



Dancing with Horses

Dressage paints a pretty picture of human-and-equine harmony.

It's been described as ballet on a horse.

Dressage, defined by the International Equestrian Federation, is regarded as "the highest expression of horse training," where "horse and rider are expected to perform from memory a series of predetermined movements," and also is an Olympic sport. It comes from the French word for training.

O'ahu has a small but close-knit community of riders dedicated to the art of dressage who compete at the national level. What they all have in common is a "crazy love" for horses.

"To me, dressage is like the intermingling of two different life forces which come together to make a beautiful and harmonious picture," says Anna Awana, president of the Aloha State Dressage Society's board of directors. "To me, it's like poetry in motion—on a horse."

Through subtle signals, a shift of weight in the saddle or slight squeeze of the leg, the rider cues the horse to perform various movements, whether it's trotting, cantering or doing a pirouette in place.

Awana, 75, is also the owner of Misty Meadows in Waimanalo. She continues to ride and to teach dressage, which she has been doing for more than three decades.

She explains that, in dressage, a skilled rider and horse connect as one, and make an intricate routine look effortless.

"When you're riding, you have to connect to the energy of the horse, and they connect to yours, because we have different kinds of energy," she says. "It's just an extraordinary thing, when you have that connection to them. You just feel suspended in air like you're being carried along. It's beautiful. The feeling is just surreal."

The Aloha State Dressage Society has about 65 members, and holds eight shows a year. Members compete at all different levels, from training to first-level, second-level and up, based on national standards. Judges come from the U.S. mainland, and oftentimes, stay to offer clinics or workshops after the competition.

O'ahu has five facilities involved in dressage, including Maunawili Farm in Kailua; Misty Meadows, Circle C Equestrian Center and Hilltop Equestrian Center in Waimanalo; and Dillingham Ranch on the North Shore.

Lisa Webster of Kailua has loved horses since she was a little girl. She rode horses as a child, and learned a little bit of dressage as a teenager in Northern California. Seven years ago, the mother of two decided to try dressage again, and has been hooked every since. She picked it up quickly, and is now competing at higher levels.

By Nina Wu

PHOTOS BY NATHALIE WALKER



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—Anna Awana



Dressage is
a lifelong
passion
for Awana.

Webster says she enjoys a challenge that involves movement and memorization.

"It's kind of like you're dancing with a horse," she says. "You're communicating without words, but through your body to their body. When you get to do it at a higher level, it's really fulfilling."

Whenever she has time, she rides.

"I love it," she says. "I hope to be able to do it the rest of my life ... It's meditative. When you're doing it, you're not thinking about anything else. You're focused on being in the moment."

Awana says the first requirement for anyone interested in dressage is a love of horses. She recommends visiting the various facilities, and watching lessons take place to see if they are a good fit. Some, such as Hilltop, have dressage lesson horses available.

Children start riding at different ages, some as young as 5. Awana says she started teaching one of her granddaughters to ride at the age of 4.

But the interest has to be there. Dressage is a sport that requires commitment and has associated costs, including years of specialized training plus access to a qualified horse. The uniform for competitions includes a black top hat, a coat with tails and white riding breeches. There are also travel expenses.

For Awana, it's a lifelong passion.

"The most rewarding thing is when you connect with them [the horses]," Awana says. "When you have that, it's like magic." ●

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