

Training with the Ostergaards

A businesswoman and dressage devotee shares what she learned about classical training, leadership, and life from the internationally renowned husband-and-wife training team.

By Roseanna DeMaria

BEGINNINGS ARE ALWAYS hard, no matter how much you look forward to them. I'd been through many beginnings in my forty-eight years, but none prepared me for the August 2004 moment when London (my eight-year-old/never-been-off-the-farm Morgan stallion) and I began two intensive weeks with international Grand Prix trainer Gunnar Ostergaard and his wife, Birgit, at their Deerwood Farm in Chester, Vermont. Little did I know how much we'd both learn before we even got into the ring with Gunnar.

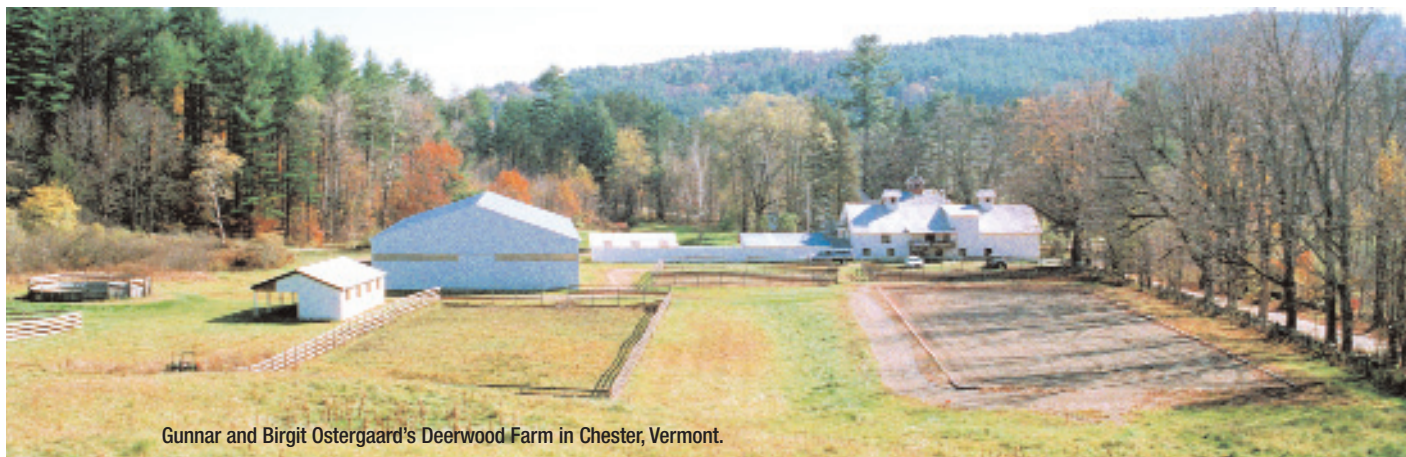
And once we did go into it, we would never be the same.

A New World

Deerwood, I knew, would be a huge change for London. He was born, grew up, and still lives on the Sanford Morgan Horse Farm in Margaretville, New York, where Don Sanford, a gifted "horse whisperer" and Morgan trainer, broke him to saddle and helped me work with him after I bought him. The four-hour trip to Vermont would be London's first time ever on a trailer.

We arrived at Deerwood early, to give London time to adjust to this major new experience, and were met by sisters Judy and Theresa Oliver, who manage the barn, ride, train, and study with the Ostergaards. At the time, Judy had been there for more than two years. Theresa had arrived just four weeks earlier, after a year working for eventing Olympians Karen and David O'Connor.

Back home, London was used to spending his "down" time roaming a huge pasture where he is king of all he can see. So even a good-sized turnout



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Gunnar and Birgit Ostergaard's Deerwood Farm in Chester, Vermont.



Gunnar urges Roseanna not to overanalyze riding London but, instead, to feel what is happening.

paddock, like the one he found himself in soon after our arrival, was unimpressive to him. After determining that the wooden fence was not electrified, he pushed out two top rails.

Theresa was on the scene immediately. While London focused his attention on the horse in the next paddock, she expertly caught him and got the lead chain over his nose. Then, to get his focus on *her*, she put him through some groundwork she'd learned while with the O'Connors. (As she later explained to me, when a horse looks away instead of at his handler, he's being aggressive: trying to do what he wants by ignoring that person.) First she got London to look at her by opening and closing her fingers, held at her shoulder's height, about 3 feet from him. Then she got him to yield his hindquarters by walking toward his left hip, then his right, while twirling a few inches of the end of the lead shank counterclockwise. When she walked him out of the paddock, he was calm.

Theresa played the focus "games" with London again at the start of his second turnout; when he was calm, she left to finish her barn chores. When he started bellowing and running around, we decided to put him back into his stall, but he resisted being caught. After Theresa caught his halter, he at first walked calmly but then bumped her aggressively before she could attach the lead line. She corrected him with a quick tug on the halter; in response, he reared. As he came down, she was holding his halter in her right hand; one leg grazed her shoulder. She turned to face him, holding the of-

fending leg in her left hand! London's look of surprise quickly became submission. She attached his lead line, and he walked quietly beside her.

More explanation, this time about boundaries: When London bumped her, Theresa said, he was asserting himself into her space—a totally unacceptable dominance message. As a non-negotiable part of the horse-human relationship, a horse *must* respect the boundaries defining his and humans' respective spaces. Over the next two weeks, Theresa continued to be my guide through a new world in which I would build a more complete relationship with my horse.

Focus, boundaries, communication ... all this, and we hadn't started training with Gunnar yet!

Adding Feel to Focus

On Monday, I watched Gunnar teach lessons to four horses from Ohio who were at the farm with their trainer and owners. Then it was our turn—and we made a grand entrance: As I led London into the indoor arena, he jumped about, kicking with his hind feet. Judy promptly put him on a longe line and worked him in both directions. Then I mounted, and we began to work with Gunnar.

London behaved far better under saddle than he had for me from the ground. Gunnar told me my back was strong and that I had a natural seat and good hands—but that I needed to relax. He urged me not to overanalyze my riding, to let the feeling come to me.

London was forward but not straight, hollowing out to the left. We began a se-

A Gunnar "Groupie"

Gunnar Ostergaard was National Danish Professional Champion in 1975; since coming to the US in 1976, he has won many national championships and trained numerous students and horses to Grand Prix. Roseanna DeMaria, a former First Vice President of Leadership & Performance for Merrill Lynch and former Senior Vice President of Enterprise Risk Management for AT&T Wireless Services, is the managing director of the DeMaria Group, a performance and development consulting firm in New York City.

Roseanna's two weeks at Deerwood were "my first formal dressage training, although I'd read all the seminal works, watched videos, and attended shows. I'd admired Gunnar's skill, and his approach, since seeing him show at Devon in 1986: his patient, sensitive training in the warm-up arena and his breathtaking performances of focused, flexible, classical horsemanship. I envied his student Ellin Dixon Miller, who won the national championship at Grand Prix in 1981. I dreamed about Ellin's Swedish Warmblood stallion Elektron, and I thrilled at Wynsum's raw energy and exponential growth as Gunnar trained the Hanoverian into a champion in the late 1990s. In fact, you could say I was a closet Ostergaard groupie." So, the first time in a Deerwood lesson that Gunnar asked if he could ride London, "it was like being an amateur musician and having Mick Jagger ask to play your guitar."

ries of exercises to straighten him, each effort requiring concentration but also complete flexibility. This was difficult for me—because when I focus, I become intense and stiff; to me, “focus” had always meant hard, laser-like thinking exclusive of all else. But Gunnar was teaching me that focus could not succeed unless it was interwoven with communication and feel, the keys to performance.

So I stopped my white-knuckle focus efforts and *tried* to wait for the feel. Before I knew it, we were doing a circle around Gunnar with shoulder-in, followed by a canter that eventually took me down the long sides of the arena.

At the end of the lesson, London and I were both exhausted. Gunnar told me that we would start London in side reins on the longe in our next lesson. (My horse had never worn side reins, so this would be another new experience.)

Calmness and Work

When I came out the following day, I found that London had broken one of

weren't attached to his bridle. He was prancing and pulling but not kicking; trying to quiet him, I jerked the bit and hit him, but to little effect.

Gunnar explained that London was being naughty but that he was also a bit nervous. The nervousness was driving his behavior—and my efforts to discipline him were escalating his worry, making the situation worse. Gunnar took the reins from me and walked London forward, diffusing my horse's tension and giving him a pat after a few quiet steps. Gunnar's voice was quiet and soothing, his movements and timing precisely responsive to what was happening. Before I knew it, London was on the longe line in side reins—and going well. Then the side reins were removed, and I was in the saddle.

Gunnar said London had very good forward movement, and we began to work on getting him on the bit. He was balanced and moving well. His transformation from the previous day was impressive, though Gunnar cautioned that

expecting such progress every day would not be realistic.

We worked on straightness and transitions. Our canter transition was a challenge because we tended to run into it; Gunnar taught me to shorten the trot first and then ask. I felt it. It worked.

Several times during the lesson, horses outside the arena neighed and London responded.

My normal reaction was to kick several times and hit him, but Gunnar coached me to be more subtle: My “big” reaction just stimulated my stallion to react more loudly, whereas a sharp well-timed correction—one sharp touch with the spur—stopped the behavior.

As we rode back to the barn from

the indoor, with Gunnar by our side, London stayed focused even when several horses in turnout paddocks talked to him as we passed them. Gunnar explained that “working” helps my horse to behave. He also pointed out that London has a “kind eye”: He is not a mean horse, and he wants to please.

Again I had a litany of questions about my position, and again Gunnar encouraged me to relax and resist the temptation to overanalyze. The day ended with a deep satisfaction that maybe we could make it all work.

Living and Learning the “Joy” Principle

Next day we turned London out early—and he did not dismantle the fence. After I put him in crossies, two other horses joined us, and he continued to behave well.

Before our lesson, I had a chance to watch both Ostergaards work their horses. Gunnar and a brilliant mover, Wilton, were having a particularly great day: Their passage was buoyant. The extensions floated. Wilton was obviously a happy horse.

As Gunnar rode, he asked, “Roseanna, can you imagine having a job that gives you this much joy?” He was referring to Wilton, but in my mind Gunnar was living proof of this joy. As I thought about the Ostergaards—their training, the way they run their barn, even their easy humor—it became clear to me that they live the “Joy” principle. They talk quietly to their horses and praise their good performance; one never hears escalated reactions. They are at peace with themselves, each other, their animals, the world. This centered perspective drives the joy in their performance. Outstanding dressage is just one result—but, then again, dressage is about life. That seemed to be the message.

London's lesson was the perfect encore to this realization. Could I apply the “Joy” principle? I entered the arena on foot with him and mounted alone; Gunnar was to arrive shortly. London was excited and looking about, having never before been alone in this arena. As for me, I was desperately trying not to overanalyze the situation. Rain started to fall;



Roseanna learned that by using her legs, driving London into her hands, and creating forward motion, she could compel the stallion to focus on her.

his water buckets and made manure in the other. He was communicating his opinion of these new experiences, and he was not mincing words. Still, I hand-grazed him without incident. Then I readied him for our lesson.

London was outfitted with side reins when we entered the arena, but they

the metal roof resounded. London's excitement increased. I felt it. We started our warm-up, and his nervous energy started to morph into forward movement. I felt it.

Gunnar joined us. We began our work: more achieving straightness, getting on the bit, transitions—and, today, shoulder-in on the long sides.

We added leg-yields. These were new for us, and afterwards I could not believe we'd done them. Of course, they'd need work, but we had a credible beginning.

Had I thought about it, I would have analyzed the movements more, instead of feeling them. But Gunnar directed me through the "feel"; they just happened.

We rode back to the barn and around the farm a bit, without incident. Progress.

Thursday was my twenty-third wedding anniversary—and my devoted husband,

who'd encouraged me to take this adventure, was back in New York. I asked myself, "You're forty-eight, happily married—and spending your anniversary at horse camp? Help me understand."

The day answered the question. When I arrived at the barn, Judy told me that they'd turned London out earlier and he'd behaved himself; the fence was intact, and he was back in his stall now and happily quiet.

I went to the arena to watch the Ostergaards train. Gunnar was teaching piaffe to a very flexible warmblood, creating and collecting so much energy that the horse leapt vertically, kicking his hind legs, not knowing where to channel the action. Gunnar calmly trotted a line and began again. Gradually, a collected, precise piaffe emerged.

The lesson was that mistakes must happen as you develop the skills to reach the next level of performance. Accept

them as part of a healthy development process and move on. Contain the impact of any errors; compartmentalize the mistakes and build on the learning by clarifying the communication. Once again, I hadn't even gotten on yet but the learning kept coming.

Friday brought a totally new experience. Gunnar suggested that Judy ride London for fifteen minutes before my lesson to get him moving correctly; that would enable me to "feel" correct movement when I began riding him, even if I

better to get him seriously working on the rail before I tried the center line.

That worked well until a horse neighed. London felt compelled to answer, then hopped a bit and rushed forward as a truck rumbled by. Judy got on and drove him forward until he focused again. We then headed back to the barn, where I bathed him and put him away without mishap—even as three other horses came by to use crossies.

Week 1 had ended—very differently from the way it began.



Roseanna had expected to improve her riding at the Ostergaards' farm. What she hadn't expected was the knowledge about life and leadership she gained from the experience.

couldn't sustain it.

Seeing London from the ground—performing correct dressage!—was a new experience for me. Judy got him on the bit, executed transitions, extended the trot, and performed shoulder-in. Gunnar narrated for me, pointing out the Second Level trot she demonstrated, the transition, and straightness issues.

Then it was my turn. London was clearly still "hearing" Judy. He was terrifically light in my hand and forward in his movement. We executed Gunnar's commands with varying degrees of accuracy. Throughout, it felt great.

Gunnar concluded by telling us to go to the outdoor arena and ride around a few times. We headed out—Judy on foot, and I on London. We entered the arena, I trotted the center line to X, and London lost focus, his nose in the air. Judy explained that because the absence of walls was an issue for him, it would be

good, and he felt fairly straight. Gunnar then began the lesson, working on our trot/walk/trot transitions, trot/canter transitions, and serpentine. London was forward and willing.

We had difficulty with the canter transitions; my hands needed to be more flexible, softer. As I focused on my hands, I realized that flexibility, or a lack thereof, was directly influencing my shoulders.

When our lesson ended, Gunnar asked Judy to get on and show me the canter transition. London picked up her aids on the first stride; with my aids, he'd taken seven strides. Seeing the transition work right would allow me to visualize it next time I asked for the canter. More progress.

The next day, the horse who'd been London's neighbor since we arrived had to move to another stall because two new horses were arriving with their own-

Week 2 Begins

On Monday, Judy warmed London up and introduced him to the counter-canter, which he'd never done before. He looked a bit confused but managed to perform. She also worked on trot-canter transitions and shoulder-in.

Then it was my turn. After Judy's warm-up, London took the bit immediately. Our turns felt

ers. This involved lots of new smells and activity, and London talked all morning.

When I took him into the arena for our morning lesson on Wednesday, we had the entire indoor to ourselves. A horse neighed as I began our warm-up; naturally, London answered. I urged him forward with kicks and clucks—and a varying degree of success.

When Gunnar joined us and the lesson began, I learned I hadn't gotten London on the bit correctly, which had allowed him to focus elsewhere. My kicking hadn't worked because it was so "noisy" that it lost effectiveness; he was able to tune me out. But by using my legs, driving him into my hands, and creating forward motion, I could compel him to pay attention.

Once I had London going forward from my legs into soft hands, he began to move with rhythm and impulsion. Our turns became sharper, our circles correct. Doing shoulder-ins, he was light in my hand and flexible in movement.

I was so surprised that I started to *think* about why this was all working—

and it all collapsed because, without realizing it, I stiffened. Gunnar urged me to relax and explained the logistics of riding the diagonal line, showing me precisely where I needed to rejoin the track and how to get London back on the bit from a long-and-low walk.

Then we began trot/canter work. Until that day, London and I had rushed into canter. Now I held my whip in my outside hand and sat tall, shortening his stride but keeping the forward motion. He took the aid, and we cantered!

Even as we went on to work on straightness and rounding, I fully believed the transition had been a fluke—until we did it again in both directions. The feeling was almost too good to believe. I was afraid to think too hard about it, for fear of messing it up. Gunnar then told us to walk on the buckle and relax.

Life Lessons From Dressage

London and I were progressing toward a goal that I saw realized every day in the

Ostergaards' riding and in their work with students. But with only two days left before heading home, I was anxious: Thursday's lesson was scheduled for the outdoor arena. We had faced many focus issues in that arena when we went there with Judy for brief post-lesson sessions, and I knew today would bring more.

Judy warmed London up. Then I mounted, Gunnar arrived, and we began our work.

The absence of walls challenged our straightness. Our diagonals were wiggly, but Gunnar encouraged me to keep my focus, steady my aids, and ride London through the issues. We became rounder, more forward, and—eventually—straight. Our 10-meter circles at B and E were the best thus far.

We then began canter transitions, with some improvement. We moved on to some shoulder-in on the long sides. London and I were tracking left and approaching A on the short side. Our turn was good.

Then it happened: hoofbeats that got

louder and faster with each passing second. Skyrocketing out of the woods behind us came Theresa—on a horse she'd been cooling down on the trail after a training session when a very sudden, loud wind out of nowhere had startled him.

London didn't stop to analyze. He leapt from A to B in what felt like two warmblood-size strides, then ran to E, almost leaving the arena. Gunnar calmly directed me to circle and explained that *any* horse would be startled. I didn't think or analyze; I steadied my hands, sat back, and brought my horse back to the present with half-halts on a circle around Gunnar. It just happened; I felt it as Gunnar and Judy had been encouraging me to do. Gunnar praised our reaction, and we began the lesson again.

This lesson convinced me that the changes in my riding were taking root, becoming part of London and me. I understood how they worked and why, but I executed them by *feel*. We could take these lessons into new situations

and perform with confidence. It was a watershed moment in our learning.

In our last lesson, Friday, in the indoor arena, Gunnar wanted to ensure that I knew the feeling when London was correct—that is, on the bit, forward, and straight. Throughout the session, he asked *me* to tell *him* when we were correct and on the aids.

We ended the training session with trot-canter/walk-canter transitions. These were new to us—and, to my surprise, we executed them on my aids in both directions.

Then Gunnar and I discussed the game plan that I would follow for the next six months with London. Basic to its success was the understanding that the next thirty days would be very important in imprinting the lessons we'd just learned.

As I left Deerwood's indoor arena for the last time, I knew much had changed for me. I'd expected us to learn a huge amount in ten days of training, and we did. My seat and legs had improved. My hands and flexibility

were enhanced. My horse and I had become better dressage athletes, with a clearer understanding of where we were and where we needed to go from a skills perspective. What I hadn't expected was the knowledge about life and leadership I gained from the experience: lessons so interwoven into classical horsemanship that they are life lessons—because dressage, in its purest form, is about life.

Update: At home on her own, Roseanna was able to use what she'd learned with Gunnar in continuing to work with London. If she hit a snag—for instance, difficulty in getting a canter depart right away—Gunnar was available to troubleshoot by phone or e-mail. And those two weeks at Deerwood began an ongoing connection: London now spends part of the year with Gunnar; Roseanna, still working on developing feel, hopes to progress with him as far as Fourth Level or even Intermediaire. (For more information on Gunnar, Birgit, and the Deerwood program, visit the Web site www.gunnarostergaard.com.) ■