

USET Short List

The following 12 riders will compete at the final selection trials in Gladstone, New Jersey, on June 14-15 and 22-23.

The top four horse-and-rider pairs from that competition will represent the United States at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

Horse, Rider	Score
Peron, Michelle Gibson	72.56
Graf George, Guenter Seidel	68.20
Metallic, Robert Dover	65.93
Pikant, Shelly Francis	65.31
Akeena, Steffen Peters	65.23
Gifted, Carol Lavell	64.77
Telestar, Ellin Dixon Miller	64.66
Commanche, Michael Barisone	64.53
Udon, Steffen Peters	64.43
Avontuur, Kathleen Raine	64.10
Dutch, Kathy von Ertfelda	63.96
Numir, Guenter Seidel	63.66



North America's Brightest

American and Canadian riders are proving themselves possible contenders for a spot on the winners' platform at the 1996 Olympic Games.

By Michelle Clayton

When predictions are made about which dressage teams will be standing on the winner's platform at the Olympic Games, many insiders list the Germans first and the Dutch second. In the last few years, the Americans are often chosen as serious contenders for the bronze medal. Having taken advantage of many of the same training opportunities, Canadian riders have also progressed to a point of deserved consideration for individual performances.

At this year's Atlanta Olympics, dressage riders will be put to the test from July 27-Aug. 3 at the Georgia International Horse Park in Conyers. Whether or not they end up in the winner's circle, North American riders have a current record of which they can be proud. Drawing on experience from extended European stays, visiting instructors and competitive grants, both American and Canadian riders are better today than at any other one point in the history of dressage.

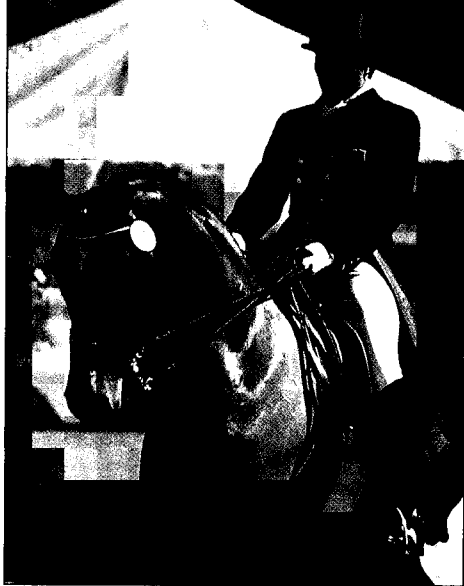
The Americans

To qualify for the United States Equestrian dressage team, 12 of the nation's top riders—who have already proven their mettle at qualifying shows around the



country—will complete four Grand Prix level tests on two separate weekends: June 15-16 and June 22-23 at the USET headquarters in Gladstone, New Jersey. From that competition, the top five horse-and-rider pairs—four team members, plus one alternate—will represent the United States in Atlanta.

The entire dressage community has followed Michelle Gibson and Carole Meyer-Webster's stallion, Peron, over the



The Americans: (facing page) Michelle Gibson and Peron, (this page, top to bottom, left to right) Guenter Seidel and Graf George (photos by Terri Miller), Carol Lavell and Gifted, Shelley Francis and Pikant (photos by Bob Langrish), Kathleen Raine and Avontuur, Steffen Peters and Udon, Steffen Peters and Akeena, Robert Dover and Metallic (photos by Terri Miller).





past couple of years as they competed against many of the top riders in Europe. With a solid record of success, Gibson can return to her home state of Georgia with confidence and a heightened ability. As testimony to her progress, Gibson won the 1995 Best Seat Award and the Best Foreign Rider Award at Aachen, and earned the highest score ever received by an American at an international competition of that caliber.

Gibson's formula for success can be traced to her trainer, Rudolf Zeilinger: "He has given me the inspiration to be as good as I can be. He taught me patience and to be aware of myself—so that your trainer doesn't have to tell you 20 million times to keep your hands down."

As a working student at Zeilinger's barn in Warendorf, Germany, Gibson has made some sacrifices for her special experience. "I've given up a lot of my personal life—family, friends. I call them, but it's not really the same. I've also given up small things, like many of the conveniences so common in America. But you can't have everything."

At the recent Bremen Sport Horse Festival, Gibson and Peron earned the blue ribbon in the Grand Prix Special. Of their performance, FEI "O" judge Dr. Volker Moritz remarked, "That was the most brilliant and outstanding performance that I have ever seen from this pair. They expressed a hard-to-surpass security. Peron was absolutely on the rhythm and completely cooperated. If she has such a ride in Atlanta, they have good medal chances."

Although Gibson says she doesn't treat her equine partner like a pet, she and he have a special bond. "He isn't very different at shows than at home. He likes to have his space. You can't go into his stall and play and rub him. He doesn't like strangers, but once you get to know him and he trusts you, he shows more of his personality."

Although 1995 Pan-Am Games silver-medal team member **Guenter Seidel** has worked hard to get where he is, he was also blessed with a stroke of luck when Dick and Jane Brown purchased Michael Poulin's 1992 Olympic mount, Graf George, for Seidel to ride.

For Seidel, first impressions of the 14-year-old, Hanoverian gelding were strong: "I was just amazed at how fun he is to ride and how great he is in the ring." As little as a year ago, the California-based Seidel had no idea which horse he would be campaigning for the Olympics.

Before Graf George, Seidel was competing on the Browns' Swedish Warmblood gelding, Numir, and earned a spot on the USET Short-List to compete in Gladstone. Focused and goal-oriented, Seidel treats international competitions as if they were any other show. "Feeling ready because you are well-prepared is the best way to go about it," he says.

To his current successes, Seidel credits the students and riders at his barn, who support his frequent absences from instruction and time on the road. "When you get more serious about trying out for a team, other areas of your business get cut back—like training and teaching."

A veteran of three Olympic Games, **Robert Dover** is a man at the top of his sport; international competitions no longer faze him. "After 25 years, only the world-class competitions still hold a bit of thrill and fun. For this Olympics, the greatest challenges have been to find a horse to try out on and then to prepare him to do a good enough job to make it worthwhile."

Earlier this year, FEI-level competitor Anne Gribbons and AHSA President Jane Clark made Dover's 1996 Olympic challenges a little easier: Gribbons decided not to campaign her Dutch Warmblood, Metallic, herself and Clark leased the

horse for Dover to ride.

Every horse Dover competes at the Olympic level must have special qualities and Metallic is no exception. Delighted to have the opportunity to ride the gray gelding, Dover says, "I have always thought Metallic was a wonderful horse, which was confirmed when I rode him for the first time when he was a six-year-old. He had, and has, increasing power and scope."

As the pair developed that necessary bond between horse and rider, Dover quickly discovered that the 12-year-old equine athlete has a "very strong-willed personality, with a huge ego and an endearing character."

As he prepared for this year's Olympic Games, Dover remembered the best advice he has ever received: "When making decisions regarding horses, ask what is in the best interest of the horse and do that. You can never go wrong." He also said the best advice he ever ignored was when he told himself to tighten the noseband on his 1992 Olympic mount, Lectron, before he performed his Grand Prix in Barcelona. The horse got his tongue over the bits at the beginning of the test, which caused, according to ground jury member Wolfgang Niggli, "large problems with submission."

Potential Olympic contender **Steffen Peters** broke the Dutch Warmblood, Udon when the horse was three years old. Peters rode him until he got bucked off, then his sister took her turn in the saddle until she hit the ground, too. The Peters' efforts paid off, however, because the chestnut gelding—now 17 years old—piaffes and passages his way through a Grand Prix test with agility and confidence.

For this year's Games, Peters earned a place on the roster for the USET finals in Gladstone with two of Lila Kommerstad's horses—Udon and the nine-year-old



Rhineland mare, Akeena.

In 1992, Peters had the chance to try out for the Olympic team, but was barred from competing because of his pending American citizenship; the paperwork was completed two weeks after the Games ended. However, Peters took the setback in stride, saying that without his later European experience, he might not have been as ready as he is now.

As for training, Peters has several words of wisdom for budding dressage riders: "Never nag a horse, never ask for a movement for a long time—[use] short, quick aids, never long aids. After a horse has learned a movement, remember to correct the mistakes, not prevent them."

Peters' Olympic-support committee consists of his wife, Janet, assistant Allison Rogers and Lila and Bob Kommerstad, his sponsors. Further, Peters values the training advice of Dietrich von Hopfgarten, Jo Hinneman and clinics with Robert Dover.

Shelly Francis of Woodstock, Vermont, was catapulted to success by a USET grant to ride in Germany. After placing third at the 1995 Festival of Champions in Gladstone, Francis earned the privilege to ride in Germany and work with one of the top trainers in the country, Jo Hinneman. He "made me think more when riding. For example, he told me not to make a correction when the horse was trying to do the movement correctly; only to make corrections immediately after he does something wrong." Hinneman also teaches that blocking out external influences and controlling one's temper are important rules in any equestrian discipline.

Riding in Germany showed Francis that she could make the grade for the Olympics: She placed first in the Grand Prix at Donaueschingen. "That's when I decided that I would try out, because I

figured I would have a chance."

Francis says that teaching is what pays her bills, but she's decreased her load since returning from Florida this spring so she could concentrate on her own riding. Sponsor Hank Smith's support and horses, including the 12-year-old gelding Pikant, have made her international competition possible.

Although Francis won the Grand Prix class at the Royal Dressage Festival in Port Jervis with 64.8 percent and the Grand Prix Freestyle with 68.075 percent, she remains cautious and reserved about the Olympics—"I don't count my chickens before they hatch."

When asked to rank the variables that go into dressage competition—practice, the horse, training, funding and innate ability—Carol Lavell chose "the horse" as number one. She placed "funding" fifth in the lineup, but added, "the catch-22 is that none of it counts unless you have the money. That's what's wrong with the system."

Lavell knew at the 1990 Volvo World Cup that she was going to try for the 1992 Olympics with her 17.3-hand, Hannoverian gelding, Gifted. At that time, "the Germans were trying to buy Gifted, but after the World Cup test, I wouldn't even consider it."

Having made the decision to try out for the Barcelona Games, Lavell found that there were numerous obstacles along the road. Before the 1992 Olympics, Gifted was sick for 10 days, both a physical and psychological setback. "Then we had a scary moment on the plane ride to Europe: The plane was low on fuel and the air-traffic controllers wouldn't let us land. When we arrived, I drew the last spot in the order of go, a difficult place to be." And, in the last-but-not-least category of causes of precompetition jitters, Lavell listed "the pressure from the Ger-

mans—they're very outspoken. You've got to stay focused."

Lavell believes that the worst advice she ever received was from respected German trainer Conrad Schumacher in 1990 when he declared, "Your horse will never win a medal with you riding him," and Schumacher suggested she sell him. Fortunately, Lavell had already made the decision to keep Gifted.

Kathleen Raine first decided to try for the Olympics because of her successes at other international competitions. "As my horse [Avontuur] became more confident in international competitions in two World Cups and two World Championships, the Olympics followed naturally. The same people are there, so it's just another show, but it's built up so much."

Raine owns the 14-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding, who helped the United States dressage team win a bronze medal at the 1994 World Equestrian Games. A hands-on owner who writes the checks that cover farrier, veterinarian, feed and travel bills, Raine lists expenses as the highest hurdle in her quest to go to Atlanta.

Of Avontuur, Raine says, "He's really full of himself and doesn't change a lot. He acts like a movie star—he thinks he's really important. If he hears the trailer, he gets really excited." Like many other riders, Raine says the best advice she ever received was to go to Germany to train.

The Canadians

To be considered for the Canadian Olympic dressage team, horse-and-rider teams must have a Certificate of Capability (earn scores of 60 percent or higher during the previous year), compete at the Grand Prix level in all three qualifying trials held around the country in May and June and earn a score of 64 percent or better at two of those trials. Even those