

## **Perseverance Pays Off: Orion and Me**

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Ever since I can remember, I've loved horses and have wanted them to be a part of my life. Although I got to ride a handful of times as a child, I had no further access to horses until my mid-thirties. I was looking for a therapeutic riding opportunity for our young son and met a woman who kindly allowed me to use her retired dressage horse for lead lining. We got into conversation, she told me a little about dressage, and seeing my enthusiasm she encouraged me to get on her horse for a longe lesson. My old horse dreams were rekindled; soon I found an instructor and began taking lessons plus part-leasing a fun little appaloosa. Within a year, I was determined to find a horse of my own and had grand dressage dreams based on a single Klimke video that I had viewed—I'd never before dreamed that horses could dance!

My first rides on warmblood horses were on a few local dressage horses that were for sale; then, I even tried a few in another state. Being such a green rider and used to the small horse I'd been riding, I didn't know anything about evaluating a horse but it seemed to me that I'd have a better chance of figuring that out if I could ride and compare many horses in close proximity over a short time period. A trip to Europe seemed logical: I speak German fluently, my husband was working for Northwest Airlines and so I could fly for free, and I could stay with my German relatives. Unbelievably, on my first day there, I felt sure that I had found my dream horse! I also visited a tack shop to purchase a pair of dressage boots. Following is a sketch of the drama that unfolded in my first year of horse ownership. The heartbreak that I experienced with my new horse coincided with a bizarre series of mistakes regarding the boots that I had purchased. Strangest of all, both the horse and the boot situations found resolution on the *same day* one year later! Perhaps destiny had a hand in it?

When I found "Omar" at a sale barn in Europe, he'd only been there for ten days and was described as being very green but learning so fast that they were schooling second level movements on him. Unfortunately, I had no idea that forcing a horse into a frame and pressuring him to look like he knew a lot was likely to have negative repercussions that might take years to work out. I did have a sense that the tightly curled frame didn't look right, but my imagination was caught by the floaty manner in which this horse moved. Plus, his lack of training made him almost affordable to me. (It would take me six weeks to get the finances sorted out and during this time, Omar certainly continued with a forced regimen of "training for quick sale".)

I also spent time at a tack shop being measured for dressage boots—these had to be sent to the shop from the factory and arrived the day before my scheduled departure. When I phoned to confirm store hours, I was mistakenly given weekday information instead of the shorter Saturday hours and so the store was locked for the weekend when I arrived to pick up the boots. How disappointing! They would have to be sent by slow surface mail instead.

Back home in Colorado, I made the arrangements for shipping my horse. His unappealing name of “Omar” seemed ominous when the only available flight was on September 11 with arrival in New York exactly one year after the Twin Towers attack. *Omar, arriving on 9-11 in New York City?* I renamed him “Orion” and pushed superstitious thoughts aside.

Our relationship started with a bang. Our first two rides were at a sedate walk, but the third ended with a crash that had me laid up for most of October and November recovering from separated ribs, massive bruising, and an unbelievable contusion on my butt. While I recuperated, I put Orion in training and in December I finally had a handful of rides and lessons on him. He didn’t feel anything like what I remembered from my trial ride in Europe and I couldn’t understand how such a soft and sensitive seeming horse could have turned into the truculent, reluctant animal I was sitting on now. Spooks and blow-ups were part and parcel of those few rides and I began wishing that I hadn’t bought him. Then, just before Christmas, pus began oozing from a draining tract near Orion’s hock; the vet recommended full-out surgery at CSU.

In tandem with the horse issues, I’d also been having “boot issues”. Several months after they’d been mailed, I still hadn’t received my boots. Surely the postal service wasn’t that slow? I e-mailed a query to the tack shop. “Oh, yes, the boots were just returned to us, the address was incorrect.” Instead of 774 they had written 744! I thought that surely the mailman would have recognized our name and delivered them anyway. In fact, a short time later, the federal customs form *did* arrive in our postbox in spite of the same *incorrect* address. Go figure. Maybe our regular mailman was out sick when the boots came. “Alright, please correct the address and send me the boots again.” This time they arrived quickly; it was just a few days ‘til Christmas. Excitedly, I tried them on. “Super, this one fits great. But, what’s going on here? I can’t get my foot into the other one!” Inside, the boot was stamped with a foot size of 7 rather than 7 ½ ! Astounded, I boxed them up and sent them back, requesting that the store owner check the numbers on the next pair before shipping them.

January arrived and I’d had about a dozen rides total on Orion when he dumped my instructor during a training session. The very next day, I too was violently ejected into the dirt and landed square on my shoulder. Numbly, I drove to the emergency room instead of to the concert hall where my colleagues were expecting me on stage (I’m a violinist in a professional symphony). The diagnosis? Complete humeral head fracture. It would have to heal without a cast and I went through excruciating pain as every movement caused the splintered bones to grate against each other.

I was ready to give up—my lifelong dream had so quickly turned into a nightmare. To make matters worse, my husband was sent to the east coast, mobilized by the Navy Reserve in the continuing aftermath of 9-11 while I remained home alone with my broken arm and our eight-year-old son. Orion's surgery proceeded in February as scheduled, and his eight weeks of stall rest ironically began on Valentine's Day. Any celebration of love or happiness was out of the question. As if to mock me, the next pair of boots arrived and I discovered that the feet were now correctly sized but that the entire calf (rather than just the ankle) had been widened by one cm. Back to the post office I went—this shipping back and forth was eating up all the savings I'd gained by buying the boots in Europe.

By April, Orion and I had both mended physically but remained emotional wrecks. I'd visit him in his stall and cry as the remoteness, mistrust, and disrespect that I sensed in Orion couldn't be denied. Neither could the need for highly expert help (and unforeseen amounts of money). Putting him up for sale seemed like the only way out. I connected with Hilary and Charlie Carrel (Colts Unlimited, WY) and requested that they work with Orion as if he'd be coming back to me rather than pushing for a quick sale; I didn't want anyone else to go through what I'd experienced. As fate would have it, the May date that they set for picking up Orion happened to be my birthday. More poignant tears and heartache. Why did all these bad things keep happening on "special" days?

Orion's departure opened up some time in which I could observe various trainers at work. I was still hoping to gain some insight into Orion's dramatic decline. The details of technique, timing, and feel that I saw being addressed went way beyond what I'd been exposed to. I'd done a lot of reading along with taking lessons, but watching the every-day nitty-gritty stuff that made up the process showed me that I'd only experienced the tip of the iceberg.

During the summer, I was introduced to Gretchen Ahlem, a trainer who clearly taught both the basics *and* the intricacies of dressage at every lesson while yet remaining affordable for people like me. I began to learn about truly influencing the many body parts of a horse and regained some confidence as I learned effective strategies for riding the spooks that her school horse occasionally produced. Meanwhile, Orion was being worked through his enormous tension and fear, and the Carrels reported his increasing confidence as they taught him to jump. In Europe, he'd been jammed into an inappropriate frame and had been dictated to with every step. Jumping required him to think for himself and allowed him to find his natural balance. The Carrels also took him to his first ever show and found that he came away from this challenging situation with increased focus and willingness to work. These positive reports, plus the expert guidance I was now receiving from Gretchen convinced me to take a leap of faith: I would bring Orion home and try working at my dream again.

In September, the Carrels brought a string of horses to show at the Colorado Horse Park and they dropped Orion off at Gretchen's on Saturday the 13<sup>th</sup> (*NOT* Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>!) After bedding Orion down, I drove home and arrived just after the postman had delivered a large flat package.

Could it be...? With trembling hands, I opened the box. The boots inside were gorgeous; the numbers stamped inside the shaft were correct. I put one on and then...the other. They fit like a glove.

#### Postscript

Master horseman, Walter Zetzl says, “It’s a matter of trust.” How true! After that first nightmarish year, the next entire year was the equivalent of intense psychotherapy for Orion. Gretchen had us do a lot of groundwork while she was Orion’s primary rider. His unpredictable and athletic over-reactions were like “flashbacks” and required a skilled rider. However, by the second year, enough of a bond had developed between us and my own riding had progressed sufficiently for me to take over all the riding. Since then, Gretchen has guided us from the ground, teaching me how to teach Orion. And it has taken Orion years to learn how to learn! In any case, it’s a hard, slow road for a developing rider to train their own horse through the levels. It becomes even harder when both the rider and the horse have mutual fear issues. Just as when peeling an onion, there’s always a new layer to contend with. However, I’ve also discovered that the onion peel analogy is true of the positive learning process and can truly represent the essence of dressage—the layers of learning never end and as you move up the levels, the onion skins become ever thinner and more subtle. Thank goodness I love onions!

P.P.S. I earned both the USDF bronze medal and the USDF bronze freestyle bar this year (2009). Coincidentally, the certificates awarding these two distinctions are both dated 9-11-09—precisely seven years, to the day, since Orion first arrived in New York and my tumultuous first year with him began. How’s that for coming full circle?!