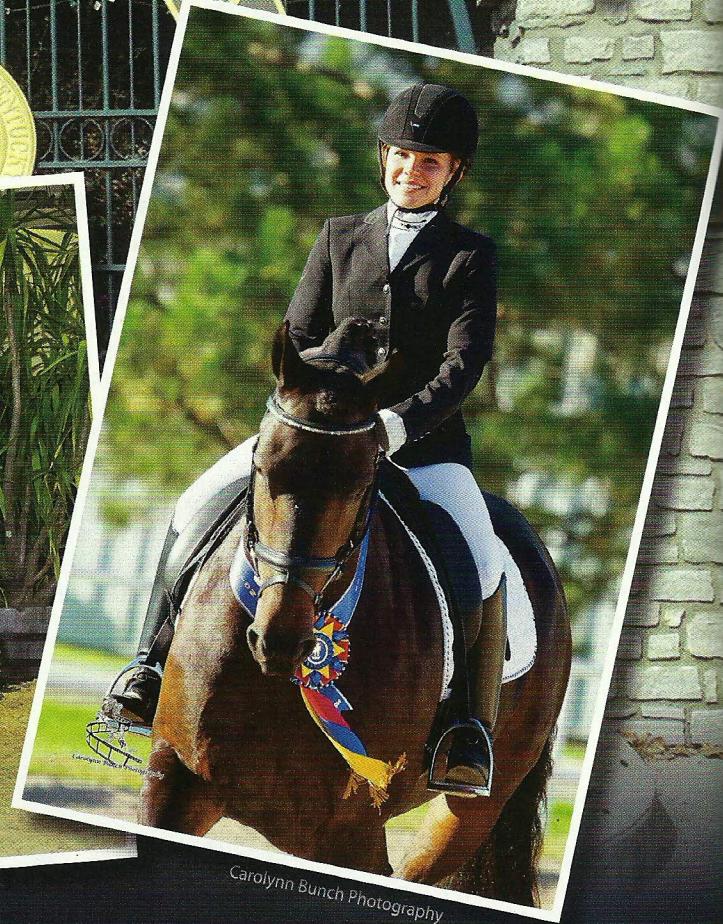


# Two Comeback Kids!



SusanJStickle.com



Carolynn Bunch Photography

## 2014 U.S. Dressage Finals Feature Impressive Returns

THE SPORT OF DRESSAGE is about the journey as much as the destination. The road from green horse to Grand Prix competitor can be plagued with obstacles, and keeping our equine partners healthy and sound is one of the biggest challenges. Here we share the stories of two horses who overcame injuries and physical issues to successfully compete in last fall's U.S. Dressage Finals, the national head-to-head championship held annually by the USDF.

TOP: Entrance to the Kentucky Horse Park, Lexington, KY. LEFT: Windsong and owner/rider Aileen Daly, the happy second place winners of the AA Grand Prix Freestyle at the finals. RIGHT: Regional Open Third Level Freestyle Champions, Celtic Grace ("Gracie") and Jonni Allen.

## CELTIC GRACE

In 2010, Bobbi Wojtowicz of Missouri and a friend went to see a mare named Celtic Grace ("Gracie"). Going to look at Gracie was a long shot—while she was rumored to be a nice quality mare, she was also rumored to be a rogue. Gracie was a seven-year-old Friesian Sporthorse mare, sired by the Friesian stallion Celtic out of the Thoroughbred mare Zena. Her breeding sounded interesting to Bobbi, whose primary interest is carriage driving.

Bobbi immediately liked the mare. "There was something in her eyes," she recalls. But Gracie was also overweight, belligerent and strong-willed. She'd had a little bit of dressage training years earlier and she was broke to drive, but she was also known for her naughty antics in both disciplines. Bobbi wanted to give her a chance though, and especially since the mare was free, agreed to take her on trial.

### A Rocky Road

"It wasn't easy in the beginning," Bobbi remembers. "We spent months working on ground manners and building her trust." Although Bobbi had acquired Gracie to be a driving horse, people suggested to Bobbi that dressage training might help make the mare a better driving horse. She found a dressage trainer named Jonni Allen. "I was very lucky to find Jonni. I didn't want to put Gracie in full training, and Jonni was willing to let me haul her in for training two to three times a week, which most trainers won't let you do. And Jonni was great with her."

Bobbi jokes that in the beginning Gracie had a 20 minute limit—she'd work for 20 minutes and then she was done, period. She also didn't like to canter, but with Jonni's patient training she began to progress. From the very beginning Bobbi recalls that one of Gracie's best qualities was that she was never a spooky horse. "She was smart and she'd become bored easily, but she wasn't spooky and nothing phased her." After a couple of months, Jonni took her to her first schooling show, where she won both of her Introductory Level classes with scores of 72.5% and 81.0%. Not a bad start for a free, "rogue" horse!

Jonni and Gracie competed in their first recognized show in 2011, earning three scores of more than 70% at Training and First Level. Clearly Gracie was no longer a rogue. Bobbi continued to take her to Jonni's two to three times a week for training, while also carriage driving her herself two to three times a week.

### Full Speed Ahead

Together Jonni and Gracie hit the dressage scene with a bang and never slowed down. In the following two years



Celtic Grace enjoys driving with owner Bobbi Wojtowicz.

they were USDF All-Breeds Friesian Sporthorse Association Champions at Training Level, First Level and Second Level. They also finished in the USDF Horse of the Year Top 20 at each level (Training through Second) and competed at the USDF Region 4 Regional Championships at each level as well, finishing no lower than fifth in the Open Championships classes.

Gracie was also enjoying a successful driving career with Bobbi through the Preliminary Level and to date is the only Friesian Sporthorse to have earned her Silver Elite performance status in the two disciplines of dressage and driving. "She's so smart and learns so quickly, I call her a 'super freak,'" Bobbi says.

### Bizarre Accident

Then on May 23, 2013, Bobbi's world was turned upside down when her beloved Gracie suffered an inexplicable seizure-like event, flipped over backwards and hit her head on the concrete barn aisle, suffering a brain stem injury.

Luckily for Gracie, the veterinarian had just arrived to perform chiropractic therapy on her and so was able to begin treating her immediately, which likely saved her life. Gracie alternated between flailing in the aisle and lying there quietly, and at one point she quit breathing. Others from the vet clinic also came out to help, as they moved hay bales to stabilize her and made makeshift IV poles from pitchforks to administer fluids. Gracie's veterinarian was also injured as Gracie flailed in the barn aisle, later requiring knee surgery himself, but he stayed by her side throughout the entire ordeal in spite of his own pain.

Gracie was unable to get up and her prognosis was growing steadily worse with each passing hour. They needed to get her to the University of Missouri's veterinary hospital, but they had no idea how since they couldn't even get her to stand.

## **“The vets at MU said she had a 30-percent chance of survival and that even if she did survive her prognosis was ‘very guarded.’”**

After five hours, they were finally able to get Gracie to stand. The next challenge would be to load her on the trailer, as she was still unstable and only able to stagger sideways. It took two hours to load her. “We had to let the air out of the trailer tires to make it low enough to load her,” Bobbi recalls. Once loaded, they still had a two hour drive ahead of them as they headed for the University of Missouri (MU).

Upon arrival at MU, Gracie was put in a neurological stall. She’d forgotten how to drink and the staff at MU prepared Bobbi for the worst—if Gracie didn’t begin to drink on her own in 24 hours, she would need to be euthanized. Bobbi found a hotel so she could stay nearby, and was thrilled when Gracie took her first drink since the accident the next morning.

The whole incident remained a puzzle, however. Tests ruled out EHV-1 and EPM as causes of the seizure. Gracie would get better, and then get worse again. At one point she developed a dangerously high fever. Then her urine turned brown—she had internal injuries to her kidneys from flailing on the concrete. The vets at MU said she had a 30-percent chance of survival and that even if she did survive her prognosis was “very guarded.” It was unlikely Gracie would ever compete again and it seemed increasingly likely with each day that she could die. Bobbi was heartbroken.

Then Gracie began to improve. After two weeks she left MU and returned home. She was still walking sideways, she couldn’t be turned out and she was on strict stall rest. Bobbi was just glad to have her alive and at home. However she kept improving.

### **Road to Recovery**

In August, three months after the accident, Gracie had a check-up with the neurological team at MU. To everyone’s surprise, they didn’t find any residual damage and she was given the green light to resume work.

Jonni resumed Gracie’s dressage training and the “super freak” lived up to the moniker with her freakishly remarkable recovery. In just two months they were once again training at Third Level and, since they’d already qualified for the regional championships prior to the accident, they decided to give the event a shot. “Even though she wasn’t 100 percent, she still finished sixth,” Bobbi recalls.

They took the next few months to focus strictly on getting Gracie back to 100 percent. Bobbi continued to haul her to Jonni three times a week for dressage training and also continued driving her as the weather permitted. In 2014 Gracie and Jonni again qualified for their regional championships, where they became the Open Third Level Reserve Champions and the Open Third Level Freestyle Champions, which qualified them for the U.S. Dressage Finals.

In November they made the trip to Lexington, Kentucky. “It was a fairytale story to have Gracie qualify for the finals, especially after all she’d been through,” Bobbi remembers. “The finals were an amazing experience.” Gracie and Jonni finished third in the Open Third Level and fourth in the Open Third Level Freestyle.

Gracie is currently schooling Fourth Level and the plan is to begin showing her at this level later this year. “For now she’s standing around fuzzy in her paddock,” jokes Bobbi. Bobbi also continues to drive her. “The dressage has made her an amazing driving horse and one of her favorite things is to go driving down the country roads,” she says.

Although Gracie’s comeback as a riding and driving horse was nothing short of miraculous, Bobbi is happiest just to have her alive and well. “She’s a one in a million horse,” she says adoringly. Her remarkable recovery and success story is a one in a million too.

## **WINDSONG**

Windsong, affectionately known as “Puff,” could easily be labeled the ultimate dressage schoolmaster. The 17-year-old Hanoverian (Weltmeyer / Lauries Crusador xx) has competed at FEI level dressage with seven different riders and has helped five riders earn the required Grand Prix scores needed for their USDF Gold Medals. He also competed in the Young Adult Brentina Cup classes in 2011 and 2012 with then-rider Heather Beachem. But while Puff has had a highly successful show career and has excelled as a schoolmaster, health and wellness issues have tested his resilience, making him not only the ultimate schoolmaster but also the ultimate comeback kid.

### **Success—and Surgery**

Puff made his FEI debut in 2005, scoring a 70.25% at Prix St. Georges with rider Martha Diaz. The next year he suffered a serious colic which required surgery. As if the colic surgery wasn’t enough, the incision line became infected, ultimately resulting in nine hernias along the scar line.

Puff was out of competition until 2009, when he came back strong earning a 65% at Intermediare 1 with rider Sarah Hellner. Puff had made one great comeback and was again doing what he did best, competing at FEI-level dressage.

Aileen Daly, who owns and runs Xanadu Dressage in South Carolina, bought Puff in 2012. “Puff had been a once-in-a-lifetime kind of horse for a lot of people already, and now he was a once-in-a-lifetime horse for me,” she says.

Unfortunately, about four months after she bought him, Puff suffered a seizure-like episode. Concerned, with no idea what had caused it, Aileen took Puff to Rood & Riddle in Lexington, Kentucky. “Nobody knew what had caused the first episode, and he was at Rood & Riddle for a couple of weeks before he had another episode,” she remembers.



Windsong and Aileen Dali at the U.S. Dressage Finals.

## Sleepless Nights

Veterinarians at Rood & Riddle contacted Dr. Joe Bertone, a California-based veterinarian who specializes in equine sleep disorders. After an extensive consultation with Dr. Bertone, Puff was diagnosed with night terrors and sleep deprivation.

Horses average three to five hours of sleep per 24 hour cycle, and sleep mostly at night. Deep sleep, also known as rapid eye movement (REM) sleep or paradoxical sleep, accounts for approximately 15 percent of the total sleep pattern but is a critical phase for horses. According to Dr. Bertone's research, horses can go several days without deep sleep, but then sleep deprivation begins to set in.

Deep sleep usually occurs while the horse is lying down because of the relaxing of the muscles which accompanies deep sleep. Horses who can't or won't lie down will tend to miss the deep sleep part of the sleep pattern and will become sleep deprived. Horses who suffer from extreme sleep deprivation will eventually collapse from exhaustion.

Puff suffers from the seizure-like collapsing episodes approximately every three weeks. "And when he falls, he goes down like he was shot," according to Aileen. Because of this, Puff is kept in a large 14' x 14' stall with extra thick shavings and surveillance cameras. Each morning the video recordings are reviewed to see how Puff slept, before planning his riding for the day.

The sleep disorders began taking their toll on both Puff and Aileen, and Aileen began to understandably have problems with him under saddle. "It was becoming too much, and there were days I just wanted him gone," she admits.

## New Direction

Then in March of 2013, Aileen began getting instruction from Darren Taplin, a USDF silver medalist with more than

**"Puff suffers from the seizure-like collapsing episodes approximately every three weeks."**

twenty years of dressage competition experience. With Darren's help Aileen was soon learning to ride tempis and pirouettes. She began showing Puff in the Prix St. Georges and the Intermediare 1 and, to Aileen's own surprise, they qualified for and competed in the U.S. Dressage Finals at Intermediare 1 in 2013. "That was a really big year for us. I owed so much of our success to Darren," she says.

In 2014 Aileen made her Grand Prix debut on Puff, still under Darren's tutelage. Aileen and Puff qualified for the USDF Region 3 Regional Championships, which were to be held in Florida that October, and Aileen began excitedly making preparations to travel to Florida.

Then on October third, just two weeks before regionals, the unthinkable happened. Darren, who had been so instrumental to Aileen's success, succumbed to liver cancer and passed away. "It was a really tough time and regionals were really emotional," Aileen says, "but I think Darren would have been proud." Together Aileen and Puff qualified for the U.S. Dressage Finals again, this time for the Adult Amateur divisions of the Grand Prix and the Grand Prix Freestyle.

In November of 2014 Aileen and Puff competed at the U.S. Dressage Finals at the Kentucky Horse Park, finishing fifth in the Grand Prix Adult Amateur and second in the Grand Prix Freestyle Adult Amateur. "It was a great experience," Aileen recalls. "My mother probably hadn't seen me ride since I was 15 and she decided to make the trip from Florida to Lexington to watch--and I was at the finals competing at Grand Prix. This year will be hard to top!"

## Next Steps

Aileen says she tried to give Puff some time off after the finals but he seemed to hate it, so she put him back in work and soon his attitude was back to normal. Puff is now happily teaching the upper level movements to his devoted groom. Because of his sleep disorder and the stress it causes him to travel, Aileen says Puff's show career will probably be limited now to shows which are more local, so he can sleep in his own stall at night. "Puff will be with me until the end; I don't ever plan to sell him," she says.

A loving forever home is the perfect ending for Puff, an incredibly kind, willing horse who has taught so many the joys of dressage. 