

# Judy Kelly's Recipe for Success

*Judy and Benise showing their elegant canter work at the inaugural National Dressage Championships in November 2013 in Kentucky. The pair took first in the Prix St. Georges Open/Adult Amateur class with a 71.184 percent.*

Photo by SusanJStickle.com



*Judy shares a quiet moment with her nine-year-old Hanoverian mare Benise (Breitling W – Rubenstein I) at the Dressage at Waterloo Show in Michigan.*

Photo by Kim MacMillan/  
MacMillan Photography

By Kim MacMillan

Mix together a strong Midwestern work ethic, a good measure of practicality, a pinch of intensity and a large portion of passion for horses and dressage and you come up with Judy Kelly of Clarkston, Michigan. Judy has been teaching and training at her Topline Dressage since 1981 and has achieved her United States Dressage Federation's bronze, silver and gold medals along the way.

Judy started riding at an early age. "The most consistent riding I did early on was in 4-H when I was 11 or 12. In fact, my husband's mom was our 4-H leader. I love telling that story; we grew up about a half a mile from one another. I just did Western then – games and pleasure classes mainly. My first horse was a little Quarter Horse named Sir Don, a.k.a. Donald. He was a great kid's horse!"

"I did that for about two years and got a little bored so I wanted to learn English riding. I grew up in Farmington, Michigan, and just down the road from us in West Bloomfield was Centaur Farms where I took lessons with Dave Lackey. I started taking English riding lessons there on school horses and did a little jumping and a little dressage. I was not a brave kid, so I didn't like jumping so much. That is how I started dressage. From age 13 until I was 19 I rode at Centaur," explained Judy.

The Maestro was Judy's first dressage horse. She bought him when she was 14 and took him all the way to the grand prix level. She and Maestro placed fifth in 1979 at the selection trials for the Pan American Games. They were also invited to compete at Goodwood in England. "I was able, just by the blessing of the horse, to make it to grand prix. I kept him for the rest of his life. Once I started back as a professional rider in 1981, he was my school horse and he was really, really good too! He was 25 when

he had to be put down," she said.

After two years off for college, Judy decided to turn pro. "In college I studied many things, because I was trying to decide what to do when I 'grew up.' Math and sciences were my forte. It makes me an analytical rider," she said.

Early in her dressage career she rode with a number of respected names including Steffen Peters, Christine Traurig and Betsy Steiner. She also participated in a developing rider clinic with Guenter Seidel. In the late 1980s, she rode with Jan Ebeling when he was giving clinics in Michigan and later re-connected with him when she went to the Los Angeles Equestrian Center to watch a Klaus Balkenhol clinic and saw Jan there. She's been riding with him for nearly 12 years now.

"Since I had already ridden with him in the clinics I asked him if he would be interested in coming out to Michigan again to work with me and he said he would. He has been the most influential person in my riding. He pushes me when I need to be pushed. His instructing and the way he explains things are great – he lets you work things out, but then he'll say 'well, I would have done it this way.' He really cares about the success of you and your horse. It's just a great relationship. He's stuck with me whether he wants to be or not," she laughed.

Judy's philosophy of creating an individual training program that suits each of her students and their horses has made her a popular instructor at her farm just north of Detroit. She and her husband of 25 years, Sean Kelly, own and operate Topline Dressage. Their barn has 33 stalls and they regularly have 25 – 30 horses at the farm at any one time. Judy teaches around 30 students per week at home and coaches many of them at shows. She also trains and shows horses for her clients and has at least one show horse

*Continued on page 23*