

Prepared for a Crowd

By Christine Duval-Sentry, Verona, Wisconsin

I just returned from my first United States Dressage Federation (USDF) horse show near Chicago, IL. Since it was such a positive experience, I thought I'd share it. I also want to take this opportunity to thank all of the mule enthusiasts who worked so fervently to change the USA Equestrian/USDF rule, which preciously prohibited mules from recognized dressage competition. Your efforts were definitely worth it.

For the past four years *Pass the Buck* (*Buck*) and I have trained with Senior Dressage judge and FEI trainer Lois Hyerdahl. We competed regularly at dressage schooling shows at our local horse show circuit progressing through the levels quite nicely. After a few year-end grand championships however, I became increasingly frustrated that I couldn't compete with the really serious riders/trainers at USDF sanctioned competitions. It was, therefore, with great enthusiasm when I learned beginning April 1, 2004, mules would be allowed to compete.

It was a bit of an adventure to figure out all of the necessary paperwork in order to show at a recognized competition. I had to join USA Equestrian and USDF and then *Buck* needed to join to get his "horse" ID number. We then joined the regional USDF affiliate organization. I also needed to find an appropriate horse show for our debut.

I selected a two-day Silverwood Dressage show in July because it was close to home. Silverwood hosts 17 recognized dressage competitions each year, and has earned the reputation of a well-run, competitive event. The classes were expensive and stabling for two nights was as much as I pay for the month in board. I figure it was about an \$800 weekend when you consider membership and entry fees, my day off work, fuel, food and the hotel room. I was told the three judges would be fair, and that was all I could hope for. As a bonus, the other trainer with whom I ride, Liz Lamm, was also going to show her horse that weekend, so I'd have some assistance in understanding the rules, negotiating the show grounds, and coaching in the warm-up.

Buck has been to some big shows, including Bishop, CA but this was a little different and it was a lot different than our local schooling shows. First, the grounds were intimidating with over 175 stalls, five warm-up arenas and three competition arenas. There were 89 horses registered for the show with more horses there for board and the three-day dressage clinic. *Buck* is nearly 17 hands, but these horses were BIG! I saw one lady standing on top of a three-step ladder to barely reach her stirrup iron. I guessed her horse was over 18 hands...and beautiful! Most of the horses were warm bloods, a few Andalusian/Lusitanos, a handful of Friesians...and one mule.

Several stables had hired crews to groom horses and clean stalls. My mom and Aunt Gayle handled those duties for me. Riders and trainers used walkie-talkies and earpieces in the warm-up arenas so their instructions wouldn't bother other riders (Liz just shouted at me when I rode by).

I sent a copy of the rule change with my entry and called show management prior to the show. They were delighted to see something different at their show and I think they were even proud I had selected their venue. They warned me ahead of time that I should be prepared for a crowd. They were right. During one test, we filled the bleachers and lined the arena. I heard a guy shout to his friends right before I entered A to trot down centerline, "the mule is in the arena!! You've got to see the mule!! Hurry!!"

I was surprised at the number of upper-level riders at the show (very unlike schooling shows). It was exciting to ride in the warm-up. Grand Prix horses would sail by at an extended trot; others were working on their one-tempi changes (lead changes every stride) or canter pirouettes and on and on. If only *Buck* could learn those movements by watching! Most of the competitors were very friendly. One guy finished his 3rd-level musical kur on his Friesian stallion and said, "Have a good ride!" as I drove by him in the arena. One woman told me I should plan to qualify and compete in Regionals.

I spoke with the Technical Delegate (a USDF-certified person who enforces the rules and handles complaints) on Sunday afternoon and she reported no one complained about our presence. Most people were just plain curious. One woman even asked if *Buck* could canter. If I had a nickel for every time someone said, "I never knew mules could do this," I'd have paid for my weekend.

My goal was to do well enough that the judges would have to place me. I didn't care what color the ribbon, I just wanted to know we could hold our own against the toughest competition we've ever seen. I entered six classes in the maiden, amateur and open divisions. We were evaluated by two different judges, and our scores were very respectable. Both judges had a lot of positive comments about *Buck*. I'm happy to report we placed in all six classes, and even won two blue ribbons!

At first, I was nervous the competitors would be insulted that I introduced a mule to their exclusive competition. However, the entire weekend was pure pleasure. I didn't think much about how all of this was good for mule promotion, etc. but I'm absolutely certain we changed some minds. After all, we came to the show prepared for a crowd.