



Slow horsemanship carries rider to the winners circle.

by Kim F. Miller

Nobody could beat Keri Potter's time aboard Bitalica in the jump-off for the \$80,000 FEI CSI3* Grand Prix on Easter eve in San Juan Capistrano. That's kind of funny because not being in a hurry with the 12 year old Oldenburg has been the secret to their increasing success together. Owned by Julia Koetting, Bitalica "just kind of fell into my lap," explains the seasoned Grand Prix rider. "We weren't looking for each other."

When Julia, an amateur, chose to take a break from the sport a year ago, she offered Keri the ride. "He was always very talented when it came to jumping and carefulness, but the other stuff affected the end result," Keri says. Lead changes and steering were nearly non-existent when she first rode him. That lack of rideability led to show ring mishaps that left him fearful and "a bit lost," Keri notes. He's still a very sensitive horse and a tricky ride, but the patient process of consistent daily work built his trust in Keri and enabled her to make the most of his athleticism.

Keri is the only one who rides him now and they spend at least an hour every day on flat work. "It's consistency and the slow process of building one block on top of the next," the professional details. "We don't move onto the next thing until we have mastered the previous stuff."

The 4 p.m. start time for the Gold Tour CSI3* during Blenheim EquiSports' Spring Classic II was later than most classes, plus there was new fencing around the FEI warm-up ring. "He notices

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everything and he gets more nervous when things change.” Several new jumps and an electric atmosphere marking the inaugural 3* upped the ante as Keri warmed Bitalica up for the class. She went into the ring “with more horse than I wanted,” but was able to contain his energy enough for two clear rounds over Olaf Peterson, Jr.’s solid 1.5M track. “Our relationship is really important. He trusts me and he’s putting it all together. We’ve become real partners.”

Smart tack helps. That includes small blinders on his bridle’s cheek pieces that “help him stay focused on what’s ahead,” and a drop noseband that prevents him from evading contact by twisting his jaw.

Since winning their first Grand Prix together in San Juan Capistrano last summer and their first FEI class during the HITS Sunshine Tour in November, Keri and Bitalica have consistently been a force to be reckoned with.

Motherhood and a gap since her last major FEI horse, Rockford, retired in 2010 has kept Keri’s international track on the down-low until she and Bitalica hit their stride last fall. Their next stops are the Del Mar National’s \$100,000 Grand Prix on May 5, then the Showpark Ranch & Coast \$60,000 class on May 13. Keri applied to represent the United States at the late-May Longines Nations Cup competition at Thunderbird in Langley, B.C. and is hopeful about her odds.

She’s thrilled to be regularly back on the familiar turf of top competition, especially with two nice young horses coming along. She and 8 year old Diabolical C, owned by Jo Cho, won the Spring Classic II’s Bronze Tour 1.35 Speed Stake. And Melanie Brooks’ 7-year-old, Jiminy Cricket, is excelling in the Young Jumper divisions.



A Sporting Mom's Life

Keri credits a strong support system with enabling her to juggle family life with three girls and high-level show jumping. Seventeen year old Grace is accomplished and active in the theater and art world; 13 year old Cece is a budding beach volleyball player, and 6 year old Charlotte is most interested in basketball at the moment. None are interested in equestrian sports. Cece's father is Brazilian Olympic show jumper Rodrigo Pessoa, Keri's first husband, yet the horse bug seems not to have taken root with her or spread to her siblings.

Keri's husband Adrian Dollarhide, MD, is critical to her success as a rider and a mom. "He's amazing and he's great with the kids," says the equestrian, who was set-up with him by her close friend and top international rider Meredith Michaels Beerbaum. Along with being a physician at the La Jolla Veteran's Hospital, he's on the go with the girls and their activities, as are the couple's parents, grandparents and a terrific nanny. A highlight of Keri's March 31 win in San Juan Capistrano was having the whole family together to see it. "It's rare," she says. "I think the hardest part of trying to be a mom and a rider and a 'sport mom' is just balancing everything. I often find myself running out of time and it turns out that my family has to bend to accommodate my schedule. They've made incredible sacrifices for me."



Coaching

Young horses are not the only rising stars in Keri's program. Under her guidance, 16 year old Hannah Loly has gone from pony jumpers to last summer's individual silver medal at the North American Junior Young Riders Championship, in the 1.4M Junior division. Hannah has already won the first two selection trials for the Zone 10 Young Rider team and is focused on medaling in that 1.45M division this summer.

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Lessons at home or warm-ups at shows can be quiet affairs. “We’ve worked together for seven years and have such a bond and relationship, she kind of knows what I’m going to say before I say it,” Keri explains.

“She’s really a neat kid. She’s a hard worker, very talented and strict in the way she approaches the sport. She is a total perfectionist. She’s hard on herself if she makes a mistake and can’t wait to come back and fix it and she knows that she can.”

Hannah came to horses tagging along with her mother, accomplished Adult Amateur jumper rider Melanie Brooks. Melanie’s parents Sarah and Jon Kelly own Tres Palomas in Rancho Santa Fe, where Keri’s boutique training program is based. Hannah first started riding as “this wiggly kid, with braids flapping around and a bit of an attitude,” Keri remembers. “You could tell she had the drive, passion and competitiveness, and it was obvious early on that she was disinterested in the hunters and equitation. She could not handle the slowness of it.” As the sparks flew in the pony jumper division, her potential was clear.

That impossible-to-coach quality of “feel” may be Hannah’s biggest asset as a rider. “Did you feel that?” is a frequent question as Keri points out a straying haunch or a creeping shoulder while watching Hannah on one of her horses. Hannah’s answer is usually “yes,” with the added ability to feel the difference between that and correct body alignment. Readying for her NAJYRC appearance last summer, Hannah said clarity of concepts and instructions were among Keri’s strengths as a coach. “She’s very descriptive in telling me what I need to do to fix a problem.”

Hannah’s ability to “let the words sink in and do something with them” makes guiding her very gratifying, Keri reports.

Hannah has a few horses, but her main star is NAJYRC silver medal partner Amya De la Demi Lune, a going Grand Prix horse Keri found through Cara Anthony. Coach and student often find themselves competing in the same classes, which “can be a little complicated” logistically. Jamie Taylor is Keri’s go-to pro if the order-of-go requires extra help in the warm-up ring. Wise beyond her years, Hannah is also independent and self-sufficient as a horsewoman, which helps considerably, Keri adds.

Hannah’s mother Melanie is grateful for the family’s long-standing relationship with Keri. “It’s

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been a lovely, long journey already and I respect Keri's ability and talent, in the saddle and on the ground," she says. Interesting and challenging at-home flat exercises have helped Melanie and Hannah with the split-second decisions and adjustments they both need in the jumper ring. Keri's voice is "one that I hear while I'm in the ring, but in a good way," Melanie notes.

Outside of the riding, their friendship and ease with each other has made the sport and the family's commitment to it fun, enjoyable and rewarding well beyond the many ribbons mother and daughter have earned in their shared passion.



West Coast Resurgence

The Gold Tour Grand Prix win has extra significance because Keri views more FEI classes as critical to West Coast riders getting their due on the international level. Fence heights and prize money have dropped too low the last few years, notes the lifelong California equestrian who has competed throughout the world. Coming of age as a jumper rider in California, "I could go to Spruce Meadows in Canada or the East Coast and win because jumping here set me up to do that." The Blenheim CSI3* typified the level of difficulty and prize money needed to bring top sport and horse and rider preparation back to her home turf. "What we jumped on Saturday is what we should be jumping: bigger and harder tracks," Keri asserts. "There's not a ton of us, but there's enough of us and enough good people coming up to be able to support the sport at that level.

"When is the last time a West Coast person has been selected for a USET team?" she continues. Indeed, it's been a long time since a local rider has been able to do that without leaving the region to gain mileage and FEI ranking points. "Things won't change overnight: it's a process," she notes, adding kudos to Robert and Hillary Ridland and the show organizing team

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at Blenheim EquiSports. “This was a good start.”

Meanwhile, Keri, Bitalica, her young horses and student Hannah seem poised to capitalize on what many hope will be a re-start for West Coast show jumping as the launch pad for international contenders.