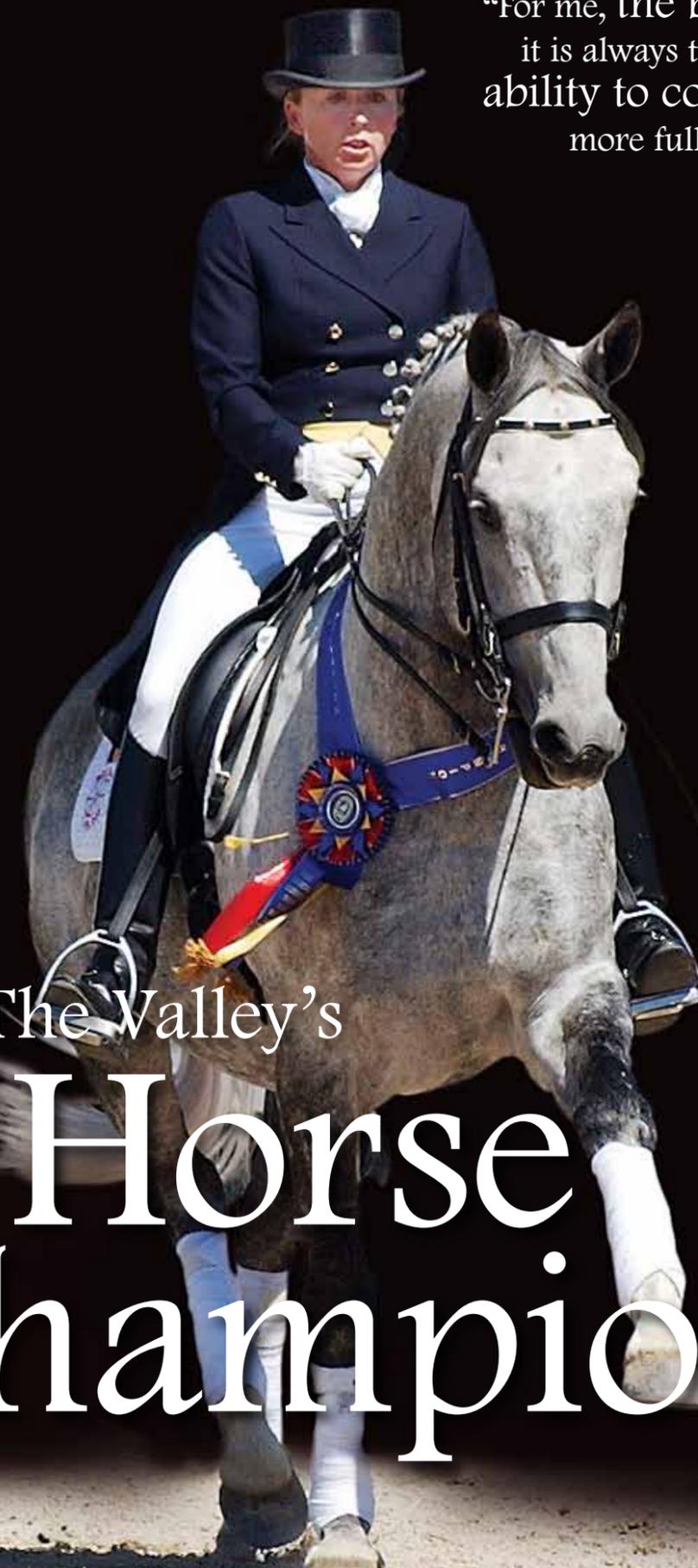


by Joy Overbeck

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— Anita Williams



The Valley's
Horse
Champions

Many a little girl, now grown, remembers a childhood wrapped up in love of horses. She recalls dreaming through endless re-runs and re-readings of classics like *Black Beauty*, *Misty of Chincoteague*, or *My Friend Flicka* where a girl and her horse were always the triumphant heroes. Most of these youngsters ultimately settled for little plastic ponies on their dressers instead of the real thing. But some grown-up women in the Vail Valley have been able to saddle that dream and forge the warm bond with this magnificent creature only dreamt of back then.

These local riders and their trail horses explore the high country's hidden places. Some horse owners here are members of an elite club of show competitors, vying in contests that display the athletic power of their equines, as well as their own skill. These longtime locals include Anita Williams, Monica Benderly, Kay Chester and Pam Shaeffer. Whether their equine sporting discipline is dressage, hunter jumper or cutting horse competition, the challenge and the delight lies in perfecting that intimate connection between horse and rider. Along the way, some of their special horses have become champions – the very best of the best.

The performance disciplines of today grew out of the very practical ways that horses have always served man. For thousands of years, horses were essential heavy equipment in battle, 1200-pound war machines whose strength and speed were used to terrify the enemy and power their riders to victory. A brave horse whirling in a circle with a sword-wielding cavalry officer on his back could slice and dice into the oncoming foot troops. The horses would save their masters from an enemy charge with a surprise maneuver called (in French) the capriole, leaping high into the air, tucking his forelegs into his chest and kicking out with his hind legs.

The art of dressage was born from these battle maneuvers, and today takes place not on blood-soaked fields, but in genteel show rings. The prize is no longer the conquest of an enemy and his lands, but tens of thousands of dollars in show winnings.

This is a highly technical performance that takes years for the horse and rider to master, according to Anita Williams who has long been the reigning dressage queen in the Vail Valley. Owner and trainer at Eagle Eyrie Dressage in Eagle, she likens dressage (French for training) to figure skating on a horse. With over 20 years of skill honed at the top echelons of competition, Williams teaches her students and their mounts the pirouette, the elegant, high-stepping prancing in place called the piaffe, the slow, skipping movement across the ring known as the passage, the crowd-pleasing dance to music of the freestyle, and other dressage moves that are tested in competition.

At her barn, Williams rides and trains eight horses a day, most of which are owned by the students she instructs. Every few months, she flies a top dressage trainer in from Great Britain to conduct clinics.

And how do you get a horse to execute these amazing moves? “For me, the beauty of it is always trying to develop that ability to communicate more fully with the horse,” says Williams. The two become so finely tuned that the audience never really sees the subtle commands passing from rider to horse as the performance progresses.

“The horse is cued by miniscule movements of the rider's seat and leg, with very little rein,” Williams says. “Your horse becomes very sensitive to the tiniest touch that nobody would even notice.”

One of the future champions in training at her barn is a tall, dark and handsome Oldenburg gelding called Picolero, owned by Monica Benderly. An off and on trail rider all her life, a few years ago Benderly found herself without a horse and with a growing curiosity about dressage. “My dad always said, ‘You need to learn a new sport every 10 years,’” she says. “So I decided this is the challenge for me... it keeps me off the streets.”

As she became captivated by the sport, she realized it required a horse with unique talent bred in the bone. When Williams invited her on a trip to Germany to check out candidates, she packed her bags. They flew into Vechta, Germany, headquarters of the Oldenburg Society, and the hotbed of breeding farms that for hundreds of years have been turning out dressage champions from this classic line of sport horses that can cost \$50,000 and above.

Near Vechta, the Colorado ladies discovered Picolero, a six-year-old from royal equine bloodlines. “He was too big, too young, but he was the sweetest, most lovable horse, like a Golden Retriever. Plus he adored me and I was able to ride him,” says the 5-foot, 4-inch Benderly of her very tall and elegant horse.

Starting as an older adult, Benderly is finding the complexities of dressage quite difficult. “There are so many things occurring at the same time, and you have to be so in sync with your horse, always two or three steps ahead of him to anticipate your next move. It requires immense concentration.” An expert skier, she sees some resemblance to her new sport in the way a mogul skier is constantly adjusting to the next bump, similar to how the rider adjusts the horse to move into the next transition.

She has an expert schoolmaster in Picolero. “He will teach me, because he learns much faster than I do,” she laughs. The big horse has shown far more potential earlier than Benderly and Williams expected. This year, Williams plans to ride him in shows at the international level. Says the trainer, “My goal with Picolero is to take him to Europe and compete with him at the highest levels there.” She thinks several more of her clients' horses will be ranked in the top national echelon this year. Williams will be competing this summer, riding her clients' horses in shows in California, and around the Rocky Mountain West including the Colorado Horse Park in Parker.

Kay Chester, another longtime local horse fancier, owns champion paint horses, hunter jumpers who can clear show ring fences nearly four-feet high with grace and pluck. Her nine-year-old paint, First Class Ticket, last year covered himself with glory when he was named Reserve Champion Horse of the Year for his class and region by the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association. On the way to his big win, he racked up points by placing in the top ten in five different Hunter Jumper Classics shows. His sister, Winning Ticket, was also named Reserve Champion Horse of the Year for the same region in the two-year-old Breed Division.

Chester was originally quite tentative around horses; she didn't saddle up until her mid-40's, when her husband and several partners purchased a large ranch on the road from Wolcott to Steamboat. “I

thought, if we're going to have cattle, maybe I'd better learn to ride a horse," she grins. She loved the look of paint horses, and now has eight of them, ranging from a 17-year-old mare she rides, to a little brown and white paint yearling that has Grand Prix jumper blood. Nearly all of her horse collection resides at trainer Karen Banister's ranch in Brighton, and Chester travels there at least once a week in summer to put them through their paces.

She still rides Ticket, as she calls him, but no longer chooses to go airborne on her personal horse rocket. "Karen rides the horses in the shows and takes them over the jumps," she notes. "Monica and I don't want to jump because we don't want to fall off!"

Instead, Chester has been learning dressage for the last several years. "I enjoy thinking through the pattern of the test and doing the different movements. Also, I think the horse enjoys it."

Like every true enthusiast, Chester uses some lofty language when she talks about her horses. "I love everything about it, I love just being with them. They are very calming and therapeutic, and they're fun too. You think about what you're doing, and everything else in your life fades away. As the cowboys say, 'There's something about the outside of a horse that's good for the inside of a person.'" And she loves to see them succeed, cheering them on from the stands at most of the shows.

While other show disciplines started on the battlefield, the cow horse contests now known as rodeo began on ranches with cowboys bragging about the talent of their trusty mounts. One of the cow horse's essential skills is the ability to "cut" a cow or a calf out of the milling herd, usually to brand, or to doctor a sick beast. Because cows

are herd animals that feel insecure if they're not packed together like jellybeans in a jar, this can prove a difficult task for horse and rider.

Today's cutting horse competitions pit each other against the best equine athletes, bred to excel in the discipline. Pam Shaeffer has been involved in this high-adrenaline sport for over ten years, and she and husband George have a half-dozen cutting horses in various stages of training on their Castle Peak Ranch in Eagle.

Last December, she achieved a lifetime dream by making the finals in two divisions on her three-year-old roan gelding, Royal Red Play. Part of the triumph was winning nearly \$10,000 in prize money at this biggest show of the year, the annual National Cutting Horse Championships in Fort Worth, Texas.

"It's really a rush to win in a competition like that, so thrilling to be on a horse that athletic and smart," she says. "When you're right in sync with that horse and controlling that cow head to head, there's nothing better."

Compared to the polite cadences of dressage, cutting can look like a break dancing free-for-all. First, horse and rider wade into the jostling tangle of cattle and maneuver to ease one of them out of the herd. Then the fun begins. Eye to eye and nose to nose, the horse mirrors every desperate move of its bovine adversary as the cow struggles to rejoin its pals. The two dodge and feint, bob and weave, throwing up dirt in a breathless game of checkmate that lasts a mere two-and-a-half minutes. In that time, the best horses can mix it up with two or three cows, one at a time.

It may look like the horse is doing all the work, but in cutting as in dressage, the rider is constantly communicating with her partner via

nearly invisible cues. "It's pretty much 50-50," says Shaeffer. "You squeeze the horse with your legs for go, sit deeper in the saddle for stop, and push him with your right or left leg to direct him. Plus after you cut the cow out, you're not allowed to lift your hands to guide the horse with the reins. It's all body position – that's what makes it so challenging."

Cutting is a discipline so precise and demanding that it can take over 18 months to train a good horse, even when they've been bred with an innate ability for the sport. All the work and the time are ultimately worth it, with the best horses often winning hundreds of thousands in prize money. Seven to eight hundred horses typically enter the Fort Worth championships every year where a total of over \$2 million in prize money is at stake; the top horse alone will win about \$200,000.

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Shaeffer will compete this year in about 15 contests, most sponsored by the Western States Cutting Horse Association of which she is a longtime board member. She and her trainers will be riding a couple of her horses in different classes at each show. Shaeffer and Royal already won as Non Pro Derby Champions at a March show in Loveland, while her trainer Scott Amos rode Royal to a reserve championship in the Open Derby event.

Winning at Fort Worth last year ignited a new fire in her. "It was like a dream come true, because the goal when you're up against 250 riders and their horses is to make finals," she says. "You just jump in and say, let's try to win this thing and see what happens... it's really incredibly exciting."

Horse lovers can't help waxing a bit rhapsodic over their sport and their steeds. As Monica Benderly puts it, "I find riding very exhilarating. I can be in the worst mood and once I'm around my horse, he's so wonderful that the sun breaks out like after a thunderstorm. Plus, he makes you look gorgeous when you're on him!" ♦

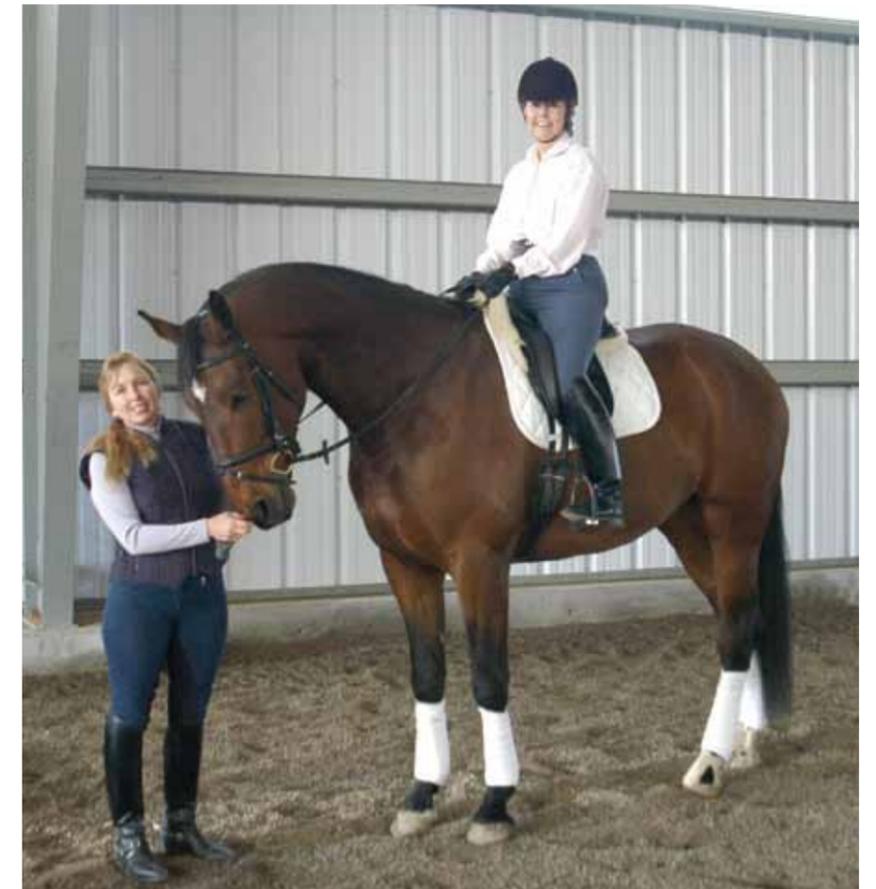
Joy Overbeck is an award-winning journalist who has written for Redbook, Woman's Day, Reader's Digest, TV Guide, Parents, LUXE, Denver 5280 and other magazines. She is also the author of three books.



Kay Chester's horse, Ticket, a champion paint horse.



Pam Shaeffer competes in the National Cutting Championships in Fort Worth, Texas.



Monica Benderly, mastering the complexities of dressage with her horse, Picolero.