

An Aria of Hope

An aria is, by definition, an elaborate song for just one, or occasionally two, voices. Dressage rider Jill Giese and her mare Aria have proved that they can create lovely music together, even in the face of a debilitating illness that seemed to end Aria's competitive career.

BY PAT PAYNE

Jill Giese is not shy about saying that Dreamcatcher Elite, fondly called Aria, is truly her dream horse. She purchased the then three year old at auction in Verden in 1999, and says she knew immediately upon trying her before the auction that this mare was a perfect match for her. At the time, Jill was living on a dairy farm in England, pursuing a riding career. It was a long way from her work as a lawyer, which had brought this Canadian native to England, many miles from home, in the first place.

New Directions

Dreamcatcher, whose original name was Daisy Dee ("How could I bring a horse with a name like a cow to a dairy farm?") is aptly named. She was Jill's opportunity to build an equine partnership and progress to the next level in dressage, a discipline she had discovered was her passion in life. She gave up legal work to pursue her dream of a dressage career. And her musical nickname is also appropriate, Jill says. "The biggest, most important song—that certainly fits her!"

And progress they did. In England, Jill and Aria worked with British trainer and Olympian Carl Hester. With Carl in the saddle, Aria won the Five-Year-Old FEI Young Horse Championships in 2001 and the Six-Year-Old honors the following year. In 2002, the mare was also named British Warmblood of the Year.

Jill also began breeding, using embryo transfer to allow Aria to continue her competitive career. "She's never been pregnant for more than seven days at a time!" Jill notes.

Home to Canada

In 2003, Jill and her British life partner John Dingle decided to relocate to Canada, purchasing a farm in British Columbia. Settling on this former cattle ranch was a life-

changing decision. It was a beautiful location but there was much work to be done to settle in the horses that were returning with them. Those horses included Dreamcatcher, of course, and also "the triplets:" three youngsters close in age, all with Dreamcatcher as their dam, sired by Dimaggio and born by embryo transfer: colts Dreammaster and Dreammaker and filly Dreaming.

The farm was named after her mare that helped Jill launch her career into the worlds of competition and

breeding: their new home was known as Dreamcatcher Meadows. "We truly built our business around this horse," she says.

Horses and humans settled into their new location and Jill and Aria continued schooling and training. Soon, the pair began working with another Olympian, California-based Charlotte Bredahl-Baker. By 2010, they were competing at Intermediare. In the same year, Dreamcatcher was named American Warmblood Society Dam of the Year. (She also has elite status with the Hanoverian Verband.)



Heartbreaking News

In April 2011, just after Jill had finished filling out the entry form for the pair's first Grand Prix competition, disaster struck. "The onset of Dreamcatcher's laminitis was sudden and severe, resulting in a 16 degree rotation of the coffin bone," Jill recounts soberly.

The mare's laminitis came as a complete surprise, Jill says, and is still something of a mystery. "I can't pinpoint exactly what sparked it. Blood and metabolic issues are often the underlying cause," she says. Originally, she adds, the veterinarians treating Dreamcatcher thought they were dealing with Cushing's disease and were very surprised to discover it was actually laminitis.

The prognosis was not good. Her vet, Jill says, told her there was just a small chance that she would ever be able to ride her mare again. The insurance company authorized euthanasia. Still, Jill says, there was no question in her mind: she would do everything possible to save her friend and competitive partner.

Small, Unique Steps

Working with veterinarian Dr. Quinn Gavaga of the nearby Cache Creek Veterinary Clinic and farrier Dave Gilmour, Jill devised a plan to help Aria recover—to whatever extent possible. “First we had to get her to lose weight,” Jill says. The mare was put on a diet of mostly hay, with just enough grain to provide a “vehicle” for any needed oral medications. “We did blood work to find the imbalance that caused the laminitis. Aria has a very sensitive system and we discovered she doesn’t always absorb nutrients properly. The right balance of exercise and feed is critical for her,” she explains.

“We managed her pain through a variety of medications and put her in special shoes to take the pressure off her heels,” she continues. “Guided by x-rays, Dave labored painstakingly to get the right angles to offer Aria the best support and reduce pressure in the painful areas. It took many hours but was a labor of love for him.”

In addition, Jill says, they kept the mare entirely on Equimat therapeutic mats. (Equimat was a sponsor of Jill’s in England; in Canada, she sells their products.) “We kept Aria moving regularly to keep the blood flowing,” Jill recounts. “We covered the aisle way with mats and we all took turns keeping her moving. Throughout the day, everyone took a turn—me, John, my working students and anyone else who was in the barn. I truly believe that the combination of regular exercise and a correctly cushioned surface really made the difference for her.”

The mats, Jill explains, provided a base that was both soft and also firm and even. “Great trouble was taken by the blacksmith to balance the foot and take pressure off the laminae to reduce pain and increase comfort, using so called ‘rocker shoes.’ The objective is to give consistent support. My thinking is too many shavings or deep sand undermine what the blacksmith is trying to do. By nature of the horse moving about, deep bedding shifts, and if too deep, there is no longer any control over the surface being level; and if there are no Equimats on the base, the horse risks being back on whatever surface with no cushioning at all,” she says.

In addition, Jill continues, she massaged Aria’s feet regularly and used magnetic boots. She says she isn’t sure what helped most, but was willing to try anything that seemed to offer a chance to help her beloved mare. She spent, she notes, a great deal of time reading and researching the disease, especially online.

For the first month, Jill says, there was little change in her mare’s condition. She acknowledges the stress of that time. “It’s a very difficult thing to see an animal in that degree of pain. It was just devastating to me.”

At one point, she wondered if she should simply put Aria down. “But I swear to God, she told me it wasn’t time,” she says. “I know that sounds crazy, but I really know this horse. For eleven years, she’s been the biggest part of my life.”

Not long after that low point, Jill realized her mare was turning a corner. “It was the way she was stepping. You could see it in her stride, which was suddenly a little looser and freer,” she says. It had been so painful, she recounts, to see a horse renowned for her walk, one that regularly earned her a “9” in the arena, reduced to a painful hobble.

With recovery came new challenges. Managing Aria’s pain medications, for example, required even more care.

“You want them to feel but not to hurt as they recover,” Jill explains.

Throughout Aria’s recovery, farrier Dave Gilmour—who traveled many hours from Vancouver Island on a weekly basis to tend to the mare—continued to carefully and constantly adjust the angle of her hooves. “He truly saw this as a personal challenge,” Jill says, forever grateful for his dedication to the mare’s recovery.

Back in the Saddle

In mid-June, about two months after the onset of the disease, Jill started riding Aria, taking her for short walks on the farm’s trails

Left: Aria was able to go from the Equimats in her stall, directly onto the Equimats in the aisleway, and then on to the roundpen that has Equimats under the sand surface. So she never had to step anywhere without the support of the mats.



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and on the sandy beaches that are also part of the property. She became cautiously optimistic that the mare might recover enough to enjoy life as a trail horse.

A few weeks later, convinced it was the right time, Jill began gently schooling her mare. "I can just feel what Aria can handle when I'm on her," she explains.

By fall, seemingly miraculously, Aria was back in full training and once again schooling at Grand Prix. Now she is carefully exercised on a daily basis to maintain and improve her fitness.

"But," Jill says, "we have a constant reminder of what happened. The laminitic line is very visible about halfway down her hoof." That reminder is truly sobering, she says. And it makes her return to top level work especially sweet. Jill is now making plans to travel to California to Charlotte Bredahl-Baker's facility in March or April for some intensive schooling.

The speed of Aria's recovery still stuns Jill a bit. "The recovery has been as fast as the onset," she says ruefully. "I was shocked at the quickness of the onset and delighted at the quickness of the recovery."

She credits both the team effort of caring for Aria and her own willingness to research—and try—new treatments with contributing to such a quick recovery. "I'm no expert in this," she stresses. "I can only tell you about my own experience. It was a huge group effort—my students, John, my vet, my blacksmith and so many caring friends. They all helped so much. And finally, it comes down to belief. You've just got to believe."

"A ten percent chance is still a ten percent chance," she continues. "There's a fine line. You don't want to disregard your vet's opinion and you can't be willfully blind to expert opinions. But I decided to focus on that ten percent."

Dreams for the Future

Today, Jill's dream is to ride Dreamcatcher in a pas de deux with offspring Dreammaster, recently named 2011 Champion All Breed Award Winner at Prix St. Georges for the American Warmblood Society. Not one to set her

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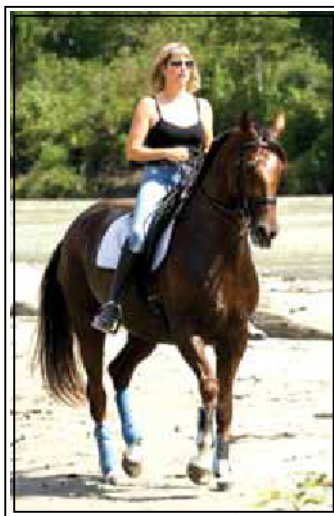
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sights low, she wants that pas de deux to be at Prix St. Georges, and she hopes to compete at Grand Prix with Aria this year.

She acknowledges there is work to do, for both horse and rider. "These days, I'm really focusing on fitness. I still feel some inconsistencies—but remember, she's 14 and I'm nearly 50!"



For Jill, Aria's legacy will live on, no matter what their competitive results turn out to be. In addition to offspring Dreammaster, Ballerina (a Dreaming daughter, making Dreamcatcher the granddam) was also recently named 2011 USDF Materiale Horse of the Year. "This is the horse of a lifetime for me," Jill says. "She's incredibly special. I've been trying to capture her specialness in our breeding program."

Jill says she knows that, objectively speaking, the horses she has bred are better than Aria. It's just that they don't sing the same song in her heart. 🎵