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Equestrian Professional Member Spotlight - Darren Finkelman

By Pam Saul

The journey of an professional equestrian is not always a straight path. Darren's journey has taken him across the globe. From Long Island, New York where he was born and raised to many years of training with leading masters in Europe, where equestrian culture and tradition run deep.



(Sportfot photo)

Darren began with horses the same way many of us do...

by pestering (or as he calls it "being persistent") an adult to take him riding. This led to summer camps, riding lessons and getting his first horse at the age of 13. Darren recalls, "My family was not involved in horses. As a matter of fact, when my mother was growing up.... if there was a mounted policeman on the corner on her way home, she would walk all the way around the block so as not to go near the horse, which she was afraid of."

During his junior years, he rode under the tutelage of Raul de Leon, who emphasized the importance of classical principles as a foundation for all disciplines. Darren also was able to practice and hone his skills on horses from Ralph Caristo's Glen View Stables. He competed successfully in hunters, equitation, dressage and eventing.

Once it was obvious to Darren's parents that his chosen career path was with horses, they felt he should get the proper credentials through intensive formal training. This led to a meeting with Major Hans Wikne, while he was conducting a clinic in Massachusetts. Major Wikne was the head of the National Equestrian Center at Strömsholm, Sweden, a Former Cavalry Officer, Olympic Rider and Coach, who was also in charge of the Dressage Judges in Sweden. He provided an important link between the Cavalry era and the modern day civilian era. After a trial ride, Major Wikne informed Darren that he was welcome to attend Ridskolan Strömsholm.

After a two year stint in Sweden, he spent 3 more years in Europe. Starting with several months in Switzerland with Paul Weier, a multiple National Champion in Show Jumping, Dressage and Eventing. The next 2 1/2 years were divided between Walter Christensen and Jürgen Koschel, both leading dressage trainers in Germany as well as National Team coaches.

While overseas, Darren lived in and visited many interesting places including Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands and Russia, where equestrian traditions are strong. Darren says, "I have been extremely fortunate to have studied with some of the equestrian world's esteemed masters who have instilled in me a devotion and commitment to excellence, which I strive to pass on to my students."

Many of his training experiences have put him in contact with influential equestrian professionals. Darren says, "Since my junior years, Raul de Leon has been a mentor. Major Wikne and Jürgen Koschel have also been mentors after my time spent training with them. There have also been many older horsemen as well as peers who have offered support and guidance throughout the years."



After many years away from the United States and the passing of his father, Darren felt it was time to return home and start up a business here in the States. Darren developed a clientele training and instructing in dressage, hunters/jumpers, eventing. He also had the opportunity to be Director of Sag Pond Farm on Long Island during it's early formative years where the focus was on hunters and jumpers.

For the last 15 years Darren has been based in Virginia. He works with hunters and jumpers as well as dressage horses and riders at various levels. During this period, from 2002 - 2008 as the rider/trainer for Hidden Trail Farm Darren successfully competed in jumper divisions up to and including the Grand Prix level as such shows as WEF, Spruce Meadows, Kentucky, Hampton Classic, Lake Placid, Beacon Hill, Atlanta and Biltmore. His most notable successes would be winning the Cherry Blossom Grand Prix at the Atlanta Spring Classic and a 9th place finish in the \$200,000 Atco Power Queen Elizabeth II Cup at Spruce Meadows.

I asked Darren if there was a particular horse that helped him or was special in some way. He remarked, "All of the horses along the way have been special or helped in one way or another. But if I had to name some....My first horse Scat's Brat because the first one is always special. Gimlet, my junior horse, as he was so versatile and helped prepare



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me for Sweden. Gustaf, my dressage horse while I was training in Germany. Baileys for getting me in the Grand Prix ring and Kimber whose great heart and talent allowed me to have success at the highest level of Grand Prix competition."

Throughout his career Darren has continued to add to his extensive professional knowledge by participating in clinics with such notables as Bertalan DeNemethy and Maria Gunther as well as a six month boot camp at Stall Eichhorst, under the direction of German Olympic Show Jumping Team medalist Peter Luther. He recently received his USEF judge's license for Hunter, Hunter Seat Equitation and Jumper divisions.


Darren's journey has been one of constant learning and sharing of knowledge. His exceptional background and experiences offer a unique value to his customers and students. He enjoys continuing this cycle and is available for clinics and has several dates open for winter booking. He has maintained many important contacts since his years in Europe which have proven valuable while searching for quality horses.

What Does Darren Say about Equestrian Professional.com?

"Equestrian Professional.com is a very useful tool. It's weekly tips are helpful and the periodic webinars are educational, with topics that are most relevant to today's equestrian world. It also affords me the opportunity to interact with fellow professionals, in areas of mutual interest."

If you are interested in learning more about Darren, please contact him at 540-270-7285 or visit his website at www.darrenfinkelman.com



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