

Horse Power

by Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi
Photography by Paul Dyson

When Linda Hosoi was a child growing up in Berkeley, California, stories such as *My Friend Flicka* and *The Black Stallion* captivated her for hours. At circuses, it was the prancing palominos that caught her eye – not the clowns, jugglers or trapeze artists. Her parents shared her avid interest in horses, and for many years the annual Grand National Horse Show in San Francisco was a much-anticipated family excursion.

Hosoi received a series of riding lessons as a gift for her seventh birthday, and started scouring the classifieds in search of her dream horse, never expecting to own one. Then, when she was 10, she saw an ad that read “Stock Dispersal Sale: Cheap Prices.”

“My father and his friend, who had become my riding teacher, took me to it,” Hosoi recalls, “and we ended up with an 18-month-old Arabian colt for \$75. My father, an architect, designed and helped build a barn in exchange for board and lessons.” Hosoi paid for her saddle by doing chores at home, and hung out at the barn as often as she could, happy to muck stalls and clean tack just to be around horses.

That love has never waned. Today, Hosoi, 59, is the senior trainer at Hilltop Equestrian Center in Waimanalo, teaching 14 advanced-level students the fine points of dressage.

Merriam-Webster defines dressage as “the execution of a trained horse of precision movements in response to barely perceptible signals from its rider.” It is derived from the French word *dresser*, meaning “to train,” and, indeed, a rider must go through years of instruction and practice to excel in the sport.

In 1998, riding Kathmandu (shown here with Hosoi), Jessica Hosoi won the United States Dressage Federation Reserve Champion Second Level title, which is calculated annually from the show scores of competitors across the country. The Champion title goes to the rider with the highest median score; Reserve Champion to the rider with the second highest score. From least to most difficult, the basic levels in dressage are Training, First Level, Second Level, Third Level and Fourth Level.





As Hosoi and Goodwill demonstrate at Hilltop Equestrian Center, precision is key in the sport of dressage.

Never mind that the horse may stand a foot taller and weigh ten times more than its human partner; in a well-executed dressage program, equestrian and mount are as completely in synch as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The most talented dressage horses – some 1,200 pounds of pure muscle – can do pirouettes and piaffes with the poise and grace of a ballerina.

The ancient Greeks were the first to practice dressage; their intricate exercises on horseback were captured in friezes at the Parthenon in Athens, which dates back to the 5th century BC. When the Romans conquered Greece in 146 BC, they adopted this agile, collected, light-handed style of riding.

Dressage's popularity, however, fell along with the Roman Empire in 476 AD. It was not revived until the 14th century in Italy, when the Renaissance brought about a flowering of the arts, including horsemanship.

From Italy, dressage spread across the continent, with the gentry taking it up with great enthusiasm. Noblemen regarded dressage as a way to flaunt their machismo and equestrian skills, while the ladies enjoyed dressing in lavish attire and riding to music. Over the next 300 years, in fact, such theatrical dressage was a favored form of entertainment among the European aristocracy.

An Olympic sport since 1912, dressage looks far easier than it actually is. "You have to be fit," says Hosoi. "You have to have flexibility and strength in your abdomen and hips to correctly position your body so the horse receives the right cues. The slightest shift in your weight or posture can affect how he responds."

Riders also must be patient, dedicated and aware of their horse's capabilities and limitations. Explains Hosoi, "Through very subtle signals, the best riders are able to bring out performances from their horse that are fluid and refined, yet energetic and powerful. I love the discipline, attention to detail, and heightened communication between horse and rider that dressage demands."

Hosoi was introduced to dressage on Kauai. In 1972, her father invited her to visit him in Princeville, where he was working on a project. Entranced by the beauty of the island,

she moved there the following year and bought an Arabian colt named Chapultepec.

Through word of mouth, Hosoi learned that the Knudsen family, who then owned a stable and cabin resort on the south side, needed someone to exercise their stallion, Four Miles Dandy. "I was the lucky one chosen to do that," Hosoi recalls. "By then, I had started to devour any reading material I could find on dressage. It became my passion, and Dandy became my first dressage 'guinea pig.'"

Hosoi has ridden and owned many other magnificent horses during her 30-year journey to distinction in dressage, three of her favorites being Kazorba, Lafitte and Walzer. She also has met and trained under dressage greats such as Tom Poulin, Dominique Barbier and Oahu resident Terry Tugman.



Hosoi shows Tia Gawani how much tension is needed on the reins to keep Goodwill's neck "round."



Gawani and Goodwill practice a routine as Hosoi watches. Dressage requires horse and rider to be completely in synch.

She cites other milestones in her life: marrying Clifford Hosoi, president of Hosoi Garden Mortuary (1979); giving birth to their daughter Jessica (1982); being invited to join the famed Lippizaner Stallion tour (1993, which she turned down because family was her top priority); applauding Jessica's Second Level Reserve Champion title for the United States Dressage Federation's 1998 season, a national honor; and watching students Breezy Burgoon and Tricia Silva compete in the prestigious North American Young Riders Championship in Bromont, Canada (2003).

Celebrating her students' success is one of Hosoi's greatest rewards. "Dressage requires a lot of work and commitment, and I admire the sacrifices they make to do it," she says. "As for myself, I'd like to think that I'll be riding, at least for pleasure, for many years to come." ■

Horsing Around

The Aloha State Dressage Society has six shows remaining in its 2006 schedule. They are set for June 17 and 18, August 5 and 6, and September 10 at Hilltop Equestrian Center (41-430 Waikupanaha Street in Waimanalo), and September 9 at Maunawili Farm (1015 Auloa Street in Maunawili). Shows usually run from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and admission is free. Call 389-0248 for more information.

If you're interested in learning more about dressage, call Linda Hosoi at 247-1478 or check out the Web site www.alohastatedressage.com.