

American Dressage Legends: Gifted

Meet the first horse inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame

By Jennifer O. Bryant

Name a horse Gifted? He'd better be good. Gifted wasn't good. He was great.

The flashy bay 1980 Hanoverian gelding (Garibaldi II – Lola, Lombard) with the enormous movement and range was the first modern American equine dressage superstar. With own-

first medal, a bronze, since 1976.

Gifted had a lot to do with America's finally getting taken seriously by the Europeans as a dressage power. Bigger isn't always better in dressage, but not in Gifted's case. Everything about him—size, heft, stride length, wide blaze, four splashy white knee-high stockings—said *Notice me* at a time when the dres-

Lavell, Loxahatchee, FL, credits her longtime coach, Michael Poulin, with helping her to achieve success with Gifted. Lavell found the horse as an untrained four-year-old in a German dealer's yard. The two went to work, and Gifted earned his first USDF Horse of the Year title at Second Level. He would go on to earn four more Horse of the Year awards, culminating in 1991 at Grand Prix.

In 1989, the year after winning the HOY title at Intermediate I, Lavell and Gifted made their Grand Prix debut on the European dressage circuit. Shortly thereafter, Gifted won an individual gold medal at the North American Dressage Championships in Canada.

In 1990, Gifted placed eleventh at the inaugural FEI World Equestrian Games. He became the first American horse to win the Grand Prix at the Hermès International Dressage Show in Goodwood, England. At the 1992 Volvo Dressage World Cup Final, Gifted placed fourth. And then they capped 1992 with that historic Olympic team bronze. Two years later, at the 1994 World Equestrian Games in The Hague, Gifted helped the US team bring home another bronze medal.

In 1997, just shy of his seventeenth birthday, Gifted was euthanized due to the effects of what Lavell called an undiagnosed neurologic disease. That same year, the USDF inducted Gifted into its Hall of Fame.

As is customary, USDF Hall of Fame inductees or their representatives are interviewed for the historical record. Before the induction ceremony in 1997, Carol Lavell reminisced about the once-in-a-lifetime equine partner who danced her into dressage legend.



LARGER THAN LIFE: Gifted and Carol Lavell charge to team bronze at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games

er and rider Carol Lavell in the irons, the supersized (17.3 hands) Gifted dominated US dressage in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1992, at the peak of his powers, Gifted placed sixth individually at the Barcelona Olympic Games and led the US dressage squad to its

sage world wasn't paying the US much notice. Gifted's extended trot and flying changes made mincemeat of the diagonal, and spectators' jaws dropped. At the height of his career, Lavell reportedly refused blank checks as other nations tried unsuccessfully to buy him.

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BOB LANGRISH

When Carol Lavell heard about the “big, unbroken four-year-old” in Ulrich Kassellmann’s barn in Germany, she knew she needed to take a look. Hof Kassellmann is world-renowned as a source of top-quality dressage horses (as a modern reference, it’s where Akiko Yamazaki and Steffen Peters found Peters’ current Grand Prix mount, Legolas 92).

The then-unnamed Hanoverian gelding didn’t make a winning first impression. “He was unfriendly to be around. He bit and he kicked,” Lavell recalled. But he came from “very famous bloodlines”—and “he came with enormous self-carriage. Big horses don’t normally move like that.” In Gifted’s size and heft, “He was a throwback to traditional German breeding. He looked like he might be one, too, except when he moved.”

Lavell bought him. Then she had to figure out what to call him. The Hanoverian registry dictates that the offspring’s name begins with the same letter as that of the sire—so “he had to be a G. I saw ‘gifted’ in the dictionary. I thought, well, Gifted sounds like a good name.”

The name choice startled Lavell’s German colleagues, who wondered why she wanted to name her horse Poisonous (“Gift” means poison in German). She assured them that it has a much nicer meaning in English.

When Lavell got Gifted home, she found that he was “easy to break. He never bucked in his whole career or ran away. If he ran, it was because he was afraid.” At the same time, “He was always going. Where was the fire?”

Gifted’s movement was so big that “I was not able to canter him for a long time because he needed big open spaces,” Lavell said. Even in Kassellmann’s huge indoor arena in Germany, she said, she was unable to get the gelding to do more than trot.

Although Gifted was never snuggly, “he got friendlier as time went on,” Lavell said. Still, “he didn’t want anybody in his stall; didn’t want to be groomed.” Her horse never had much of a nickname, but occasionally she’d

call him Snapper after his habit of clacking his teeth together to indicate his displeasure with some human interaction or another.

Gifted was unusual in several ways. One was his weight. “There are other 17.3-hand horses,” said Lavell, but most don’t tip the scales at 1,900 pounds. The horse was so massive that “KLM put him on a three-horse pallet. He was expensive to ship.”

Another was the contrast between his appearance and his abilities, which posed something of a training challenge to Lavell.

“One thing that was difficult for me to learn: A horse with a long back, higher behind than in front, [and a] short neck should be more difficult to collect, according to the principles of conformation. It was the opposite with Gifted. Gifted could get himself off the ground any way you wanted him to. He was a lady’s horse despite his enormous weight. He did not require the strength of your arms and legs and seat; nor did he require a whip or spurs. That was more special to me than anything.”

“He’s not a wrestler-type athlete,” Lavell said. “I’d compare him to a Michael Jordan [the legendary basketball player]—all those muscles but the ability to get up in the air and fly.” And fly he did: Huge, gravity-defying flying changes later became one of Gifted’s signature movements.

Gifted was such a willing partner that Lavell dubbed him “the volunteer dressage horse” in a tribute article.

“Submission—so important in a dressage horse,” she said. “Gifted was quite submissive at the lower levels; but at the upper levels, he didn’t like that. It was not until the later years, when the work got very hard, that he was less of a volunteer. And I don’t blame him. That was a tough job.”

Gifted taught Lavell another important lesson as a trainer. “I needed him to do it our way, but there was no way little 121-pound me was going to take a 1,900-pound animal and make him do it. Once I realized that, it began to be on his terms as well. We had a nice com-



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promise. It was a partnership. He was not a slave. He was his own person. He had his own method of expression, and you just couldn't stifle that. [He refused to] just be robot-like and mechanical in the dressage test. That's what I think made him great: He had his own way of doing things. Thank goodness it was appreciated by the judges!"

Appreciate him judges did—although it took a bit longer for the European judges to warm to the American pair.

That was another harsh lesson Lavell had to learn: "It takes a lifetime to get to the top, but it takes just a few seconds to get to the bottom. And that can happen in a dressage test."

Gifted easily climbed to the top of the US dressage ranks, winning title after title in the 1980s as he progressed through the levels. In 1989, he and Lavell embarked on their first European competition tour. At Gifted's first CDI (FEI dressage competition), in Falsterbo, Sweden, they finished last.

A pensive Lavell mused afterward, "We don't belong here; we should go home." But she soldiered on, determined to make the best of the experience.

"By the end of the tour, we were first. It was a long way up. We had a lot of help from [the late German master] Herbert Rehbein."

The other barometer of Gifted's rising star was European audiences' reactions to his performances. "Used to be, when the American flag came down center line, everyone would go get a cup of coffee and come back after the

ride was done," Lavell said. "I knew we had arrived when they would come back for Gifted."

Before long, Gifted was a bona fide draw. "Hanne Valentin, a dressage judge from Denmark, said the shows should charge admission because so many people came to see Gifted. In Europe, the audience would clap or whistle." They went particularly wild for what Lavell called Gifted's strong suit: freestyle. "Now he was doing a freestyle to *Robin Hood*, streaking across the diagonal in extended trot to big charge music. The audience was cheering so loudly, I couldn't hear the music."

Before Gifted's popularity took hold, "I was sleeping on the floor of my horse van, eating out of my cooler," Lavell recalled. "There were no sponsorships back then. Organizations began to help because Gifted was so popular. He was so different from the other horses. He was so much fun to watch."

Yet detractors persisted. "One coach said, 'Carol, that horse will never win a medal with you riding.' And that's when I decided that no one would get Gifted. He was going to be ours." She refused to sell.

That bit of Yankee stubbornness (Lavell was a Vermonter for years) turned out to be the best possible decision for American dressage.

In 1992, Lavell and Gifted anchored the US Olympic dressage team in Barcelona, Spain. It was the era of German and Dutch dressage domination; no other country had proven able to match such competitors as Nicole Uphoff on Rembrandt, Isabell Werth on

Gigolo, and Anky van Grunsven on Bonfire. The other nations in the scrum "were all trying to make third place," Lavell said.

Teammates Robert Dover on Lec-tron, Charlotte Bredahl on Monsieur, and Michael Poulin—Lavell's coach—on Graf George had already ridden the Grand Prix and the Grand Prix Special (the GP Freestyle would not be introduced in Olympic competition until 1996).

Lavell recounted: "I was the last of the riders on the second day. It came down to Gifted's ride. I needed a test that was nearly 100 points higher than I had ever gotten. I came out and I rode my test. I saw the score, and I realized we had won the bronze medal.

"I have only one wish: to go back in time and ride the test again and see how it felt. I can see it on the videotape, but it's hard to remember because of the pressure."

Two years later, in 1994, Gifted helped bring home another team bronze medal at the FEI World Equestrian Games in The Hague. It would be his last major international win.

To Lavell's astonishment, after the great horse died in 1997, friends and fans established the Gifted Fund at The Dressage Foundation.

"It's one of the most active scholarship funds in The Dressage Foundation," said Lavell. Through the Gifted Fund, adult-amateur riders can obtain funding to further their dressage educations.

"It's a very special remembrance," Lavell said. "He has helped more riders get more education to better train their horses. He left quite a gift." ▲

Learn more about the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame at usdf.org/halloffame.

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