

Uni Griffon Regains His Groove In Ocala

By: Kat Netzler



*Lisa Marie Fergusson's mount jumps to the top of the CCI** to cap off a year of rebuilding.*

It's been an up-and-down season for Lisa Marie Fergusson, but she ended on a high note with a dressage-score win in the Florida CCI** at the Florida Horse Park in Ocala. The Langley, B.C., rider led the victory gallop on her advanced mount Uni Griffon the weekend of Nov. 14-16.

Fergusson's Florida win was a pleasant end to a year peppered with uncertainty. Last year her 10-year-old Welsh Cob-Thoroughbred was a prospect for the Canadian Olympic team, but an accident over the winter squelched that possibility. While schooling an open water at a show jumping clinic in San Diego, "Uni" stumbled on the deeply-angled pavement at the bottom and took a nasty fall.

"I'm sure he didn't understand he was supposed to jump over the whole thing," Fergusson explained. "As soon as we got up, we went and did it again and he felt fine through the rest of the clinic. I didn't think very much about it, but [later] I found out that there was a bit more work to be done than I'd originally thought."

Determined to avoid water, Uni struggled in his spring events and was eliminated at the Jersey Fresh CCI*** (N.J.) in May. So Fergusson took a different tack, spending the summer months in Minnesota and turning Uni out in a field of Quarter Horse broodmares. She dropped him all the way back to preliminary and brought him back up slowly.

“It was a good mental break for both of us,” she said. “That’s why, when things started coming together again in Minnesota, I figured the best bet for me would be to try to stay away from all the pressures of a big barn in Florida and to try to do things on my own.”

Fergusson, 26, now rides with Leslie Law about once a week. She says Uni, who has a higher, Welsh-inspired head carriage, benefits from Law’s teaching style, which works to improve her horse’s natural way of going rather than attempting to change it.

“I had one show jump lesson with Leslie last spring and with the exception of [the Kentucky Classique (in September)], where he was sick, that horse hasn’t pulled a show jump rail ever since,” Fergusson said.

And it was Uni’s show jumping skill that earned him the win in Ocala, as Fergusson posted the only double-clear round in the division. With a solid dressage score of 44.7 and a confident, clear cross-country round, the pair show jumped in third place, but neither second-placed Buck Davidson nor leader Karen O’Connor could duplicate their faultless performance.

“Leslie has helped me approach a course like that, where I would tend to be nervous and want to add strides,” Fergusson said. “He’s helped me focus on carrying a steady rhythm and a little bit longer stride length than I would usually do, and it helped the course flow a lot better for me.”

Fergusson hopes to bring Uni back out at advanced in the spring but is in no hurry to rush the horse she bought as a 2-day-old colt. A decade ago she went to visit a fellow Pony Clubber’s farm to see her parents’ new foals, and the attraction was instantaneous.

“I was out in the field with him, and it was just one of those moments where the hair on the back of your neck stands up and you know you have to have that horse,” Fergusson explained.

She now owns Uni’s 3-year-old full brother and 4-year-old half brother as well. All three are in Ocala with her, as well as Bear Paw Confetti, an Appaloosa gelding she’s campaigning at preliminary for a friend from Fargo, N.D. He placed sixth in the open preliminary division in Ocala.

“I’m really lucky that I get to just do what I love and ride,” she said.

A Smart Second

O'Connor was among the crowd of riders disappointed by a rail down in show jumping on Sunday. But her second-placed finish was still impressive, considering she took over the ride on That's Smart, a 9-year-old New Zealand Thoroughbred gelding, just last month when Richard Thompson bought the horse.

"Smarty" pulled the front rail at an oxer in the final line on course, which rode in either six or seven strides.

"He was trying very hard to win," O'Connor said. "He was giving me a great ride, and I got into a bit of a muddle stupidly. He had a bit of a cut in his mouth from the day before, and when I went to use my reins in the line he dropped behind me, and then I was off my stride and ended up backwards to the liverpool."

O'Connor was "excited" about Smarty's performance, even if she wished she'd been able to get a win for Thompson. With his late wife Vita, Thompson has owned many of O'Connor's top mounts over the years, including Biko and Upstage.

"At Middleburg [Horse Trials (Va.) in late September] 'Dick' came to me and said that he'd really like to get back involved with the upper levels and would be interested in getting another horse," O'Connor said. "The next week, Amy [Tryon] came to me and said, 'I'm going to have to sell Smarty.' So with that in mind, I went back to Dick and said, 'I know it's only been a week, but I think I may have found you the horse!' "

Thompson and O'Connor vetted the horse immediately after Tryon's dressage test at the Fair Hill CCI** (Md.) in October, and the sale went through in time to withdraw Smarty before cross-country so that O'Connor could ride him herself in the Ocala two-star.

Tryon imported Smarty last spring, and O'Connor got to know the 16.3-hand gray gelding while Tryon was based with her on the East Coast throughout the year.

Bred by Joanne Bridgman in New Zealand, Smarty is a full brother to one of Polly Stockton's current mounts, and is out of a Brilliant Invader mare. Brilliant Invader also sired Blyth Tait's 1998 World Champion and 1996 Olympic champion, Ready Teddy. Smarty was therefore a talented prospect, but with two young three-star horses in her barn, Tryon made the tough decision to sell him this fall for financial reasons.

O'Connor said she received an ecstatic voicemail from New Zealand when Bridgman learned she'd gotten the ride on Smarty. She also kept in touch with Tryon over the weekend.

"Amy's really excited about it, and she knows Dick really well, so it's a happy story for everybody," she said.

"There's no question that he's a really special horse," O'Connor continued. "He has ability, but more than just ability, he has rideability. He's a real gentleman. He allows you to ask anything you want of him, and he's more than happy to oblige."

Spectators at Ocala were also surprised and pleased to see O'Connor's Olympic mount, Mandiba, stretching his legs around the preliminary course. They placed third in the open division.

"He's had a great holiday, so he's a little fat right now," she said, laughing. "But he got off the island for the weekend. I took some time faults on the cross-country, but he jumped it beautifully. You can just call me a granny. It's a little early in the 2009 season, since it's not even 2009 yet, to put my foot down and ask him to go galloping around, even if it's only at preliminary speed. But he enjoyed it."

And, a special treat for Theodore O'Connor devotees, Karen also competed "Teddy's" full sister, Louisiana Catahoula, in the novice division for owner and breeder P. Wynn Norman.

"She's much smaller than Teddy," O'Connor said of the bay mare. "But it's uncanny how similar some of their mannerisms are. I'm quite realistic about her size and what we would inevitably ask of her, but she's a really nice little horse and I'll be happy to run her in some more novices this winter."

All Locked Up

Jessica Schultz led the CCI* from start to finish with her 6-year-old off-the-track Thoroughbred Lock N' Load, adding just one rail in show jumping to their dressage score of 41.1.

Schultz, 23, gallops race horses for Dogwood Stable in Aiken, S.C., in the mornings, so when she found the young gelding near Boston three years ago, she didn't hesitate to buy him without even trying him under saddle.

“They basically pulled him out of the stall and we looked at his conformation, then they chased him around the ring so we could watch him move, and that was it,” Schultz said. “Re-training wasn’t a big [concern] to me. We just liked his general attitude and how he’s built.”

Lock N’ Load raced 17 times and won only twice, but Schultz’ choice to make him an eventer has already proved fortuitous. The 16.1-hand dark bay gelding is a flashy mover and “actually comes to shows and generally is better than he is at home,” according to his rider. “When he goes in the ring, he gets very light in the bridle and very responsive.”

Originally from Colorado, Schultz has been based on the East Coast for the past five years riding with Lynn Coates-Holmes. In the summer she goes north to Massachusetts, but right now she’s pursuing a degree in nursing at the University of South Carolina in Aiken.

Schultz was proud to have a special audience in Ocala for her one-star win—her parents flew in from Colorado and were on hand to witness a turning point in their daughter’s partnership. A bit change on cross-country helped her strike a new balance with her exuberant former race horse.

“I was pretty excited,” she said. “I’ve been struggling for a while with control and adjustability. He wanted to take the bit and run. I came through the finish line at our last event just exhausted from fighting the whole time. So I tried a Mikmar this weekend and loved it. He was so light. He was fabulous.”

Schultz said her horse felt a bit tired on Sunday, but he jumped particularly well on the main arena’s synthetic footing. Their low dressage score afforded enough of a cushion to maintain the lead even with one rail down.

“As much free time as I have, I definitely want to put it into him,” Schultz said. “He’s my only horse. I’m looking toward intermediate next year, but he’s only 6, and I want to take my time with this one. He’s fancy now, but when he puts it all together he’s going to be really fancy.”