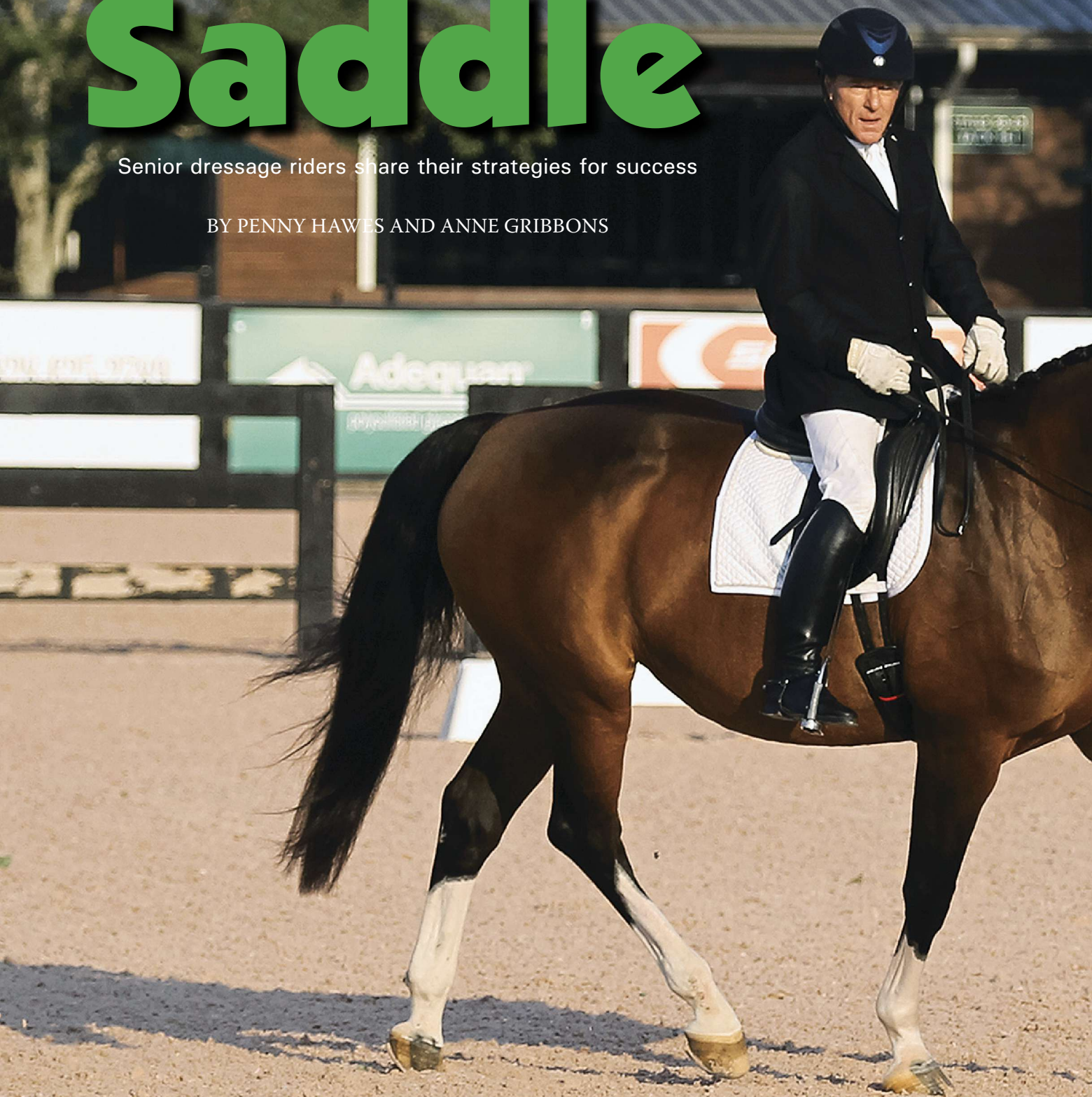


# Still in the Saddle

Senior dressage riders share their strategies for success

BY PENNY HAWES AND ANNE GRIBBONS



*GREAT ADVENTURE: Having discovered horses and dressage later in life, adult-amateur rider John Boyle (pictured aboard Suzetta K; a former jumper) has fully embraced the sport and the active lifestyle*

SHARON PACKER



When the pioneering feminist Gloria Steinem famously said, “This is what forty looks like,” she had no way of knowing that the age bar would continue to rise steadily over the next several decades. Today, nearly 45 years after the *Ms.* magazine founder’s pronouncement, 70 is the new 60 or even the new 50—and dressage riders are among those most eager to keep going for as long as they can.

When the USDF introduced its Vintage Cup awards in 1986 for riders aged 50 and older, there weren’t a lot of 70s, either on the test sheets or in the saddle. Nowadays, there are so many members earning gold medals and other awards at advanced ages that the USDF has stopped touting “oldest-ever member” success stories because the records just keep getting broken.

While many dressage enthusiasts stay in the saddle long into their retirement years, injuries and infirmities force others to hang up their spurs. *USDF Connection* wondered whether there are any common threads to the success stories. We talked to seven active senior riders—four amateurs and three famous pros—to find out.

### Success Strategy #1: Staying Active

Dressage riders obviously enjoy physical activity, but nearly all the seniors we interviewed exercise out of the saddle, as well.

Former USDF Region 8 director Fern Feldman, of Cheshire, CT, doesn’t need to attend USDF conventions any more, but when she did she was a fixture in the hotel gym, getting in early-morning workouts before the long days of meetings. Feldman, 75, an adult amateur who earned her USDF gold medal in 2012 at the age of 69, still rides nearly every day. She is also a skier and a runner who has competed in 5Ks and a few half-marathons.

Amateur riders Michelle King and John Boyle both embrace Pilates. King, 65, of Purcellville, VA, a US Equestrian “r” dressage technical delegate and the Region 1 USDF Technical Delegates Committee representative, was walking and doing water aerobics to supplement her saddle time—but her instructor, Virginia-based dressage pro and former USDF Region 1 director Alison Head, said that King was “just getting stronger in my crookedness.”

King added Pilates to her fitness regimen and now does two or three sessions a week. “Pilates is the dressage of exercises. It’s very precise and requires specific use of muscles and movement. It totally benefits your riding and really parallels dressage.”

“It’s really incredible—good for stretching, and great for your core,” says Boyle, 71, of Landrum, SC. He, too, works with a Pilates instructor two or three times a week. ⇨

A former eventer and hunter/jumper rider, Boyle credits his fitness to an active lifestyle. “We live out in the country, so the dogs get walked, the horses get ridden. Pretty much working on the farm, riding, or getting out walking the dogs—those are things I like.”

Amateur rider Deryn Stewart, of Ponca City, OK, became one of those “oldest-ever USDF members” when in 2016 she earned her USDF gold medal at the age of 73. A self-described strong rider, Stewart says of her fitness routine: “I like walking, but riding is my thing. I don’t really do anything else.”

If you’re of Vintage Cup awards age, make sure you’re healthy and fit enough to continue to ride. See “Take Good Care: Health Advice for Senior Riders” on the facing page for a gerontologist’s advice.

## Success Strategy #2: Embracing Dressage

Their passion for horses and riding—whether lifelong, acquired in midlife, or rediscovered after years out of the saddle—spurs older dressage enthusiasts to keep going. Some find their later years more conducive to riding and horse ownership, with more time to spare and more disposable in-

## Elite Senior Rider Profile: Hilda Gurney

### As told to Anne Gribbons

**H**ow do some top international dressage competitors keep going well into their later years? As someone who calls herself “in the same boat”—Gribbons is 71—she wanted to ask a few of our best-known high-performance riders whether they have any secrets to their longevity.

*Hilda says:* I started riding at age 14 and have ridden in competition for 60 years. Competition keep me sharp and on my game. I will stop when my riding isn’t up to snuff.

My favorite challenge is figuring out how to train each horse most effectively. Such fun! I ride 14 to 23 horses a day. That is about seven hours daily.

I’m in shape with no special diet, although I avoid red meat and alcohol.

I like my lifestyle and feel so lucky to live such a wonderful life.

*Hilda Gurney, 74, won team bronze at the 1976 Olympics with her legendary partner, the Thoroughbred gelding Keen. Both horse and rider are members of the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame. Gurney remains an active trainer and an award-winning sport-horse*

come, and they’re loath to give up their long-awaited dream.

Feldman was one who had to bide her time. She took weekly walk-trot lessons at age 11 but didn’t sit on a horse again until she was 45. At that point she’d lost interest in the idea of jumping and gravitated to dressage, she says.

Another who never let go of the dream was King, who “grew up loving animals in a family that did not” and rode Western at summer camp and a local stable as a child. She didn’t put a foot in the stirrup again until the summer before college, when she was able to take lessons in order to satisfy the school’s phys-ed requirement. Regular riding still eluded her, however, until after finishing law school she met some equestrians who rode in Rock Creek Park in Washington, DC. King took some lessons, went on a trail ride, and “a few years later I bought my first horse and never looked back.” Now retired, she rides four or five times a week.

Boyle didn’t ride as a child, but watching the steeplechasers at the Tryon (NC) Block House Races captured his



**NOT SLOWING DOWN:** Hilda Gurney on her homebred Luminence (by Leonidas) in 2007

*breeder at her Keenridge in Moorpark, CA. She is a founding member of the California Dressage Society and the winner of numerous championships and USDF Horse of the Year awards.*

imagination. He took some riding lessons, and “the bug bit.” After eventing for a spell he found he loved riding jumpers, but the fun came at a price.

Boyle suffered a few “life-altering accidents,” including a broken femur and what he describes as a blown-out carotid artery. Seven years ago, “My wife looked at me and said I had two life choices, and both begin with D: divorce or dressage.” So “the jumper and I had to learn to become a dressage horse and rider.” He quips: “Someone once told me that the object of riding is to keep one leg on each side of the horse. That’s much easier to do in dressage than jumpers.”

The only one of our adult amateurs to have ridden all her life is Stewart, who as a child growing up in Canada rode Western and barrel-raced. “When we moved down here [to Oklahoma], I was 21 and still running barrels and riding reining horses. Then I rode hunter/jumpers, and then dressage started in this part of the country. I’m a charter member of the Oklahoma Dressage Society. There wasn’t even dressage here when I moved here, so I’ve seen how it has evolved.”

### Success Strategy #3: Keeping the Brain Engaged

Forget the stereotype of the bored retiree who watches TV all day. Our dressage-riding seniors use their minds as well as their bodies. All say they’re avid readers, for starters.



STRAIGHT FORWARD: *Technical delegate Michelle King no longer competes in dressage, but she continues to ride regularly*

## Take Good Care: Health Advice for Senior Riders

**A**s we age, many of us fear that forgetting names or losing our keys are early warning signs of dementia. Not to worry, says University of Southern Florida gerontologist Tracy Wharton, PhD, MSc, MEd, MSW, LCSW.

“Slower processing speeds, losing keys, forgetting people’s names—that’s normal. Episodes of getting lost or disoriented aren’t normal and are hallmarks for dementia issues; however, only about ten percent of the population are going to get any kind of dementia.”

Although there’s no specific research showing that riding dressage helps with mental acuity, according to Dr. Wharton, “both the CDC [Centers for Disease Control] and the NIH [National Institutes of Health] recommend learning new things frequently as exercise for your brain. And we know physical exercise is good, along with good nutrition. Something new we’re always learning is good.”

Of course, our bodies do change as we age, and Dr. Wharton issues a few notes of caution.

“There are some biological realities that start to happen after age sixty: Our metabolism starts to change, our

bone density changes, balance and gait and processes like that do change. We all know that when we fall off a horse in our forties, we don’t quite jump up quite as quickly as we did when we were in our twenties.”

One very real concern for equestrians: medications. According to Dr. Wharton, most adults aged 65 and up take eight to 10 medications. Side effects of medications commonly prescribed for seniors may include balance problems, dizziness or vertigo, muscle weakness, or forgetfulness—and sometimes medicines don’t play well together. So it’s important to talk to your doctor about all of your medications.”

If you’re in generally good health, though, your age really may be just a number in terms of being fit and able to ride, Dr. Wharton says.

“There’s not some magic portal we go through when we turn sixty and suddenly we’re ‘older.’ In the sixties is really kind of young, still. In terms of being able to ride, if you have the muscle and leg strength, riding is actually good for balance and gait. So there’s no reason that someone in their sixties and seventies, even eighties can’t continue to ride and enjoy the sport.”

After she retired, King earned her US Equestrian technical delegate's license. In her work as a TD, she says, she's found herself putting her legal and mediation training to good use.

"There's a huge mental aspect to being a TD," King says. "The rule book is not the epitome of simplicity."

Many equestrians enjoy giving back to the horses and the sport they love through volunteering, and midlife and beyond can be optimal times for doing so. As a former USDF regional director, Feldman is no stranger to volun-

## Elite Senior Rider Profile: Christilot Hanson Boylen

As told to Anne Gribbons

I started riding when I was about 10. I rode in my first Olympics at age 17 (with special permission) in Tokyo in 1964, and went on with very few breaks until now, so that's 53 competitive years.

I've ridden in six Olympic Games and the 1980 alternate Olympics, and in four Pan American Games, including three individual gold medals. I rode about 12 "made" Grand Prix horses and have produced about 15 more, as well as a number of small-tour horses.

I have been extremely blessed my whole life with a good, strong athletic body, which I take pains to maintain. Except for a recent bout with breast cancer, I have had no major issues. I am aware that it could have been otherwise! I was blessed with a mother who was a dancer, and I spent many years helping her in classes. This background was a huge asset in learning dressage, and over the years I have tried to do 15 to 20 minutes of stretching and strengthening of the core every morning before I ride. As I get older, I really feel the need to do this daily. I try to eat well, take a vitamin supplement, and swear by a magnesium supplement daily.

Now that I am older, I must pace myself; I can't ride eight horses a day any more, nor do I want to. And I stay away from the larger, bulkier horses that are physically too much for me. Height in a horse is not a problem, but wideness and heaviness are not for me.

In some ways, my life is easier now. I have cut down on the number of horses, but I still find tremendous satisfaction in teaching my pupils, and I really enjoy my riding and training of the few horses entrusted to me. One of the pleasures in my life is also having some seriously talented riders who can absorb and carry on the training methods I was taught.

teering. Even though she's no longer on the USDF Executive Board, she remains an active volunteer, lately focusing much of her energy on Olympian Lendon Gray's Dressage4Kids programs.



CONTINUING THE TRADITION: *Boylen on the Hanoverian gelding Soccer City (by Sir Donnerhall) in 2014*

Equestrianism is a way of life. The pursuit of excellence has allowed me to see and meet some of the finest people I would ever hope to meet, in many countries around the world. And the horses! What a gift to be able to say you work with these magnificent animals!

Would I do it over again? In a heartbeat!

*Canadian Christilot Hanson Boylen, 70, studied under dressage masters including Willi Schultheis, Georg Theodorescu, Albert Stecken, and Udo Lange. On such mounts as Gaspano, Biraldo, Walldorf, and Bonheur, she won major international titles in Europe and North America in addition to her Olympic and Pan Am Games achievements. Now based in Wellington, FL, she is a well-known trainer who coached Canadians Belinda Trussell and Megan Lane at the 2015 Pan Am Games and the 2016 Olympics.*

The sport of dressage itself, Boyle has found, provides considerable mental training. “Memorizing the tests is easier when you understand the logic—what you’re doing and why, and the progression of each test. The challenges of remembering are mostly nerves before you step in the ring.”

And, of course, there are the mental-health benefits most horse lovers know and love. “When you ride it clears your mind, just like going to an analyst,” says Stewart. “You’re thinking only of the horse, and that’s very healthy.”

Boyle concurs. “As you get older, life presents its own pressures and responsibilities, but riding is a great stress reliever. It’s nice going into the barn in the evening and hearing the horses munching on their hay. It’s nice to spend a little time grooming them or whatever you want, whether that’s picking manure out of the pasture, grooming, or going for a little walk. It’s enjoyable to be with them. They’re incredible animals.”

### Success Strategy #4: Choosing the Right Horse

You don’t bounce the way you used to, and your joints and muscles may not take so kindly any more to riding a huge mover. Be realistic about any physical limitations, and find a mount that makes you look forward to your saddle time,



LIFE PARTNERS: Deryn Stewart in 2016 after earning her gold medal on a horse she raised and trained, the Hanoverian mare EMC d'Erin (by Der Radetsky)

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not intimidated or fearful, older riders advise.

“My biggest piece of advice,” says Stewart, “is to get the right horse. That is so important. It doesn’t have to be an expensive horse; it doesn’t have to be a big horse; but the temperament can’t clash. If it does, don’t be afraid to move on.”

(Not that Stewart herself is looking to “trade down,” mind you: “I think my riding’s done nothing but improve and that I’m a better rider now than I ever was. I’m still a strong rider, and I still like a horse with a lot of challenges. Now I’m working with a horse who’s the biggest challenge of any horse I’ve ever had, but I just love it.”)

Boyle’s first dressage horse, Suzetta K, is a “great mare” who was his daughter’s jumper before she married. He’s also excited about his new horse, Superman, purchased last August: “We’re formulating a new partnership, and my goal is to earn the USDF bronze medal by the end of the year.”

Feldman says that having “appropriate and wonderful horses” has played a big part in her riding journey. A sportpony enthusiast who owns two Connemaras, the petite Feldman joins in encouraging other riders to find mounts that fit them, both physically and in temperament.

## Elite Senior Rider Profile: Michael Poulin

As told to Anne Gibbons

I started riding when I was 10 with a teacher who was a student of James Fillis. I worked many years with Franz Rochowansky from the Spanish Riding School of Vienna. I’ve been competing in dressage for around 62 years. I love the horses and the pressure of competing.

I was a ballet dancer and a karate instructor for many years, but my body won’t let me do those things any more. Today my body doesn’t want to keep up with my mind; that’s the only thing that makes me slower.

I don’t do anything special to stay fit. I watch what I eat and do lots of stretching. I don’t take any special nutritional supplements other than the medications I need for my health.

There are advantages to being an older rider and trainer: lots of wisdom and understanding, greater respect for the horse, and having to take more time to do it more correctly than I did when I was young. I try to train at the speed of the horse’s acceptance and not at the speed of competition.

My horses have been my greatest teachers. I’m the most happy when I’m with a horse.

What would make me stop riding is death.

## Success Strategy #5: Setting Goals and Continuing to Learn

The senior riders we talked to put a new spin on the old saw about riding off into the sunset. They intend to stay in the saddle for as long as they can, and they want to continue learning and improving their dressage skills.

King believes that it’s important to do exercises outside of riding that “directly translate into keeping your body strong and supple to ride. Try to keep riding regularly, and set goals that are realistic to your situation. Make them incremental goals, and make them achievable. If I can achieve a square halt, I’m happy.”

These “vintage” equestrians agree that the physical and mental challenges of dressage have helped them remain fit,



HAPPY PLACE: Poulin in the saddle aboard Thor M, a KWPN gelding by Mirakel, at the 2016 Adequan® Global Dressage Festival (FL)

Michael Poulin, 72, was a member of the bronze-medal-winning 1992 US Olympic dressage team, riding Graf George, a horse he trained. He has developed numerous other horses to the Grand Prix level, including Watch Me, Lighten Up Jack, and Duke of Earl. Among his best-known students are fellow 1992 Olympian Carol Lavell and his own daughters, Gwen and Kate. In 2012 Poulin was inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame; Graf George was inducted in 2000. With his wife, Sharon, Poulin owns and operates The Dressage Center in DeLeon Springs, FL.

active, and engaged. There's truth to the famous quote "The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man," Boyle says.

"It's been a great adventure and a great life." ▲

*Penny Hawes is a writer, rider, and chronic volunteer from Virginia. You can catch her blogging at [thehorseylife.com/DF](http://thehorseylife.com/DF).*

USDF Connection editorial advisor Anne Gribbons is an FEI 5\* dressage judge; a former US national dressage technical advisor; and an international competitor, trainer, and coach. She is a popular Chronicle of the Horse columnist, and selected columns were compiled into her 2014 book, *Collective Remarks*. Gribbons, of Chuluota, FL, will serve as the head of the ground jury at this year's FEI World Equestrian Games dressage competition in Tryon, NC.



**JUST MY SIZE:** It's especially important for older riders to feel safe and comfortable on their horses, says former USDF Region 8 director Fern Feldman (pictured with her 11-year-old Connemara gelding, Duncan)

### Podcast Alert



Listen to an interview with senior rider Janne Rumbough on episode 73 at [usdf.podbean.com](http://usdf.podbean.com).



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