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# Equine ballet

By **Zenaida Serrano**  
Advertiser Staff Writer

Suzi Hillis and her horse, Dante, took to an open pasture at Hilltop Equestrian Center in Waimanalo with a series of graceful trots, skips and turns.

Hillis wore a formal riding coat and top hat, sitting stick-straight on the massive steed. Trotting in place and striding across the muddy field, Hillis and Dante maintained their stately posture.

The steps and riding looked easy to an uninformed observer. But to those with knowledge of the skills involved, the duo demonstrated advanced dressage, a style of riding in which horse and rider are essentially dance partners.

"Dressage is compared to the ballet," said Anna Awana, president of the Aloha State Dressage Society. "... It is a disciplined way of riding to create a oneness between horse and rider."

Hillis and Awana are among dozens of Island dressage aficionados looking forward to clinics hosted by Debbie McDonald of Hailey, Idaho, Jan. 21 and 22 at Hilltop Equestrian Center. McDonald is an Olympic bronze medalist and the country's first World Cup dressage champion.

The workshops are open to participants of all levels — even those with no riding or dressage backgrounds. The event is a chance for Hawai'i residents to meet and learn from an Olympic medalist, and to watch skilled horses and riders perform, organizers said.

## DEMANDING SPORT

The word dressage comes from the French dresser, which means to train.

The rider cues the horse to perform various movements. The signals should be imperceptible and may include a squeeze of the calf, a closing of the fingers or a shifting of the rider's weight in the saddle, according to the United States Dressage



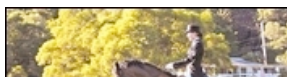
Pam Jones on her horse, Mirakel, left, and Suzi Hillis on her horse, Dante, perform the stately trotting and pirouettes of advanced dressage.

Photos by RICHARD AMBO | The Honolulu Advertiser

## DRESSAGE MOVES

Riders are judged on use of cues, and the horse's form and energy level. Common moves:

- **Pirouette**, a turn in place at a canter (a slow gallop). The horse's hind legs move in a space no bigger than a dinner plate.
- **Piaffe**, a trot in place.
- **Extensions**, which are "the opposite of the piaffe, covering as much ground in each stride as possible and yet staying balanced," says Linda Hosoi, an instructor and trainer at Hilltop Equestrian Center.



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"It's like you almost begin to think as one," McDonald said.

It's for this reason McDonald is passionate about the sport, she said.

"It's actually the bond and communication you have to have with the dressage horse to get him to do the higher level movements," McDonald said.

Dressage riders and horses go through years of training, said Linda Hosoi, an instructor and trainer at Hilltop Equestrian Center. A typical horse in the Olympics is 11; "Younger than that is just a super talent," she said.

For spectators, the key to enjoying the sport is to see how rides differ and look for moves that affect the horse and rider's score.

There's also the spectacle of the formally dressed rider and beautifully groomed horse to appreciate. While demonstrating dressage moves, Hillis wore the formal riding attire typical of dressage riders: top hat, navy blue coat, stock tie, white breeches, black riding boots, spurs and white gloves.

Dante was outfitted with a saddle and double bridle. For a show, Dante's mane would have been braided, and he would not wear the protective leg wraps used during the training session.

**U.S. RIDERS EMERGING**

McDonald, 51, is a decorated rider with 15 years of dressage experience.

Her achievements include becoming the dressage champion at the 2003 World Cup, which was organized by the Federation Equestrian International, and the first American to hold that title. She earned the U.S. Olympic Committee's Athlete of the Year award that same year, and was part of the bronze medal-winning U.S. team at the 2004 Olympics (McDonald and her horse, Brentina, finished fourth individually).

"She is the most accomplished of our Olympic dressage riders in America, ever," Hosoi said.

Until recently, dressage had been a European-dominated sport, Hosoi said.

"The Americans are now finally getting to where (the Europeans) are nervous about us, and Debbie McDonald has been the closest," Hosoi said. "We're excited to have her come to share her knowledge with us."

In addition to spotlighting McDonald's expertise, the clinics will feature horses of all levels of dressage, from training level to FEI level, which is the highest level, Awana added.

"It is open to beginners or anyone who is interested in horses in general, and no previous knowledge of dressage is necessary," Awana said. "Just come and see some beautiful horses do their stuff."



Pam Jones and Mirakel demonstrate an extended trot.



Suzi Hillis leads her horse, Dante, while wearing the formal attire for dressage riders — top hat, coat, breeches and gloves.



Polished boots are part of Suzy Hillis' formal riding outfit.



A double-bit bridle allows a wider range of signals to the horse.



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**TO LEARN**

**Debbie McDonald dressage clinics:**

**Also:** Bob McDonald, Debbie McDonald's trainer and well-known A-rated hunter/ jumper trainer, will be available for private lessons this weekend.

For more information, contact ASDS president Anna Awana at 389-0248. Send checks made out to Aloha State Dressage Society to Awana at 41-838 Mahiku Place, Waimanalo, HI 96795.



Debbie McDonald, Olympian and 2003 champion of the dressage World Cup, will hold clinics here Jan. 21-22.

**TO WATCH**

Aloha State Dressage Society shows start at 9 a.m. and end at about 4 p.m.; shows are free to the public. For details, call 389-0248.

**FIND OUT MORE**

Extensive information about dressage is available on these Web sites:

Reach Zenaída Serrano at [zserrano@honoluluadvertiser.com](mailto:zserrano@honoluluadvertiser.com).

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