

AMERICAN QUARTER HORSES

The American Quarter Horse Association's dressage program creates new opportunities for the breed and riders.

By Kelly Sanchez



For 30 years, Teena Middleton has been a regular at Quarter Horse shows in North Carolina, doing what she describes as “a little bit of everything”—from classes in Western Pleasure to over-fences. The dressage arena, however, remained untried. So when Middleton learned that the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) was launching a program on Jan. 1, 2010, allowing registered Quarter Horses to earn AQHA points at U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) and Dressage Federation (USDF) dressage shows, she and her 9-year-old Quarter Horse mare, Mysterious Detail (aka Paris Hilton), took the plunge.

Their efforts paid off: After just one year of training, they were the high-point winners in the adult amateur division at a show last September in Pinehurst, North Carolina. “Not only did the Quarter Horses hold their own against the big guys,” she says proudly, “they stole the show!”

The pair's dressage scores—which included 70 percent at Training Level, Test 4 and 66 at First Level, Test 1—were hard-won notes Middleton. “I never would have taken the step without the AQHA program. I didn't know much about dressage, but I

Courtesy, Michelle Williams



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ABOVE and LEFT: Michelle Williams with A Cash Vantage (Casey).

saw that there was a little something for everyone. I said, 'If there's something for beginners, I'll try it,'" she recalls.

Middleton is just one of a growing number of riders across the country blazing the way for Quarter Horses in the dressage arena. With more than 5 million horses registered worldwide, the AQHA can easily claim the title of the world's largest breed registry. Valerie Smith, the AQHA's secretary to the senior director of shows and new events, says that by the end of 2010, there were approximately 73 registered American Quarter Horses participating in the AQHA dressage program, which encompasses Training Level through Grand Prix. "That doesn't sound like a big number," she said, "but I get phone calls about it every day."

Warmbloods may represent the ideal in dressage, but Quarter Horses are making inroads with their versatility and trainability, as well as their accessibility.

"It's not unusual for Quarter Horses to do a lot of different things," says Middleton, who nevertheless admits that dressage was something of a "culture shock" for her horse. "Paris was a hunt-seat horse and for her to learn to go into

that bridle was tough. Quarter Horses have an amazing level of self-carriage, but getting Paris to learn to go into the contact was a serious challenge. She had to bring her head up and accept the contact." Middleton credits her trainer, Susan Wiedman of Encore Sporthorse in North Carolina, with their success. "Susie's been so patient with us. She's had some problems that she's never had with other horses. We had to go back to square one, but I think we're doing pretty well now."

Marcy Bisson of San Juan Capistrano, California, showed Western Pleasure with a Quarter Horse mare in the 1980s and later owned a Swedish Warmblood. Four years ago, after searching for an equine partner that was as capable in the show ring as on the trail, she purchased Jacs Sliding Rocket (aka Hollywood), a 10-year-old Quarter Horse gelding. "Hollywood was bred and raised for reining," says Bisson. "He's not a big horse—just 15.2 hands—and he may not have the suspension of a warmblood, but he has a good mind. In gaits he won't get 8s, but in precision he clears the path."

Last summer Bisson's trainer, Victoria Rea of Rea Equisports, showed Hollywood at Third Level, Test 1, where they earned a 64.872 percent in the open division. Bisson, Rea and Hollywood regularly make the trek several hours north to train with well-known judge and trainer Hilda Gurney, herself a proponent of non-traditional breeds in the dressage ring.

"Any horse without the fancy gaits is going to have to have an exceptional performance," Rea notes. "Hollywood's not going to get the big scores for gaits, and I've got to make him think about

keeping the jump in his canter. But he's very talented and athletic, and he's changed dramatically. He can do good collection and some decent pirouettes."

Rea points out that Bisson can take the horse on a three-hour trail ride and then load him onto the trailer and show him in a dressage test. "He's just a dandy horse," she says. "The AQHA program is a great opportunity."

Michelle Williams of Georgia is another dressage rider who's glad for the chance to accrue AQHA points, qualify for AQHA Incentive Fund earnings and compete for year-end awards. Inspired to try dressage after attending the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, she made her Second Level debut last fall on her 13-year-old Quarter Horse gelding, A Cash Vantage (aka Casey). "He was a wonderful hunter, but he just blossomed in dressage—this is the job he likes," says Williams. "Casey's out of a halter bloodline, so he should really be standing at the end of a lead shank in the halter ring, not doing Second Level dressage!"

Williams concedes that, for many, warmbloods are still the breed of choice in the dressage arena. "But, I found Amber Clark, a trainer who liked Casey.



Courtesy, Teena Middleton

Teena Middleton rides her Mysterious Detail (Paris).

Amber told me, 'A nice horse is a nice horse. It doesn't matter what breed it is.' And three people came up to me after my ride at the Region 3 Championships in Georgia and said they were so excited to finally see someone out there competing and doing well on a Quarter Horse. I call them the golden retrievers of horses," she chuckles.

The AQHA program has prompted Williams to seek out approved dressage shows. "Knowing that Casey could finally get points on his record was a huge motivator," she says. High scores in two shows earned him an AQHA Register of Merit award in 2010. "He's also AQHA Incentive Fund-nominated, so every point that I earn is worth \$30. My goal for 2011 is to get my USDF bronze medal. Hopefully, by late summer/early fall, we'll be moving into Third Level."

Despite their enthusiasm for the new program, some Quarter Horse owners say they've had trouble finding AQHA-approved dressage shows to enter. Riders have approached show secretaries and offered to pay the \$50 necessary to get shows AQHA-sanctioned, while others

have stepped forward to foot the cost of the judges' memberships to fulfill the AQHA requirement that the USEF/USDF-licensed judges officiating these classes be current AQHA members.

Quarter Horse trainer and dressage rider Lynn Palm worked for more than a decade to help make dressage a recognized discipline within the AQHA. She recognizes that the program is still in its infancy. "In Florida a few of us got sponsors to pay the approval fees and the judges' memberships," she explains. But Palm says she's also heard from judges who've expressed concern that joining one association and not another could make them appear to have a breed bias.

Alex Ross, the AQHA's director of judges, explains, "Our longtime policy is that AQHA specialized judges have to be members. To be consistent with the requirement of judges from other disciplines, [we] voted to require the same from dressage judges."

Some riders worry about the program's viability if the judge's membership requirement is not dropped. The AQHA's Valerie Smith said they are

working out the kinks. "We've had a lot of requests to drop the judge's fees," she says, "but a rule must be in place for two years before it can be changed."

Proponents also express concern that the AQHA isn't doing enough to promote the program. "They've got to help it get some legs these first few years or it's just going to wither on the vine," Michelle Williams contends.

"Maybe we're just not big enough in numbers yet. I'll continue to show dressage no matter



Beatrice Rosenbaum

Victoria Rea rides Jacs Sliding Rocket.

what the AQHA does, and I'll continue to buy Quarter Horses. I would just love for my horse to be recognized by the breed association for his accomplishment, especially because there are so few horses that have gotten up to the level he has."

"It's definitely still in its baby stage," Palm says of the program, "but I see an exciting marriage." Palm, who first began riding Quarter Horses in the 1970s, says she appreciates the breed for a myriad of reasons: "As a trainer, I like their trainability and temperament, and as a competitor, I find them easy and docile. I'd like for them to think 'forward' more," she notes with a laugh, "but they have smooth gaits and are hassle-free. I think the Quarter Horse can really grow in the dressage world," Palm adds. "Now people are accepting dressage as a foundation for any breed of horse and any riding discipline."

Now that she's dipped her toe into the dressage pond, Teena Middleton isn't turning back. "I'm hooked now," she says. "We're going to try a musical freestyle this year. I'd like to do it at the Quarter Horse shows to try to get people excited about dressage. I hope this encourages those who are intimidated about competing against the warmbloods to go on and make that move up to the [licensed] shows." 🐾



Courtesy, Lynn Palm

Lynn Palm rides Larks Home Run, a 5-year-old AQHA stallion by Rugged Lark (owned by Amy Grabe). He was 2010 USDF All-Breeds Reserve Champion Quarter Horse at Training and First Levels.