

Dressage Breeding Issue

Daring To Be Different Defines O'Connor's Breeding Program

She's turned a childhood dream into reality with her black-and-white dressage horses.

Jennifer M. Keeler



(Mary Cornelius Photo)

Color may be a priority in Marion Dresel O'Connor's breeding program, but her highest aim is to produce quality horses with attractive gaits and exceptional rideability.

MARION DRESEL O'CONNOR loves a horse with "bling." And a lot of it. Defying an unlikely background, modest means, remote location and some unconventional approaches, O'Connor has turned her love into consecutive national honors from the U.S. Dressage Federation as Dressage Sport Horse Breeder of the Year in 2009 and 2010, while her colorful horses make an impression on the dressage world.

O'Connor was born horse-crazy in a town in Germany where riding was only for the privileged few. Watching "Bonanza" on TV as a youngster, she was mesmerized by Little Joe's black-and-white pony.

As a resourceful teenager, she found a way to earn some lessons and learned to ride in jumping and classical dressage. The demands of a burgeoning non-equestrian career took her away from the show ring while she trail rode and dabbled in other disciplines for 10 years, but she never lost her spark for dressage.

She met her husband, Patrick, through a mutual interest in Native American jewelry—he was an importer and distributor of Indian art throughout Europe. During buying trips to the southwestern United States, the exotic pinto and Appaloosa horses of the area drew O'Connor like a magnet.

Before long, the couple owned five flashy American Paint Horses, which were flown overseas to Germany. However, as board bills mounted, they began to think about a farm of their own. During a state-side buying trip, the O'Connors found themselves in northern Idaho and fell in love with the land, purchasing property in Careywood near

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Though unshown due to injury, the colorful stallion Radikal continues to sire champions for Marion Dresel O'Connor.

explained. "I realized that I could be dead tomorrow! I wanted to give horses a go. And thankfully my dear husband supported my decision."

Her Very Own Black Stallion

Soon after, in 1995, O'Connor accompanied Kabasa on a buying trip to Germany, where she intended to act as translator. However, it was O'Connor who bought one instead—a big, black, flashy Hanoverian yearling by Neuquen out of a Wienerwald mare.

"I'm the first one to admit I got lucky," she admitted with a laugh when asked why she took a chance on the youngster. "This colt became our first stallion, Winnetou."

O'Connor planned to cross her new charge with her Paint mares and Thoroughbreds off the track. But after additional trips to Europe to see stallion shows, she realized she'd have to step up her game even further. "I saw Weltmeyer and had never seen anything like him. I wanted to have a horse like that, but with color!" she said. "And since nobody had them, I wanted to breed them myself."

O'Connor sought help from stallion owners in the United States who were skeptical of her unconventional approach. Finally, Ann Schmidt, a Hanoverian breeder and owner of Classic Sires in Portland, Ore., agreed to help. "She taught me so much about breeding, and she had access to frozen semen from Europe, including from Weltmeyer," said O'Connor.

In 1997, the first year of crossing Weltmeyer with one of her Paint mares resulted in a black and white filly named Weltskandal. "At first I was disappointed because she wasn't a colt," said O'Connor. But Weltskandal would become O'Connor's foundation mare, producing several exceptional overo foals, including her current proven stallion Radikal (by Rotspan).

A year later she crossed Winnetou with another Paint mare and produced Wolkenzauber, a brightly colored and talented colt. Successfully shown to second level in dressage, Wolkenzauber now competes in eventing at the training and preliminary levels.

His daughter, Wolkenkarat (out of Hochkarat), won USDF Reserve Horse of the Year titles as a yearling and 2-year-old, then earned Horse of the Year in 2008 for materiale and

Imported from Germany in 2004, champion mare Hochkarat has become the new cornerstone of Marion Dresel O'Connor's (middle) breeding program, shown here with (from left) Jessica Wisdom and husband Patrick O'Connor.

the Canadian border, which they christened Cocolalla Creek Sport Horses.

Finding A Silver Lining In Tragedy

When O'Connor first moved to the United States she competed in reining. While at her reining trainer's barn, she met other riders who took lessons from a local dressage trainer, Pat Kabasa.

"She was willing to give me dressage lessons on my Paint reining horses, and I really liked it and had so much fun!" said O'Connor.

Despite this newfound enjoyment, it was a horrific car accident that ultimately changed the course of O'Connor's life. After spending 10 days in intensive care and receiving a settlement for damages and pain and suffering, she decided it was time to make some major changes.

"I was 29 years old and decided that life was too short to try to continue to pursue a business career which I wasn't that passionate about anymore," she



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(Photo courtesy of Cocalalla Creek Sport Horses)

Wolkenzauber was the first stallion to come out of Marion Dresel O'Connor's breeding program, and not only has he produced lovely black and white babies, but he also competes in dressage and eventing.

3-Year-Olds under saddle. In 2010, with owner/rider Sophie Pirie Clifton, she qualified for the 5-year-old division of the Markel/USEF National Young Horse Dressage Championships, earning qualifying scores as high as 8.42 from FEI O-level judge Anne Gribbons.

It's About More Than Color

O'Connor is breeding for eye-popping color, but she sticks to the overo pattern, particularly black and white. Overos have a solid dark color along their topline from their ears to their tails with sharply defined and irregular white patches, which are horizontally oriented on the horse's sides.

Because of this pattern preference, O'Connor never considered using the popular Art Deco line for her horses, since he was a tobiano, where large white areas are arranged in a vertical pattern across the horse's body. But O'Connor stressed that her breeding philosophy is about much more than fancy markings.

"I would say that nine out of 10 times I have color in mind, but I will never sacrifice quality for color," she said. "I have to be responsible and produce the best quality individuals that I can possibly get in order to give those horses the best possible chance to succeed. And instead of aiming to produce a one-in-a-million Olympic horse, I focus on producing a beautiful, quality horse with big gaits that is rideable."

Because horses with an overo color pattern can carry a deadly recessive gene called "lethal white," O'Connor only breeds an overo mare or stallion to a solid-colored partner, which technically results in only a 50 percent chance of color.

"In our experience, about every three out of five times my pairings will end up with a solid color, usually black, with basic white markings. But when I don't get a paint, it works out," she said. "From a commercial point of view, I can sell a solid black baby 20 times faster than the colored ones anyway. Dressage riders love big black horses."

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Working To Overcome Prejudice

O'Connor braves a mixed reaction from the sport horse community by breeding spotted dressage horses. Some judges associate pinto coloring with stock horse-type breeding, which can lead to preconceived notions of ability. She rarely shows the brightly colored youngsters in-hand any more.

"I would present a paint baby and solid baby of the same type and quality, and the solid one would always handily beat the colored," she said.

Among riders, however, styles are ever changing. "These days, it's become fashionable to have a horse with a lot of 'bling.' But once the coloring gets too wild, the number of dressage riders interested in these horses is much fewer," she said.

"However, there is a small group of color devotees, and they want a quality mount with the flashy color, and I can provide it."

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She's also seeing an increasing interest from the European market and, therefore, will be looking to send a future colored colt to Europe to compete and stand at stud.

O'Connor doesn't advertise her stallions. "To make your living selling semen, you have to have a very good horse and a lot of money to campaign and advertise him. For me, I achieve best results via word of mouth and getting our youngsters seen," she said.

But due to O'Connor's remote location, even getting her youngsters seen is challenging. "We will primarily travel to Spokane [Wash.], which is just over an hour away," she said. "But every other dressage venue is at least eight to 10 hours away. We try to occasionally travel to Portland [Ore.] for the Devonwood shows and even as far as California."

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"Don't be barn blind! Get the two best mares you can and get rid of the 10 average ones."

—Marion Dresel O'Connor

Success Through Economy And Education

O'Connor operates with the utmost efficiency in mind. "I don't keep more than 20 horses on the place," she said. "In this economy, I can't afford to keep a bunch of mares anymore just to serve as broodmares. All of our mares must double as performance mares, and we flush them for embryo transfer, which is fairly affordable in this area. We only keep one or two recipient mares of our own, using Thoroughbreds and draft crosses, and we lease more if needed."

She focuses on selling her young stock to pay the bills. "Normally we don't sell embryos or semen anymore," she said. "By keeping our operation small [our goal is five or six foals a year] and not breeding a bunch of outside mares, it's easier to control the quality produced. I emphasize producing my own foals of superior quality and selling them young."

To compliment her exotic stallions, O'Connor is passionate about the importance of excellent mares. "Even though genetics are 50/50, I always breed the best mares I can," she said. "I rotate mares in and out of our stock, importing new mares which bring fresh bloodlines into the program; then after a few years I sell those mares and reinvest again."

She looks to Europe for new blood. "While things change quickly there, my all-time favorites are, of course, Weltmeyer and Don Frederico crossed with Weltmeyer or the Hanoverian A line, since these horses are very ride-

able. I also like Ramiro Z for lovely movement, as well as Stedinger, and mares with De Niro on the dam side," she said.

O'Connor is also a Hohenstein fan. "It's on my wish list to add a mare by his son Hochadel to my program," she said.

Regular trips to stallion shows in Europe help O'Connor stay on top of her game. "It's amazing to see how breeding is always advancing and changing," she said.

O'Connor emphasized that breeders must be able to criticize themselves and hold their program to the highest standards. "Don't be barn blind! Get the two best mares you can and get rid of the 10 average ones. Don't skimp on stallion selection: Always take the best you can get. The stud fee itself is nothing compared to the expense of raising a youngster to sale age," she said. "And make sure to educate yourself—go to shows, inspections, auctions and licensings, especially in Europe if you can afford it."

Following her own advice, O'Connor made the difficult decision to sell Winnetou in 2004 and used the money to travel to Germany to purchase the best black mare she could find. After spending two weeks, she found the 3-year-old Hochkarat (Hohenstein—Destemona, De Niro) in the sales barn of Klaus Büniger.

Hochkarat proved to be an outstanding producer and became the new cornerstone of O'Connor's program. She doubled as a treasured riding partner and helped her owner achieve her lifetime goal of a USDF Bronze Medal.

"Hochkarat was so difficult at first that we called her the 'coiled cobra,'" joked O'Connor. "She is 100 percent total alpha. But I'm glad I stuck it out—she is now my soul mate. We have a mutual respect, and she's trained me well. I will compete with her this year at third and fourth levels, but for me it's not about the scores; it's about how it feels."

Big Plans For The Future

As a rider, O'Connor appreciates the importance of a well-started dressage horse. "We breed good horses in the U.S.; but as is often heard, there seems to be a lack of good young horse trainers in this country," she said.

In 2005, she partnered with trainer Jessica Wisdom, who now starts all young horses for O'Connor and presents them in-hand and

Marion Dresel O'Connor believes in putting good basic education on the horses she breeds, so in 2005 she paired up with Jessica Wisdom (shown), who now starts and shows all of O'Connor's young horses such as Wolkenkarat.



(Mary Cornelius Photo)

under saddle. "I owe so much to her. She embraces the training of youngsters and brings out the best in them," said O'Connor. "I'm so glad I met her before she becomes too famous!"

Wisdom holds high praise for O'Connor's program. "I've done work for a lot of big breeders, and Marion's horses are absolutely of the same quality if not better. And she works hard to do right by the horses—something I don't see enough of in this industry," she said.

Clifton, owner of Wolkenkarat, wholeheartedly agrees. "The very fact that Marion is winning these national awards despite having such a small program and very few progeny out there showing is testament to the fact that the horses she is producing are every bit as fancy in conformation and movement as those being produced by the big name breeders and by those who are relying on more currently fashionable bloodlines like Sandro Hit," she said.

"Marion also does an exemplary job, not just in breeding for good conformation, movement and temperament, but also in how she raises the horses and has them started. There is quality and consistency throughout her program."

O'Connor is expecting four foals this spring. In the show ring, she plans to present her "awesome" 3-year-old fillies by Cocolalla Creek stallions, Rad Safari (by Radikal) and White Romance (by Wolkenzauber).

In addition, Wisdom hopes to target three progeny by O'Connor's stallions (and all out of Hochkarat) in the Markel/USEF Young Horse Dressage Program, including Rio Rima (by Radikal) in the 4-year-old test, full sibling Rio Rio as a 5-year-old, and Wolkenkarat (by Wolkenzauber) for the 6-year-old division.

"I began all of this not because somebody asked me to produce these horses or because there was a demand at the time for it. It was just something that I really liked and wanted to do for myself," said O'Connor. "I wanted to ride dressage on a really good black and white horse. I have better horses now than I did three years ago, and I still want to breed better horses in three years than I have today." 🐾

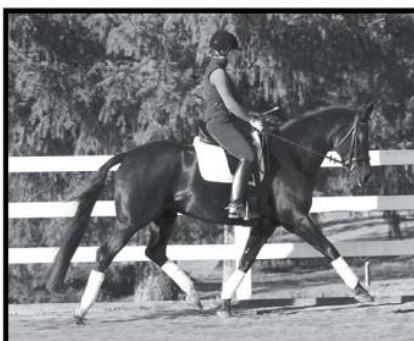
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