



Geographic desegregation urgently needed in California dressage scene.

by Michael DeLuna

There was a time when California was the powerhouse of American dressage. For decades, if you had aspirations to ride amongst some of the very best in our country, your circles and serpentines were performed in the Golden State. On any given weekend, you could find yourself sharing a warm-up with legends like Hilda Gurney, Sandy Howard, and Lilo Fore, or watching Steffen Peters, Guenter Seidel, Leslie Morse, Debbie McDonald and Sue Blinks battle week after week for their next spot on a team for the World Cup, WEG or the Olympics. This was not something that I read about or heard about from peers. It was my reality for as long as I can remember.

I was fortunate enough to be born into the horse world. As a native Northern Californian, I was at the barn as soon as my mom, Michele DeLuna, could find a ringside babysitter. From the time I was three months old, I traveled every five weeks down to Los Angeles with my mom, where she trained with my dear aunt, Leslie Morse. Needless to say, I was primed to become an FEI groom from the time that I could hold a brush. So, whether it was Rancho Murieta or the Los Angeles Equestrian Center, I was rolling polos and shining boots for Leslie and my mom.

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As the years went on, I accompanied my mom to shows all throughout the state. As Leslie's career blossomed, my mom and I found ourselves catching the Wednesday evening flight out of San Francisco into Burbank for the next World Cup qualifier. My mom and Leslie were able to show me dressage at the highest level, so whether it was Del Mar or Aachen, I was exposed to the world's most elite riders from a young age. Like most, once you get a taste of the big leagues there is a constant hunger for that level of competition.

After graduating from college, I found myself looking to get back to Europe to pursue horses professionally. I stuck to my roots, reached out to fellow Californians, and was connected to Jennifer and Jürgen Hoffmann, who were stationed in Germany.

I worked for the Hoffmanns for a year and a half as their head groom, traveling to different shows all throughout Europe managing Jennifer's string of international competition horses. The Hoffmanns took what I already knew and shaped it into true professionalism. Our mutual connection as Californians bonded us and kept us positive during the gloomy days of winter in Germany.

What Happened?

After my time in Germany, I once again returned home to California in 2016. Two days later, I found myself grooming for my mom at the Region 7 Championships at LAEC, an event I looked forward to year after year. Upon arrival, I could already see that the number of riders had dropped. The stabling was lighter and the big names of the old days were nowhere to be found.

On the long haul back to Northern California, I thought about how the show scene had changed, and even declined since the early 2000s. Once back in California after Germany, I was eager to stay involved in the California Dressage Society. So, I reached out to former CDS president and long-time friend Kevin Reinig about attending the 50th Anniversary of CDS and the annual symposium. He encouraged me to come down to Del Mar and volunteer, an invitation I embraced fully.

During the long weekend, I was able to see old friends such as Paula Langan, Patti Schofler and Tom Meyers, all of whom lent me great advice as to what my next move should be. This cumulative advice ultimately landed me to where I am today, living and working in Wellington,

Florida for Canadian rider Denielle Gallagher.



Four years have passed since that CDS annual meeting and I find myself asking the same question that I did leaving those Region 7 Championships: How does California return to the status of a powerhouse in American dressage?

After these four years, I feel that I have a better idea of what is missing in California: it is the divide between Northern and Southern California competitions. California has the horses, has the riders, has the money, but they are struggling not just to unite as a state, but for Southern Californians to go show up at north, and for Northern Californians to go South. There needs to be an incentive to do so.

Geographic Desegregation Needed

In order to begin the process of desegregation to rebuild a cohesive community of the entire state of California, we must incentivize competitors to travel and compete. Whether it's good footing, qualification scores or prize money, the riders must have a reason to show.

Over the last few years I have heard buzz of a six-hour trip from the Bay Area to San Diego being too long of a haul, but would it be if that was the last opportunity to qualify your horse for the USEF Festival of Champions at Lamplight?

If show organizers made qualification shows available on one end of the state at a time, we would see more involvement. For example, two scores are required to qualify a young horse for our nation's Young Horse championship: you should have to get one in Rancho Murieta and one at Showpark.

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Many business opportunities are missed as far as networking because of a lack of travel by the riders, simply because they don't have to travel. The majority of California professionals are located in Southern California, along with majority of the bigger shows in the state. If organizers were to come together to devise a plan that would require riders to travel, we would not only build a better community, but allow an opportunity for professionals to pick up a new client, sell a horse, buy a horse, etc. that otherwise would be missed staying on home turf.

Growing up, I always looked forward to shows and especially the Pebble Beach CDI. This relatively central location allowed for a neutral location for riders from all over the state to compete. Along with the CDI, there was always a great national show to help fund that CDI. The best riders in the state were always there, which allowed many riders to evaluate their own riding against heightened competition.

The greatest incentive to attend this show was the location. Located in beautiful Pebble Beach, near the sleepy town of Carmel, riders, spectators, owners and clients could enjoy their horses, the beach and boutique style living for a week, usually over the Fourth of July. Sometimes, it's not all about the ribbons and prize money but the opportunity to attend a show cocktail party or silent auction amongst some of the nation's best, who happen to be Californians just like them.

Too Much Travel

This season in Wellington, every elite rider from California shipped their horse across the country to compete for a spot on the team. Think about the reality - at least six elite riders brought their horses across the country to qualify for the World Cup and/or the Olympics. A long trip and 12 weeks of the most intense competition in the country, only to then ship back West for a World Cup Finals. And then to then travel to Europe with the goal to hopefully make the Tokyo Olympic team. Had there been an established California circuit, the miles that would be saved on the horses could make a huge difference. Sadly, this year there was no other option.

Although the current state of the world is very scary, there is a shining light for the dressage world. With every competition in the world canceled at the moment, California has time to get back to the drawing board.

In early March, California had already made a tremendous and positive step in the right direction with the Pacific Coast CDI in Temecula. To see everyone come together to make that show happen after the demise of the West Coast Dressage Festival is indeed encouraging.

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With the extra time that this pandemic has allowed for most, it's time to join together as a state to make sure that the first step out of the global shutdown is a positive one. I hope for my home state and the sport of dressage that everyone can come together and restore order in the California dressage scene.