

Leading Ladies

Champions in dressage—a sport that favors neither children nor Paints—Jessica Dworkin and "Jazzie" are pint-sized competitors with big-time courage.

By Breanne Hill

Jessica Dworkin was a 7 years old, mourning the tragic death of her pony, when a petite mare named Casanova Lady came into her life early last summer. At 9 years old, Casanova Lady had been labeled a "throwaway Paint" by her owners, but Jessica saw something else in the deep chocolate of the mare's eyes.

She saw a friend.

"From the first time I met her I thought she was really, really pretty, and I wanted her a lot," says Jessica. "I knew she would take care of me because she's sweet and kind. That's all. I just knew it."

If Jessica could find happiness with the mare, then her parents, Lisa and Jeff, were willing to go along for the ride. They had been through a lot of tribulation in their short time as a family. If one horse could make Jessica smile again, then the couple would welcome that horse with open arms, even if she was a "throwaway."

Tough all over.

There comes a time in everyone's life when he or she needs to be rescued. For Lisa and Jeff Dworkin, that time came in 1994. Married less than one year, the New Jersey residents' future plans were shattered when Jeff's spina bifida—a spinal defect with which he had been diagnosed at birth—finally made its presence known, forcing the once avid soccer player into the life of a bedridden invalid.

Jeff needed 24-hour care, so his new wife quit her job to tend to him herself. The couple moved in with Jeff's parents, and Lisa, who had ridden horses almost all of her life, sold her prized Thoroughbreds.

"That was hard," says Lisa. "We were like children again. Thank God for Jeff's parents."

Photo by Cookie Originals

With the support of his parents and Lisa, Jeff was eventually able to recuperate through physical therapy and sheer determination. The next

year he was walking, and even running, again. But by that time, the Dworkins had nothing of value to their names. Jeff and Lisa had to quickly rejoin the workforce, and save their money. Then, on September 27, 1996, Jessica was born.

To her parents, Jessica Lynn Dworkin was 9 pounds of pure miracle. In "Jessie," Lisa saw a future full of family meals and trips to Disney World. What she hadn't counted on, however, was that Jessica would bring her back to her first love-horses.

Pony parade

When Jessica was 3 years old, the Dworkins took a tentative step back into horse ownership by buying a pony named Minnie Mouse for their preschooler.

Right away, Lisa was delighted by the fact that her daughter seemed to be a natural in the saddle and began looking for a better-quality pony for Jessica to show. The family went through a chain of such ponies before settling on a docile gelding named Peter Pan.

With Peter Pan, Jessica began to show in lead-line and walk-trot classes.

As the little blonde's potential as a rider grew, so did Lisa's interest in rejoining the horse show industry. Putting the skills she learned when she was younger to good use, Lisa bought several horses and trained them for dressage and sport horse events while Jessica was riding ponies.

In 2001, Lisa trained Irish Hills Chyna, the year's Zone 2 Performance Horse Registry (PHR) Hunter Breeding Horse of the Year. And in 2002, while Irish Hills Chyna won Zone 4 United States Equestrian Federation (USAE) and PHR Horse of the Year honors, Lisa also trained Irish Hills Amber, who became Zone 4's USAE Hunter Breeding Horse of the Year Reserve Champion.

The "Irish Hills" in the horses' names became the call name for the Dworkins new farm, Irish Hills Farm, in Sumterville, Florida. They moved to the farm in 2002.

Meanwhile, Jessica was growing tall for her 6 years-too tall, in Lisa's opinion, for the 11-hand Peter Pan.

"A man named Jose Medera who worked for our vets [Peterson and Smith] knew we were looking for a new horse for Jessica," says Lisa, "and he had a Quarter Horse mare named Ellie. He gave Ellie to Jessica."

In Ellie, whose show name became Show-N-Tell, Jessica found a kindred

spirit. The pair bonded as Jessica had with no other horse.

"We knew Ellie wasn't a forever show horse," says Lisa, "but we knew she'd be our forever horse."

The Dworkins decided to breed Ellie in the spring of 2004. She was in foal 16 days when Jeff and Lisa went out to feed and found her lying listless in the barn.

"We rushed her to the vet and tried everything," says Lisa, "but it was organ failure. There was nothing they could do."

It was recommended that Ellie be put down to end her suffering. Before doing so, however, the veterinarians permitted Jessica to say goodbye to her friend.

"How do you explain to your 7-year-old about death?" asks Lisa. "It was so hard. I remember driving home from the vet's with Jessica, and I noticed that her ponytail was down. I asked her, 'What happened to your ponytail holder?' She told me she had put it in Ellie's forelock, so when Ellie was in heaven she wouldn't forget her.

"I had nothing to say to that. I didn't know how to respond."

Both Jeff and Lisa became concerned for Jessica. Ellie died on a Tuesday and Jessica's school was out for the summer the next Thursday. They needed a distraction, and fast, to get Jessica through the next three months. Lisa's solution was to "window shop" for a horse to lease. Any horse would do—just something that would be safe and would get Jessica out of the house and out of mourning.

All that Jazzie

Casanova Lady didn't have a lot going for her by the summer of 2004. In her 9 years of life, the 14.1-hand bay tobiano mare had belonged to three different families, none of whom completed her riding training. Her latest family had received her as payment for a shipping bill and were in the process of trying to find new owners for her when they spotted Lisa's "looking for a pony" advertisement in the newspaper.

"I got an e-mail from someone saying they had a cute Paint mare for me to look at," says Lisa. "They said that she was a throwaway off of a shipping bill, so I thought she wouldn't be too expensive."

Lisa decided to visit the people's ranch and look at the Paint mare. She was expecting the worst, but as she and Jessica turned into the ranch's

driveway, she noticed the attractive Paint out in the pasture.

"She was beautiful," says Lisa. "I thought, 'This is a throwaway?' And, of course, Jessica was taken with her right away."

Lisa tacked up the flashy mare and took her for a ride around the arena. At a walk, the Paint was excellent. At a trot, she was good. But at a lope, she crow-hopped and bucked.

"I got off and said, 'Thank you very much, but no,' " says Lisa. " 'This is not a kid's horse.' "

Despite Jessica's protests for the Paint, the search for an appropriate horse continued.

"We looked at so many horses," says Jeff, "but Jessica kept saying how much she liked the Paint mare, and how sweet the Paint mare was.

"She even started calling her 'Jazzie.' We didn't even own the horse, and Jessica had named her."

Lisa and Jeff realized that Jessica had formed some sort of attachment to the Paint, and that her mind was made up.

"I decided that the crow-hopping lope was something we could deal with later," says Lisa. "Jessica wasn't loping yet, so it wasn't an immediate problem. And the mare was sweet-natured, which was a big plus."

So, in June of 2004, Jessica got her Jazzie.

Almost immediately, Jessica and Jazzie clicked as horse and rider. A naturally smooth mover, Jazzie learned quickly to walk and trot with Jessica as if the pair had been together for years.

"I was surprised," said Lisa. "I wasn't expecting Jazzie to be so talented. We began to suspect that we'd hit a little gold mine with her." "A kid and a Paint?"

Although the United States Dressage Federation (USDF) says that every kind of horse can benefit from the body control and discipline dressage requires, traditional Western stock horses, such as Paints, are not considered "ideal" competitors in the sport.

Dressage purists claim this is because stock horses don't look as agile and elegant as warmblood-type horses do while performing a dressage pattern.

Others, however, claim stock horses don't do well in dressage because they generally aren't favored by the upper crust's horsey set.

Nevertheless, by 2004, Lisa, who was neither a member of the upper crust nor wanted to be, was listed as one of USEF's top four owners and top 10 breeders of dressage horses.

A champion of equines in need (she regularly takes in ex-racehorses with problems and rehabilitates them), Lisa believed she was prepared for anything the equine world threw at her. That is, until Jessica made a strange request.

"She wanted to compete in dressage with Jazzie," says Lisa. "I said, 'Honey, it's a dressage show. A little 14.1-hand Paint probably isn't going to be so great.'"

Jessica cared little about the odds she was given. She and Jazzie had won every walk-trot show they entered. The 7-year-old looked at dressage as simply another hurdle to leap over with flying colors.

"Jessica was so insistent about showing Jazzie in dressage that I finally gave in," says Lisa. "We started practicing for the in-hand class."

An in-hand dressage class is judged on movement and how well a horse responds to the commands of its handler. The problem for Jessica and Jazzie was that they would be competing against adults and larger horses.

"So, we had this kid and this Paint," says Lisa. "Dressage just doesn't revolve around kids."

"Add into that the fact that Jazzie is a pony as far as USDF is concerned, showing against 17-hand horses, and you've got a real recipe for disaster."

The disaster never took place. As it turned out, Jessica had a sparkle about her and a professionalism that belied her young age, and Jazzie, under the show name Kodachrome, had a sweet expression and grace that overcame any preconceived ideas the judges might have harbored.

The pair began their winning streak with three blue ribbons at their first show, and went on to win Dressage Sport Horse Breeding classes with the Sunshine Sport Horse Association and at Pennock Point sport horse shows. They won every Sport Horses of Color class in which they competed and even beat Lisa and her champion Trakehner filly, Keep The Faith, at one competition.

By the end of the awards season, on September 30, 2004, Jazzie and Jessica had an average annual score of 66. As a result, Jazzie was named the 2004 USDF All-Breeds Mature APHA Horse of the Year.

It was a huge victory for a little horse that no one had believed in or wanted only five months earlier.

"We were really proud," says Lisa. "So much for the throwaway Paint."

The only one who wasn't surprised by Jazzie's success was Jessica.

"Jazzie takes care of me," explains Jessica. "When I get nervous, she lets me know it's OK, and I shouldn't worry. She just helps me, and I love her." For the Dworkins, life is about second chances and flying in the face of the odds. Every person and animal at Irish Hills Farm has been rescued in some way and is now living a better life because of the love that exists in the Dworkin family.

Jessica and Jazzie are the ultimate advertisement for this love. They are also proof that even the littlest among us can do mighty things if only given a chance.

For additional information on Irish Hills Farm, visit their website at www.irishhillsfarm.com.

Swearing By Seminole

"I'm very particular about what I feed my horses," says Lisa Dworkin. "I'm a label reader and a researcher."

"When we moved to Florida, I did my research and switched to Seminole Feed. Seminole just makes good, quality products." All of Irish Hills Farm's horses eat Seminole feed.

Jazzie is fed Seminole Gold Chance 10, while Lisa's open mares eat Gold Chance 12 + Lysine, and her pregnant mares get Gold Chance 14. "I love these feeds because they're so clean," says Lisa. "They're not dusty, and they have the right number of vitamins and minerals. That's very important to me."

Lisa says Seminole feeds are the reason her horses remain an ideal weight and have shiny coats-even the ex-racehorses she rehabilitates. "I got one mare off the track who was a bag of bones," says Lisa. "I put three buckets with different feeds in her stall for her to choose because I knew she was a picky eater."

"She went right for the Gold Chance 14. Now, she looks healthy and happy." Lisa feels that she gets both great feed and service from her local Seminole Feed dealer TomKat Feed and Supply. Lisa also includes Seminole alfalfa cubes in her horses' diets and gives Seminole alfalfa pellets to her younger horses.