

Soul Mates: My Life Lesson

In August of 2004, my then eight-year-old stallion, Londonderry (Starduster Centaurus x C L F's Donna), and I spent two weeks studying Dressage with Gunnar Ostergaard in Vermont. The experience was life changing for both of us on many levels—it was “London’s” first trip off the farm where he was born and our first formal Dressage training. The decision to go to Vermont was a serious one for us. Our staunchest supporter was Gordy Sanford, London’s soul mate. Soul mates do not come along every day and when they do it’s important to pay attention. We did.

Gordy and his wife, Donna, bred London. It always was very clear that Gordy and London had a special connection. They both had the same sparkle in their eyes and playfulness in their hearts when they were together. You knew when Gordy arrived because London would come galloping across his pasture to the gate, trumpeting his greeting to Gordy, with his long black mane flying behind him. Not surprisingly, when we decided to send London to Ocala to train with Gunnar, Gordy was supportive.

I went to Ocala once a month to train with London and Gunnar. In between, Gunnar’s assistant trainer, Judy Oliver, rode London. He quickly progressed and surpassed me. Judy took him to two Dressage shows where he performed well. In April, London and I joined Gunnar at a small Dressage show. Our debut was in two classes—Training Level Test 4 and First Level Test 1. We had a very windy day, which brought a number of smells that distracted London. That fact, coupled with my once-a-month riding regime, resulted in tests scores of 55 and 57. During this time Gordy took ill and was in intensive care. Thanks to Tom Cross, a fellow client of Gunnar’s, we had photos of our debut. We shipped them to Gordy to cheer him up. He passed away the following week.

When London returned home from Ocala in June, his soul mate was gone. He seemed confused. Like the rest of us, he was sad. We began to train for our first big Dressage show, the July King Oak Farm Show in Southampton, Massachusetts. The week of

the show we joined Gunnar in Vermont where we prepared for our tests under his direction. We were again riding in Training Level Test 4 and First Level Test 1. We arrived at King Oak the day before our classes. When it came time to school that day, Gunnar explained that we would take London to the ring where our tests were scheduled and we would school around the outside of the ring. During our session we focused on moving forward on the bit with impulsion. London’s extended trot felt very strong as he lengthened down the long side. When we returned to our working trot, Gunnar advised me to half-halt London while bending him on the turn to keep him vertical. This worked well. We then cantered the ring doing the same half halt on the turn. It worked well again. Gunnar told me to ask for more response from London’s inside hind at the canter as we rode the long side. I timed my request with London’s stride and our canter improved. Both London and I felt confident

By Roseanna DeMaria



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after our schooling session. London seemed to feel very proud as we worked together. As we walked back to the barn, London seemed to have a swagger that said he was special. He seemed to be telling me he was show ready inside and out. In fact, his sparkling eyes and demeanor reminded me of his reaction to Gordy. I was paying attention!

Show day arrived and we found ourselves warming up in the green field outside our ring with about 20 other horses. London was light in my hand and very forward. He was ready. The bell went off and we headed for the entrance. London was all business. Then the magic started. We headed down the centerline with straightness and energy. The announcer introduced us with, "Now entering the

ring is Roseanna DeMaria riding Londonderry, a nine-year-old Morgan stallion. London and Roseanna dedicate their tests at King Oak to the memory of London's breeder and soul mate, Gordy Sanford." We were halting at X by the time Gordy's name was said. London gave me a square halt in what I can only describe as a soul mate salute. I could feel his eager energy to perform and perform we did. Our canters received 7s! Our score was a personal best, 61.8. Our harmony was real. When it came time to leave King Oak, London went to the corner of his stall. He wanted to stay longer. He found his soul mate because Gordy never really left him. Gordy was in his heart the whole time. Once again, London taught me about life. ■

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