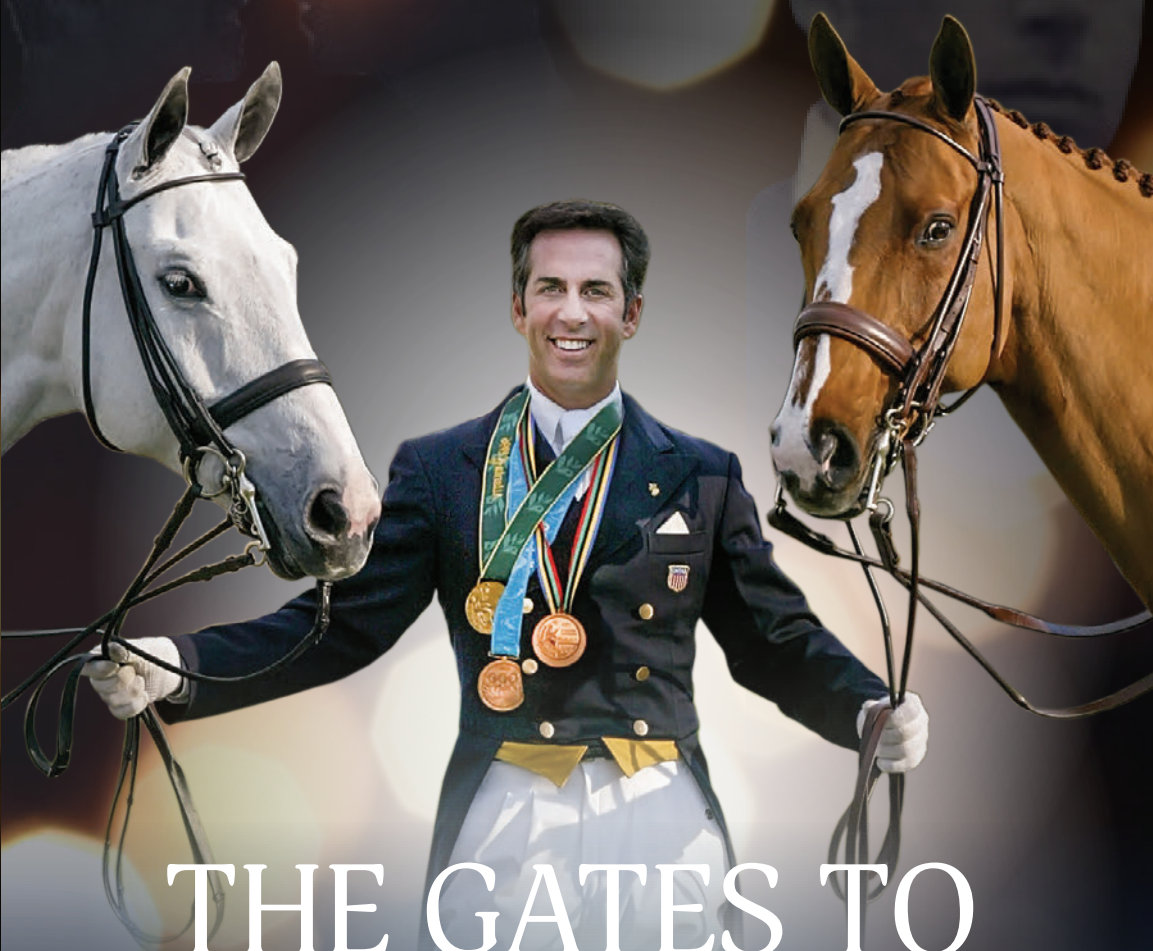


"An inspiration to anyone, equestrian or not." —Tami Hoag

ROBERT DOVER



THE GATES TO BRILLIANCE

How a Gay, Jewish, Middle-Class Kid Who Loved
Horses Found Success

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FOREWORD

IX

PREFACE

XIII

CHAPTER 1

Childhood Games

Living with Purpose by Defining Your Passion

1

CHAPTER 2

Getting Lost to Find My Way

Producing a Roadmap to Your Goal

13

CHAPTER 3

The Yellow Brick Road

Following the Right System

23

CHAPTER 4

A Rather Silly Sport

Focus, Patience, Humor, and Humility

33

CHAPTER 5

Scars on My Heart

Loss, Mourning, Grief, and Grace

57

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CHAPTER 6

Beauty, Death, and OCD

Facing Down Fear

97

CHAPTER 7

Going Off Course

Embracing the Art of Failure

111

CHAPTER 8

Brilliance Lives on the Edge

Establishing and Expanding Confidence

131

CHAPTER 9

Jump into the Great Lake

Surrounding Yourself with Good People

147

CHAPTER 10

Touch Your Toes

Maintaining Physical Health and Well-Being

163

CHAPTER 11

Say What You Need

Communication and Getting Professional Help

181

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CHAPTER 12

Think of It as Rain

Finding Love and Giving It Back

191

CHAPTER 13

One Good Thing

Being of Service and Paying It Forward

225

CHAPTER 14

Be a Star not a Victim

Making Every Single Day a Joyful, Fabulous Adventure

239

CHAPTER 15

Memories and Drinking Stories

Being Conscious of and Thankful for Every Revelation

245

DOVERISMS

255

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

265

INDEX

267

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Going Off Course



The Art of Failure




7


CHAPTER

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When I moved to Germany in 1986, it was in the dead of winter after what for me was an enormous failure—placing thirty-seventh that summer at the World Championships in Toronto. I had received an incredible invitation that seemed too good to be true from Olympic Gold medalist Gabriela Grillo, to come to her farm with my horse Federleicht. Gabby had extended the invitation to David, my boyfriend at that time, and also a dressage rider. We could live for practically nothing in one of the two gatehouses on her estate, and she helped us secure stalls for the five other horses, owned by clients, who came with me on this great adventure. It seemed



fortuitous that I had just won the spot to compete in the upcoming World Cup Finals in Essen, Germany, which was to take place a couple of weeks after our arrival. With such a perfect plan and such goodwill behind me, how could I not succeed?

After a very long day, flying with seven horses and our two Jack Russell Terriers, Half-Halt and Pirouette, overseas, we arrived in the town of Mülheim an der Ruhr, about an hour outside of Düsseldorf, in the middle of the night. Unfortunately, the van driver could not find the Grillo farm. (In 1986, there were no cell phones with GPS.) We rode up a number of long and winding driveways that ended up being the wrong address before finally stopping at the entrance of the Red Cross, where the driver asked for the directions to Stal (Stables) Grillo.

David and I were exhausted as we unloaded the equally tired animals, along with equipment, feed, hay, and basically all of our belongings, into the barn aisle. We did as we were directed through our interpreter (the driver) and at the command of Stallmeister (Stable Master) Luke, who we had not-so-gently awakened with our late arrival. Once the horses were set for the night, Meister Luke sent us with our driver and personal belongings back to one of the two identical gatehouses near the front entrance of the farm. However, unlike the perfectly furnished and appointed home across the driveway—which Gabby used for her trainer, General Paul Stecken, when he came each week to teach her—our apartment was almost completely devoid of furniture, save for a mattress on the floor in one bedroom and a small television with antenna “ears” to catch the three channels available in Germany at that time. Still, it was warm, had cold and hot running water, and was to be our home for the foreseeable future. I was determined to learn how to be a “winner” in the biggest arenas of the world and had made a commitment to myself that I would not return to America until I had succeeded in doing so. I did not care how long it might take or how much I would have to sacrifice; I was determined.

The morning after our arrival, having fed and taken care of our horses, we met up with Gabby, who greeted us with a hug and took us to her home, otherwise known as “Landhaus Grillo,” to meet her mother. The house reminded me of a set from the prime-time soap opera *Dynasty*—sort of a less-antiquated version of a castle. Frau Grillo was sitting in a beautiful, wing-backed chair, her hair silver-blue and pulled back in a knot. She welcomed us, said she hoped we would enjoy our time in her country, and announced that this would be the last time we heard English, so if we wished to keep eating, we would need to learn German.

Over the next ten days, I prepared for the World Cup Finals with the help of Gabby and General Stecken. To be honest, I probably gained the most information from Stallmeister Luke, who had spent decades grooming and being the eyes on the ground for Gabby and others before her. For sure, Gabby and the General watched Federleicht and me and had valuable pointers, but Meister Luke would do his best to convey in *slow* German and hand signals that my horse needed to be more through and on the aids and forward-thinking through my tests. As much as I was trying to make my horse more electric, he just felt listless and unlike himself, and I was alarmed when I came into the barn and saw that Feder’s legs were all very swollen from the knees and hocks down to his feet. I immediately asked the number for the vet, but again, Meister Luke came to the rescue, explaining that he saw such behavioral and physical changes all the time when horses came in from a different climate and their grain and hay was changed.

Sure enough, Feder was back to normal a couple of days later. Normal...but still not forward-thinking or electric enough to be brilliant. When we competed in the World Cup Finals, we landed in eleventh place out of the thirteen riders entered.

Failure!

The following week, General Stecken took me aside, with Gabby standing by, and told me that I would never be able to do my horse justice, and that the best thing I could do for Federleicht was to sell him to Gabby so that she could bring him to his potential. I was devastated to stand before this great trainer and hear him say that I was not good enough for the horse I had trained since he was three years old and on whom I'd represented my country. Holding back tears, I told the General that I had already entered several spring shows, in which I and my student, Hector Rodriguez of Colombia, were planning to compete.

"If I don't do any better by the end of our spring tour," I said, struggling to compose myself, "I will sell Federleicht to Gabby."

With that, General Stecken and Gabby walked away, and I finally broke down and quietly cried in a way I thought would go unnoticed, but Meister Luke had been listening around the corner and gave me a look that said, "Pull yourself together. It's going to be all right."

Over the next few days, I trained with Meister Luke on the side, saying, "Good!" or "Again!" and after a week, things really felt better. I also had the great fortune to meet a young lady named Petra Kasseberg (later, Hofmann), who rode at Gestut Eschenbruek, where I kept the other horses I had brought to Europe. She had heard I was looking for help to take with me on my "European tour" (the series of competitions I'd entered with the intent of gaining international experience and recognition) and was very enthusiastic about coming with me. I explained that I was pretty poor, even though people who did not know me thought that my being in Europe with seven horses must be evidence that I was born into great wealth like so many others in my sport. Petra didn't care—she bubbled with enthusiasm and said she would help me with everything and anything I needed. She began grooming for me the next day and quickly became my "Number One": She was a super ground person and trainer, seeing as she was a *Bereiter*—a certified horse trainer and riding

instructor in Germany. In other words, Petra was *way* overqualified for the job, but it seemed she liked me right away, just as I liked her, and was determined to go on this adventure with me.

I was gaining confidence daily as my student Hector Rodriguez, his wife Diana, and I set off on my first major European tour. Petra rode in the van with the horses to ensure all were safe and taken care of on the road. We had chosen three shows that would start in Lipica, which was in the former Yugoslavia (now Slovenia) and where the famous Lipizzaner stallions truly came from (a fact I had not known). The show was actually held at the Lipizzaner Stud Farm, which dated back to the fifteenth century and still bred pure Lipizzaners and trained their riders to perform for the public, just like the Spanish Riding School in Vienna.

Federleicht and I placed third in the Grand Prix in Lipica, which was a major boost to my confidence. I had been working very hard on the basics with him and it carried over into the show arena, as it should. The following day, in the Special, we placed third again, out of thirty-two combinations! The class was won by Christine Stückelberger, the famous Swiss rider who had won Olympic Gold and many medals since the early seventies. Suddenly, I began to feel a sense of assuredness flooding through me, and with it came both relaxation and increased drive to be not second, but the winner!

Christine, however, had been a great champion for over a decade, and there was no way the next day that anything would stop her. Federleicht and I ended in second place in the Freestyle (the test to music). I was so proud, not only for proving to myself and others that I was, in fact, an international rider on my way up, but that I was also a promising coach, having trained Hector, who placed a very respectable ninth in the class.

My happiness grew as I made new friends from various countries, who now no longer looked down on me as “that stupid American rider” but rather showed admiration for my skills and harmonious connection with my beloved Feder.

On the last day of the show, the head judge, Wolfgang Niggli of Switzerland, strolled up to me as I was standing on the hill overlooking the arena one last time and said, “Robert, I have to compliment you on your new Freestyle. Everything about it, from the choreography to the music, is so much better than what you did a month ago at the World Cup Finals! Well done!”

I was quiet for a second before replying, “Thank you very much, Mr. Niggli.”

As I walked back to the barn to pack up in preparation for our next competition, I smiled. You see, I had not made one single change to my Freestyle since the World Cup, *including* the music and choreography! I had made so much real headway in the last few weeks that Feder’s fluid and mistake-free ride to the exact same music was unrecognizable.

What happened after my Lipica results led me to two observations: First, being technically correct and showing the confidence that stems from having really done your homework makes others gravitate toward you in very positive and sometimes rather remarkable ways. Second, music, dressage, and art in general, being subjective, can create a situation in which being “in sync” with the rhythm and “harmonious-looking” is all you need to earn high scores. I used to say that I could take a trash can lid and a stick to beat out a rhythm, and as long as I hummed a few notes while riding a clean test exactly to the rhythm of my pounding, the judges would say they loved my music. That has changed to a degree over time as more judges have become better educated, but it is still up to each to decide if he likes one piece of music over another and if he feels it fits the horse and rider being judged.

After my early successes, I built up a large clientele of great students and friends, and at one point, had seventy horses in my barn. One of those

clients was the McPhail family: Mary Anne, Walter, and their daughter Melinda. I loved all three of them (and still do!) and taught mother and daughter on their horses, including a nine-year-old gelding named Waltzertakt, nicknamed “Walter” and sometimes not-so-lovingly referred to by his alter ego, “Crazy Walter.” He was a beautiful horse and actually quite talented, which I found out the first time I tried him. He also had a very short fuse that, once lit, could go off and bring out an animal that not only could do things to hurt you, but lacking any sense of self-preservation, could kill himself in the process!

Walter could be really very sweet and began learning the Grand Prix quite quickly. He even started to show signs of becoming an international winner—of sorts. The problem was that at any moment, almost anything could set him off, and the kind of rampage that might ensue was anyone’s guess. (He would go on to win not one but two Grand Prix National Championships at Gladstone and was nominated to our World Championships Team in Stockholm in 1990. On the way to that, however, were shows that I will never forget, even if I tried—and believe me, I have tried!)

Walter was one of the seven horses I took to Germany in the winter of 1986. The McPhails had placed great deal of trust in me to allow me to take their horse, and of course I did my best to keep expenses for them, and for all my clients, as low as possible. One way to do that was to fly the horses in single-stall containers, three abreast, to Frankfurt, Germany, on Lufthansa airline. Not having flown with horses before, I had no idea as to whether this arrangement was more or less safe than the usual double stall containers, but I knew it was a hell of a lot cheaper. I put Walter between two other horses, one traveling with me and one who was with someone else but made up the third spot in our container. David and I were on the flight with my dogs, Half-Halt and Pirouette, and all was quiet.

After landing we had to wait what seemed like an eternity before airline staff began to unload the containers on their pallets, using forklifts

to lower them to the ground. I remained in the sectioned-off front of the container to comfort my two horses as we were moved, to little effect—something about the way the container began to shake during the process set “Crazy Walter” off and calm turned quickly into a nightmare. He pulled back, almost to the point of lying down, but feeling the pull from the two lines connecting his halter to the bars at the front of the stall, he then leapt forward, practically jumping into the front of the container with me. Again and again he went backward and then flung himself forward, hitting his head on the top of the container and striking me with his hooves as he got his legs over the front of the divider where I cowered. It took several minutes before we were finally on the ground. Both the horse and I were bleeding, and there was no doubt that Walter needed immediate medical care. A horse ambulance was summoned, and off he went with a handler to the closest equine hospital. Luckily, I only had a few bad scrapes, but I was badly shaken, nevertheless.

Walter recovered and went back to work, but not without drama. There was a brown sliding door at the far end of the indoor arena, through which the tractor could come to rake the footing. It rained practically every day in our area of Germany, and for some reason, the inside of that sliding door would get a dark splotch in the middle from moisture condensation. Well, that was enough for “Crazy Walter.” He would stop halfway down the arena and refuse to go anywhere near it. It became so bad that one day when the vet was there to inoculate horses, I dismounted while schooling the gelding and asked the vet to take a look at his eyes. I wondered if perhaps he had cataracts or some other partial blindness and felt terrible that it was a possibility, given the trauma that he had endured. After a careful look, however, and with a sort of a chuckle that made me know he was partly joking, the vet handed me back the reins and declared Walter had nothing wrong with his eyes that a good spanking could not cure!

Rats!

In the spring of 1988, I had a nice show scheduled in Paris, in the famous Bois de Boulogne park. The stables had been set on the other side of a very busy downtown street. The local *gendarmes* were there all day and evening to assure riders, grooms, and horses could cross without issues from ongoing traffic.

Or so I thought.

That afternoon, I rode Walter up to the intersection where the police were stationed and ready to stop traffic. The horse took one look at the white painted stripes of the crosswalk and reared up, then bolted back toward the barn. I managed to stop him after several strides and turned back around toward the crosswalk as Petra came running to help. We both thought she could take the reins and lead us across the street to the park, but Crazy Walter would have none of it, rearing up and whirling around again, literally picking Petra up off the ground as the three of us went sailing back toward the stables again.

Collecting myself, the horse, and my nerves, once more I made my way to the crosswalk and the policeman who now was looking at us with justified trepidation. But this time, just as Walter was getting to that point of making a bid for home, I turned him around and began backing him up. Not seeing where I was directing him, he proceeded to back right up, across the road, and up onto the sidewalk on the opposite side. There I turned him around to face the nice green park, toward which he gladly resumed marching. We actually had quite a good show, placing well in both his classes.

Walter progressed to the highest level, the Grand Prix, and we had a number of successes: back-to-back National Championships, wins in Stockholm, Rotterdam, and Münster, and a fun exhibition under the lights at the Washington International Horse Show. But there were also failures—dramatic ones—a World Championship Qualifier in Neumünster, Germany. Our US squad of Marie Meyers, Betsy Steiner, Shelly Francis,

and Kathleen Raine were all riding, coached by the famous Herbert Rehein, one of the greatest trainers of the twentieth century. The show took place in an indoor stadium with a warm-up arena about three hundred feet away. Training the day before the competition went very well, and I was hopeful that Walter might be really good.

The next evening as the class began, it was cold and rainy. The steward told me it was time for me to make the trek from the warm-up to the show arena, and as we headed over, I could tell that Walter was not in the mood to play along. We had almost reached the entrance to the main hall that led to the ring where the judges and spectators were anxiously waiting when up he reared and then bolted back toward the comfort of his friends in the warm-up area. Herbert, seeing my situation, came running to my aid, took hold of the reins, and marched us back toward the entrance to the hall again. Before I could say, “I think this is a bad idea,” up and around went Crazy Walter again, this time dragging Herbert along with us, practically all the way back to the other arena.

Shaken, it occurred to me that I knew exactly what to do. I told Herbert to leave it to me, and Walter and I proceeded back toward our goal. Just before that dreaded spot where my horse refused to go forward, I stopped, turned him around, and began to back him up, just as I had done to cross the street in Paris several years before. In we went, down the hall to the entrance doors to the main arena. As I backed him through the doorway, I told the two men in charge of the entrance to close the doors as fast as they could and not to open them up again, no matter what they heard, until they knew my test was done!

As soon as the attendants shut the doors, I wheeled Walter around so he was facing the head judge at the opposite end of the arena. My horse stared—at the judges, the tables they were sitting at, and at the packed audience, which was now chuckling as they had never seen an entrance like this. This amount of stimuli was actually so much that Walter could

not decide what to think, so we began our Grand Prix pretty well. Going very forward was working until we got to the far end of the arena where we had to do two walk pirouettes, similar to a dancer doing a twirl. We completed the first one nicely, and as we were about to do the second one, a spectator got up from a seat in the stands and allowed the base of the chair to fly up and hit the seat back, making a noise that caught Walter's attention. He stared up into the crowd and began backing up in the direction of the judge and scribe sitting in the corner by "H." The scribe went running toward the other end of the arena while the judge stood his ground for a few seconds until he saw my horse was *definitely* not in his right mind. With that, the look on the judge's face changed, and I watched him try to scale the seven-foot wall up into the spectator's bleachers. Just as a few people in the first row began to pull the judge from "H" over to safety, Walter's hind legs hit the white PVC railing of the dressage arena, and we went flying forward, ending back in the middle of the ring, staring at the judge at "C." Acutely embarrassed, I saluted the head judge and turned to leave as I heard the announcer say something kind about how I treated my horse so nicely under the circumstances. I listened as the crowds applauded my horsemanship.

Walter taught me patience and humility.

Once, while working on the piaffe with Herbert Rehbein at his farm in Germany, Herbert came up behind us and said, "Hold on!" as he whacked Walter on the butt with his whip. Off we galloped toward the far wall, a seven-foot, slanted kickboard with a four-foot by four-foot window above it. Before I could even think, Crazy Walter was trying to scale the wall to and somehow jump out the window with me still aboard. Fortunately, the wall was too high and slippery, and we finally came back to earth.

Another time, I left Walter with Gabby Grillo's assistant trainer for a week while I went to watch the European Championships in England. I explained the gelding had a "short fuse," but of course, the German trainer

waved me away, saying all would be fine. When I came home and asked about the horses, the look in the trainer's face was completely changed.

Apparently he had been riding Walter, and the gelding was not responding well enough to his leg. He had picked up a whip and smacked Walter on the side, at which point the horse immediately leaned up against the arena wall and proceeded to slide his body down the kickboard until he was lying on his side in the dirt. Fortunately, it all happened sort of like a slow-moving train wreck. The trainer was able to step quickly away as the horse hit the ground, having a good-old-fashioned tantrum, thrashing his head and legs back and forth in the dirt. After a minute, he simply stopped, got back up, and shook the dust from his body all over his rider.

The lesson I learned here? Respect the power of the horse and try to understand his thoughts better. We need to think like them instead of trying to make them think like us. The same rule can also apply to our relationships with more than a few people in our lives.

Prior to the 1992 Olympics, I was riding Lectron, a beautiful, black stallion, also owned by Walter and Mary Anne McPhail and formerly ridden by their daughter, Melinda. Lectron had been hard for her to bring along to the Grand Prix, so it was decided that I would train and compete him for a year or two, then give him back to her so she could try out for the next US Dressage Team.

Lectron began to bloom in his physique and became highly competitive, making our European squad and then placing well in the international competitions leading up to the Olympics in Barcelona. We were actually a top-ten favorite as we came to the first day of the Games! Back then, each horse-and-rider combination had to go into the "Ten-Minute Ring" before going to the main stadium. In that small space, no one but the rider, not even the horse's groom, was allowed to touch the horse.

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23. With the urging of student and friend Ruth Barish and financial aid from the wonderful Caroline Muldoon, I bought three-year-old Federleicht from Gerd Zuther and November Hill Farm. This amazing horse would go on to change my life time and again for the better! ●



24. Thank you seventies for this unforgettable image! I definitely was trying to look like the famous Olympic swimmer Mark Spitz. ●

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25. In 1980 I trained Patience Priest and others at her Sugarland Farm in Poolesville, Maryland, where we built a business together. At the time I was just figuring out I was gay. I came to realize Patience cared for me more than as a friend when she bought me a beautiful ring, which I still wear, and actually made a twin for Robert as our wedding bands—go figure! ●
-



26. Patience and I procured Lago Maggiore, a wonderful horse trained by Willi Schultheis. I would later take a clinic with him in Kentucky at the farm of Liz and Dieter Felgendreher where I would tell Herr Schultheis I thought Lago was thirteen and he would explain the gelding was closer to twenty! ●
-



27. Herr Schultheis teaching me with Dieter Laugks translating. I went on to live in Germany and learn the language. ●

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67. 1992 was the year of the Barcelona Olympics with Walter and Mary Anne McPhail's Lectron. He had done so well at all the shows leading up to the Games and then got his tongue over the bit as I started my Grand Prix test. Amazingly, our team still got the bronze medal! ●



68–69. Our bronze-medal-winning team at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona: Charlotte Bredahl-Baker on Monsieur; I'm on Lectron, owned by the McPhail family; Graf George, owned and ridden by Michael Poulin; and Carol Lavell and her very own Gifted. We were led by our fantastic Chef d'Equipe Jessica Ranshausen, herself a three-time Olympian. ●

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- 70-71.** Sitting in the stands in The Hague, site of the 1994 World Equestrian Games, with family and members of our squad from that year: (left to right) Melinda McPhail, my parents Jean and Herb Dover with Chef d'Equipe Jessica Ranshausen behind them and me beside them; Carol Lavell, Jane Savoie, and Gary Rockwell. I bet we were all there watching our teammate not pictured: Kathleen Raine. ●
-



- 72.** 1994 in Rotterdam at the World Equestrian Games on the Bronze Medal Podium with Gary Rockwell, Carol Lavell, and Kathleen Raine. To our right, standing proudly, is Klaus Balkenhol, one of the team gold winners from Germany, who went on to coach our American team through our medal-winning years from 2000 until 2008. ●
-

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73. 1994 was another medal-winning year, this time with Susan Dansby's Devereaux at the World Equestrian Games in The Hague. My family was there, along with Robert, as we proudly rode in for our medals. ●

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74. I am with Kathleen Raine, Carol Lavell, and Gary Rockwell, and we are led by our Chef d'Equipe, Jessica Ransehausen. ●



75. Back in the stables at the 1994 World Equestrian Games in The Hague with a bronze medal around my neck and a magnum of champagne in my hands, ready to pour for Robert, Jessica, and Team USA! ●

76. Mary Ellen Purucker had Katherine Bateson, shown here with Mary Ellen, and I bring Devereaux out to Kansas City for the Kansas City Royal Horse Show, a big indoor event she helped sponsor. The "Grand Dame" of her community, Mary Ellen is now 105! I was honored to have her speak at my birthday in 2021. ●
-



77. In 1995 the World Cup Finals were brought to the Los Angeles Equestrian Center. Though Devereaux ended up having a quarter crack in his hoof, resulting in my withdrawal from the competition, we still had fun at the many parties. This one, at the home of Ken Kragen—who secured the talent that appeared on the hit fundraising single and album "We Are the World"—and his wife and my student, Cathy (between me and Robert), was chock full of television and movie stars—and of course, all the dressage stars from around the world (Monica Theodorescu is on my left). ●
-