

Leslie Ann McGowan

Profile for Friday Updates – December 10, 2021



Leslie Ann performing dressage at Devon
Stacy Lynn Photography

If you are not an equine enthusiast you might not know that there is a highly-regarded equestrian center in Durham. Double A Equestrians, part of Linden Woods Farm, is situated on 30 acres at 135 Packers Falls Road, a half mile south of Bennett Road. Leslie Ann McGowan owns and operates the facility with her mother Karen Bishop.

Double A Equestrians

Karen and her husband Bill McGowan, who has served on the Durham Planning Board for many years, purchased Linden Woods Farm in 2002. Running an equestrian facility was always a dream for Karen who grew up with horses. Likewise for Leslie Ann who started lessons when she was five, ultimately receiving a bachelor's degree in Equine Management from UNH.

She is now teaching riders and training horses professionally and competing herself at a high level, riding six to eight horses daily as part of this regimen. Leslie Ann has four horses of her own: a lesson horse for teaching beginners, a show horse, a yearling she is preparing for competition in the future, and one that is retired.

Double A - named for Leslie Ann's first two horses, Ace and Austin - offers boarding, riding lessons, and clinics. The facility has an indoor riding ring (so they are busy year round), an outdoor ring, matted stalls, a heated tack room, a jump field, and a network of trails. They offer vibrations technology to enhance performance and pulsed electro-magnetic field therapy to facilitate recuperation from injury and other infirmities.

At Double A they teach English riding, with a specialty in classic dressage training. Western riding, originated from cowboy work on ranches, is a different style with different breeds of horses. The saddle, for example, has a horn for roping cattle.

Dressage

Dressage (pronounced dress -äzh') is a kind of dance with prescribed movements performed with the horse and rider in exhibition and competition. The purpose is to develop and refine the horse's natural athletic ability and grace where the animal responds smoothly to very subtle nonverbal commands. Riders communicate through their legs, seat, and reins. Dressage is considered the highest expression of equestrian training.

Leslie said, “Horses walk, trot, canter and gallop. In dressage we do ‘tests’ that involve the first three but not galloping, their fastest gait. Walking and galloping involve four beats with each leg moving on its own (but in different patterns). Trotting is two beats with the legs moving in diagonal pairs and cantering is three beats (with one diagonal pair moving together). We do movements called half passes, pirouettes, flying changes, and airs above the ground along with other maneuvers depending on the level.” It takes many years for a horse to develop the strength, balance, agility and obedience to perform these movements.

Some of the highest-quality horses used were originally German breeds – including the handsome Hanoverians, Oldenburgs, and Westphalians - but there are now many fine American-bred horses. The most renowned dressage is performed by the white Lippizaner horses (developed by the Hapsburg monarchy) at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna.

Training

Horses naturally prefer relaxing in the field enjoying the warm air and sunshine rather than following orders and working hard (just like us). Plus, they are animals of prey so their instinct is to spook or run away when they see anything unusual or surprising. Leslie Ann’s job is to instill gentle discipline and teach the horse how to deal with stress. “You must invest in a relationship and spend time with the horse. If you take care of them then they will trust you and want to please you. You do not need to be super firm but you have to be clear with your expectations.”

She adds, “Once the horse respects you and your authority it will respond. Otherwise, you will not be able to outmuscle a 1,200-pound animal.” One of the first things that she establishes is ‘ground manners,’ the proper way for the horse to follow when you walk ahead (and to the side so they don’t step on your foot) leading with the reins.

The trainer needs to adapt the approach to the individual horse as all are different. “Some respond readily and others are more resistant. They have higher or lower energy levels. Some focus better than others. Some horses are just goofy. Some are shy and others are outgoing. With show horses you want them to be confident.” A pleasure horse, especially one used with inexperienced riders, should be ‘bombproof,’ meaning it remains calm no matter what happens around it.

Training can be taxing on horses mentally and physically. Leslie Ann varies schedules, concentrating on strength one day and stamina the next, alternating demanding and light programs. In beautiful weather they may simply go for a long ride. Her horses like to work and they greet her in the paddock, whinnying “hello.” Horses with not as good a work ethic run in the other direction when they see her coming. But even a stout horse may need a day off, perhaps after a big show: he will look at her and then turn and walk away.

“If you pay attention they are usually trying to tell you something, with a swish of the tail, the position of their ears, an expression in their eyes, or how they hold their head. You have to know what is normal for the particular horse to best interpret the signs though.”

Sponsorship

Leslie Ann competes in dressage all over New England and she has made the U.S. National Finals. A large team of professionals is required to support performance at this level, involving a good deal of veterinary attention; massage, chiropractic, and other therapeutic treatments for the horse; periodic visits from the farrier; and guidance from Leslie Ann's own trainers.

Most important, a rider needs financial backing to cover care for the horse, entry fees for shows, expenses for traveling, and the cost of training. Leslie Ann's sponsor is a gentleman in his 70s who actually is the owner of Belfast, her show horse. "My sponsor loves horses and wants to be part of the journey as he is not a competitive rider himself. He is generous and has the resources to help."

Leslie Ann's goal is to compete in the Olympics. The dressage tests demand tremendous skill and concentration from both the horse and rider on that stage. The American team has four riders (including men and women) so it is exceedingly competitive to be selected. Belfast is a superb horse but he probably does not have the potential to reach that level. Hopefully, another sponsor with a top-quality horse will see Leslie Ann perform and offer their horse for her to train with. The finest dressage horse could cost half a million dollars.

Love of horses

Leslie Ann reads about horses a lot and observes how other people ride. She doesn't watch Westerns much though. Asked about John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, she said, "They ride pretty well but not with any kind of finesse." Dressage was not Duke's metier.

Leslie Ann says, "Horses are such cool animals. I love being around them - their personalities, their big hearts, their willingness to try." She found her pony Woody, who had been abused, in the woods. "He tries his heart out for me."

She adds, "Horses feed off your energy. That partnership, the challenge, the competitive piece. There is always so much to learn. I want to be the best that I can be and I want to help others succeed and accomplish their goals."

Apart from handling horses, Leslie Ann enjoys taking her dogs for a walk and she does some wakeboarding and snowboarding. She played ice hockey her first two years at UNH and says that she would like to get involved in coaching "if I can find the spare time, ha ha." Perhaps she will after she returns from Los Angeles in 2028.



**Leslie Ann with Belfast
Susan Irene Photography**