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Breezy Burgoon, left, and her horse Wishes Do Come True and Tricia Silva with WinSome Appeal are about to take their animals out for a practice ride at Hilltop Equestrian Center in Waimanalo. The women hope to participate in an Olympic-level equestrian competition.

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Horse dancers

Young equestrians qualify for Olympic-level competition in the balletic sport of dressage

By Pat Gee
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With all the focus on Seabiscuit, the champion horse that is now the subject of a feature film and television documentaries, many here are finding Hawaii has its own horse story, and the lack of \$12,000 is the only obstacle in the way of getting two young horsewomen from Waimanalo to compete in an Olympic-level international competition in Canada next month.

Breezy Burgoon, 18, and Tricia Silva, 20, have trained for years and recently won themselves a chance to compete in the North American Young Rider Championship Aug. 20 to 24. If they don't raise the money in time, they don't go, Burgoon said.

CORRECTION

Wednesday, July 30, 2003

>> Check donations to help horseriders Breezy Burgoon and Tricia Silva compete in the North American Young Rider Championship should be payable to USDF Region 7/Hawaii, NAYRC Team Fund and sent to P.O. Box 6494, Kaneohe, HI 96744. A Page D1 article Monday incorrectly said the checks should be payable to USDA.

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"But we try not to think about it," Silva said.

"It would break our hearts knowing we've gotten this far and because of money we can't go," Burgoon added.

The University of Hawaii students from Kailua are scheduled to leave Aug. 14 for Quebec for the event, considered to be the most prestigious competition for dressage (French for "to train") and other horse exhibition sports; it is an official USA Junior Olympic-Equestrian event for riders 16 to 21.

"Every rider dreams about this competition," Silva said. "Just saying you competed in the event gets you a great deal of respect."

Burgoon added: "This is the steppingstone to the Olympics (2008). It would be such an awesome experience, not only to prepare for the bigger goal, but to show people that even though we are so isolated here in Hawaii, we are just as capable."



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Burgoon, left, and Silva put their horses through their paces.

Dressage has long been regarded as a rich person's hobby because the sport demands years of specialized training. But Burgoon and Silva weren't born into the big money it usually takes to reach the upper echelons of the sport. They couldn't afford to buy their own

horses, but were given them by their owners, who no longer wanted them.

As a result, Silva had to start from scratch, working with a difficult horse who distrusted humans. Burgoon was the luckier of the two, gaining a horse already trained in dressage.

Dressage requires that the rider use precise cues with his or her body to put a horse through movements not second nature to a horse, such as side-stepping (the half-pass), pirouettes or skipping (flying changes). Dressage is likened to "a mix between ballet and gymnastics," Silva said. It is as demanding on the rider as the horse.

Burgoon does her best to explain the feeling of being on the horse and "becoming so connected to this powerful animal that the slightest movement of my leg, tightening of my seat or even letting out a breath can make him perform movements, like a dance."

Horse trainer Anna Awana, owner of Misty Meadows in Waimanalo, bought the girls' formal uniform, which includes a black top hat, a coat with tails, and white riding breeches and shirt, easily costing \$800 per outfit. The first time the teens put on the apparel, they felt they had arrived: "OK! We're really doing this!"

Burgoon and Silva also credit local horsewomen Pam Jones and Tia Gaurani with helping provide support and financial backing.

Two years ago, if anyone told them they would be preparing to go to a Junior Olympic event, they would have responded, "No way could we do it," Silva said. But their trainer, Linda Hosoi, convinced them they had the drive and the talent to make it.

"She knew we could handle the work," Silva said. "Just having Linda say she thought we could do it -- it's her opinion we respect the most." It was enough to persuade them to go for it.

SILVA STARTED RIDING when she was 7, and Burgoon at 9. Practically growing up together at Waimanalo's Hilltop Equestrian Center has made them more like sisters, Silva said.

Like many athletes and music prodigies, they've sacrificed the typical teenage social life in order to train or tend to their horses every day. Right up front, boyfriends are warned the horses come first.

"We're not like normal girls," Silva said.

"We've been kicked, thrown and bitten. We're die-hards. We've had many emergency room visits," Silva said. They've even broken their arms in the same places.

The girls' bond with their horses is akin to a mother-and-child relationship; they just have to look at their horses to sense their moods, and vice versa.

"We work as a team. She (her horse) reads my thoughts and I read hers," said Silva, who owns WinSome Appeal, an 11-year-old Hanoverian dark brown mare.

Before she could even start training her horse, Silva had to wage a battle of gaining her trust and establishing who was boss. The headstrong horse, given to Silva when she was 16, was abandoned and "literally left in her stall; she got out maybe once a year," Silva said.

WinSome, age 6 at the time, could barely tolerate being haltered for riding. It took Silva two months of getting WinSome accustomed to the bridle before she could even sit in the saddle.

"It was like taking a little kid who had never been taught manners or had any schooling. ... I had to take baby steps and not push her too fast," she said.



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Breezy Burgoon mounts her horse, Wishes Do Come True, left, while Tricia Silva prepares her horse, WinSome Appeal, for dressage practice.

She remembers the first day she could steer WinSome, 4 1/2 years ago. "One day it just clicked," she said, and now Silva doesn't have to use reins to steer WinSome, just a bit of leg pressure.

"When things click, the harmony between you and the horse is unspeakable," Silva said.

WinSome's mother, Sweetie, had been Silva's first horse, loaned to her for tending. But she had to be put to sleep, a devastating heartbreak after four years of bonding.

When Silva was given WinSome, "a lot of people thought it was unbelievable to give a 16-year-old a crazy horse," she said. "That's a death wish. I'd come home broken and bleeding. ... I was very disappointed often."

But Silva viewed it as if Sweetie "gave me her firstborn," and through WinSome, she said, "I will always have a piece of my old horse with me."

Silva added: "I want to emphasize that it's not normal for WinSome to be performing at this level. She's only been under the saddle for four years (six years is the norm for Olympic-level competition). I've pushed her very, very hard. This has shown the type of horse she is. She took it all in stride." But, she said, WinSome is still a moody horse.

Burgoon's horse, called Herbie (show name: Wishes Do Come True), has the opposite temperament of WinSome -- lovable and affectionate. Herbie is a chestnut-colored half-Hanoverian/half-Anglo Arab gelding.

Herbie was already well trained in dressage when Burgoon got him in 1997. "He was like a God for us, an incredible horse who did these beautiful movements," she said.

Because Burgoon was then only 12, "he had to come down to my level," she said. "He had to teach me; I had to learn it. He was really patient with me."

Since the horse dressage community is small, the women have performed in front of 60 people at the most. They will have to compete before thousands in Bromont, Quebec.

"We've been preparing ourselves mentally," Burgoon said. "Honestly, we won't know (how we'll do) till we go."

It's not uncommon for wealthy parents of some young competitors

to spend \$150,000 or more on horses already trained for high-level dressage, and all a rider has to do is sit on it, Burgoon said, so a win would mean very much.

"These are local horses born and raised here just like us, and no one handed them to us ready to go," she said. "We trained them ourselves."

Silva said she feels like they both have a lot in common with the Seabiscuit saga, the rags-to-riches story about a horse and jockey who beat the odds against them.

They hope history repeats itself.

Raising cash to compete

A fund-raiser will help Breezy Burgoon and Tricia Silva raise the money they need to compete in the North American Young Rider Championship:

When: 5:30 p.m. Wednesday

Place: Marbella Restaurant, 1680 Kapiolani Blvd.

Cost: \$75, includes heavy pupus and wine

Reservations: Call 263-1916.

Donations: Make checks payable to USDA Region 7/Hawaii, NAYRC Team Fund, and send to P.O. Box 6494, Kaneohe, HI 96744.



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