mare, will be shown in the Materiale classes (sport horse under saddle group stuff), and maybe Training Level. I've got a young horse to train when I get home, which should be fun. I'm trying to find a way to get back to Europe for the winter to train and maybe show over there, but if I can't, I'd like to try and get down to Florida for their winter season.

For more information on Lauren Sprieser, visit her website: <http://lauren.sprieser.com/>.