



Long absence from the sport makes Grand Prix Freestyle Championship all the sweeter.

by Kim F. Miller

If you've ever driven through California's agriculture valleys and fantasized about galloping through orchards and crop fields, you have a sense for what Kristine Howe's childhood was like. Growing up a horse crazy girl on her family's Westlake Farm in the Fresno area's Stratford, Kristine believes she probably sat on a horse before she could walk. Her grandmother raised Arabians and her parents supported her horsey enthusiasms in every way.



The orchard gallops are a far cry from the refined Grand Prix Freestyle that earned Kristine and her Hanoverian gelding Loanshark the championship title at the CDS Great American/USDF Region 7 Championships in early October. But both types of riding stem from a lifelong passion shelved for several years due to a demanding career as a lawyer.

In a small, agriculture-oriented law firm with an emphasis on being “second chair” in civil litigation, Kristine worked seven days a week and even “dreamed about law and the responsibilities to our clients” at night. At a certain point, she decided that wasn’t the life for her. She pulled back to working on just one case and from home and that’s when she was able to get back into riding.

Kristine circled back to trainer Pam Nelson, her main coach through an impressive junior career that included competing up to Prix St. Georges dressage and Preliminary level eventing.

The pinnacle of that phase was contesting the 1987 North American Young Rider Championship in both eventing and dressage. She rode the jet black, unspotted Appaloosa, Front Row Center, aka “Horsey,” to a team silver and an individual fifth place finish in dressage

Although dressage is her focus now, Kristine and her family are closely intertwined with the Central California eventing community. Kristine considered RamTap to be “my backyard.” That’s where she first rode Preliminary, at just 13, the same age at which she earned her Pony Club “B” rating as a member of the Fresno Pony Club.

Kristine’s aunt, Penny Howe Gallo, rode with Pat and Marian Humphries, the principals behind the RamTap Stables and event venue in Fresno. (Now known as the Fresno County Horsepark). Her father Ceil Howe, Jr., built many of RamTap’s cross-country jumps and her mother, Gerri Howe, took over the Pony Club when founders Kathy & Kristy Wise sold their farm and moved onto other things.

Along with the famous Fresno venue, Woodside, Pebble Beach and Wild Horse in Napa comprised Kristine’s early stomping grounds. She loved the thrill of eventing, but an introduction to higher-level dressage work with Pam eventually inspired her to focus solely on that discipline.

It was natural to look Pam up when Kristine decided to end her equestrian hiatus. By then, Pam had relocated her Villa Rosa Dressage north to the Gilroy area's Hollister, and Pam's daughter Heidi Gaian was an equal part of the training program. Kristine had found an Appendix Quarter Horse and was hauling him to Villa Rosa for weekly dressage lessons. With her lawyering schedule curtailed, weekly visits became twice-weekly visits, then "yes" answers to requests to oversee operations at Villa Rosa when Heidi and Pam were away competing or horse shopping in Germany. Two years ago, Kristine said "yes" again when Heidi asked her to move to Villa Rosa and go pro as her assistant.

Enter The Shark

Her partnership with Loanshark began five years ago. Kristine figures he'd had schooling up through Fourth Level, but he had not been ridden regularly for some time due to medical issues for his previous owner.

She fell in love with "Shark" right away and he was a naturally hard-worker from the get-go. Identifying him as a "sensitive guy" was pivotal in their partnership "really taking off," Kristine reflects. "He tries so hard and loves his work. There is not a day when he doesn't give you everything he's got. Once we tapped into the idea that he was also very sensitive, we've been able to use that to our advantage. It's allowed him to feel comfortable figuring things out, even if that means making a mistake."

Shark's fondness for the music of Prince is one example of the strong connection between horse and rider. When he first heard snippets of the all-Prince freestyle music Karen Robinson designed for Kristine, Shark perked up and began offering steps of piaffe and passage, even though Kristine was riding him on a relaxed long rein. "We like to think that he chose the music, too." That was all before Prince passed away, Kristine points out. Adding a purple pocket square and points to her shadbelly added a layer of tribute to their winning freestyle.

Kristine and Shark cracked the Grand Prix ranks in 2015, riding two tests at that level and enabling Kristine to earn her USDF gold medal. "I still feel like a real rookie," she admits. Kristine knew she had an unusual privilege in riding some of Pam's Grand Prix schoolmasters as a pre-teen. Even being familiar with how pirouettes and other movements felt from the saddle, training them is a different endeavor all together, she explains, and one that sweetens her and Shark's success.

At presstime, they were preparing for a cross-country haul to the United States Dressage Federation's Finals in Kentucky, Nov. 10-13. It's a long trip that the rider feels happily obligated to make.

"We were practicing our freestyle to our music before the Championship and happened to have one of those really good schools," Kristine explains. "Heidi gave me one of those looks and said, 'Kristine, if you win at the annual show, we are going to Kentucky!' I said, 'Haha! No way in heck are we going.'

"But that Friday night when we won at the Championships, it was 'Oh my god! We are going to Kentucky!'

"It's the kind of thing where who knows if it will ever happen again," Kristine continues. "I had a long talk with my family and, with all of their support, we're going!"

As for the future, Kristine would like to get a CDI or two under her belt and, at some point, she sees the development of a young horse in her future.

Full-time law practice is happily behind her, but she's happy to offer help and advice to others and has kept a keen eye on legal developments related to the horse show world. "As the sophistication of the equine community evolves, so has the need for attorneys," she observes.

It's unlikely that any amount of demand would pull her out of the riding arena. After all, who would dream of legal concerns when you can live out a dream of passaging and piaffing to Prince music—perhaps the grown-up version of galloping through those orchards and hay fields as horse-crazy kid.