

Opportunities gather momentum for KIWI DRESSAGE RIDER

By Barbara Schnell

It all happened by accident. After training with European star coach Jean Bemelmans at his home base in Krefeld near Cologne, in Germany for a year, Kiwi dressage rider Haydee Wells-Parmenter had already booked her ticket home to Auckland when a week before Easter 2006 someone else took a flight of a different kind, and everything changed for her.

Wells-Parmenter's horse Rubinstar had become unsound but she had left him in good hands and wrapped up everything else when Dr Britta Schoeffmann, an acquaintance at the stable where Haydee had her apartment, took a nasty fall off her youngster and injured her knee. Grounded for weeks to come, Schoeffmann asked Wells-Parmenter, who had already helped her out lunging one of her horses, if she would ride both her horses – the then 11-year-old, Grand-Prix-trained Hanoverian mare La Picolina (aka "Liese") and the five-year-old youngster Courbière (aka "Buffalo") – for as long as her injury would take to heal. So the young rider changed her mind about going home, cancelled her ticket – and planned to stay on for another six to 10 weeks.

"Britta's flight interrupted my flight," Wells-Parmenter joked but six months ago she made another joke that would have considerable consequences.

She got along so well with both Schoeffmann's horses – and with Schoeffmann as her new coach – that after a while, she asked half-seriously when the next competition was going to be. The horses' owner and trainer, a Grand Prix rider, well-known German equestrian journalist and trained judge, took her up on that, and together they started getting more serious.

"I liked Haydee's riding style and her attitude to horses," Britta Schoeffmann said. "It was and is fun to work with her and train her. So I thought, 'Well, let's try a show'."

First, Wells-Parmenter entered Courbière into a couple of tests for young horses – she started four times and promptly took home one winner's ribbon and one third place. So Schoeffmann decided to let her compete the much more advanced Liese as a thank you and entered the pair at a local Prix St Georges in which they finished third. >>



Haydee Wells-Parmenter and La Picolina



Haydee Wells-Parmenter and La Picolina doing the piaffe with help from owner and coach Britta Schoeffman



Haydee Wells-Parmenter with coach Britta Schoeffman and La Picolina



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Haydee Wells-Parmenter and La Picolina

CONVINCED BY THE PAIR'S HARMONIOUS PERFORMANCE, BRITTA SCHOEFFMANN DECIDED TO GO ONE STEP FURTHER AND LET WELLS-PARMENTER RIDE HER FIRST GRAND PRIX EVER ABOARD LA PICOLINA...

<< "Liese is such a delightful horse to ride," Wells-Parmenter said afterwards. "She's so easy and so willing. It's a unique and different feeling competing her, there's absolutely no reason to feel stressy, it's just pure fun."

Convinced by the pair's harmonious performance, Britta Schoeffmann decided to go one step further and let Wells-Parmenter ride her first Grand Prix ever aboard La Picolina. For the 26-year-old talent, a new dimension opened up. Having started playing with her first pony at age four, she started riding seriously at 11. "At first I did eventing but my passion was always dressage, and I put much more effort into that," Wells-Parmenter said. "I stopped eventing after I sold my last pony and went straight into dressage."

With "my first serious horse" Wells-Parmenter went all the way through from starting a four-year-old to Inter-II-level, with the help of her trainer at that time. "Then I sold him so I could go to Australia, where I trained with Clemens Dierks for a couple of years. After that, I decided to take the big step to Europe," she said.

That may prove to be an even bigger step than she first thought because soon people back home raised the question that if she could keep competing these horses for a while, and maybe do it internationally, the 2008 Beijing Olympics loomed on the horizon.

While Schoeffmann herself wouldn't have a chance to make the German team on Liese – there are simply too many Grand Prix competitors in Germany for that – things might be different for the New Zealander. What started as a temporary solution may well turn into the chance of a lifetime for rider and owner/trainer.

In order to make the longlist for the Olympics, Wells-Parmenter would have to score 64 percent at two international qualifiers. "And that," she said, "may not be a given, but it is more than a dream. At the least, it's a chance to see how far you can go. Even if we don't make the qualification, it's a chance to represent New Zealand in the Grand Prix arena, and a wonderful opportunity to get known." ■