

Pikko del Cerro HU and Anne Sparks have had a special connection since she saw him take his first breath at her farm. He currently lives with Lisa Wilcox at Marsh Pond Farm in Wellington, FL.
Photo by SusanJStickle.com

THE TRAITS OF SUCCESS

Hard work and perseverance have made Anne Sparks' Horses Unlimited one of the most successful dressage breeders in the U.S.

BY GEOFF YOUNG

IT WAS AROUND TEN YEARS AGO THAT I FIRST MET ANNE SPARKS. I WAS ON assignment working on my next installment of the "In Search of the Perfect Barn" feature that was a popular series in HC for several years. I visited Anne's farm just south of Albuquerque, NM where her business, Horses Unlimited, was headquartered.

The beautiful barn with large arched doorways, adobe walls and tile reflected the nuance of New Mexico's culture. As I toured the new facility, a big beautiful bay stallion stood in his paddock and eyed me with a calm but self-assured demeanor. This stallion was Noble Champion, a decorated Oldenburg showjumper who was now retired from competition and serving as one of Anne's first foundation stallions.

As I stood in the barn and admired the large empty stalls, I didn't know that I was witnessing the beginning of a vision that had not yet been realized. Ten years later the stalls would be full of champions and future champions and the vision was now a reality. Sparks' first imported stallions, Noble Champion, Pik L and Glorioso Noir would lay a foundation for one of this country's finest breeding operations, and the empty barn that I saw ten years ago was now the home of the 2013 USEF Dressage Breeder of the Year and home to champions and future champions.

The prestigious year-end award was the result of 13 years of breeding decisions made by Sparks, and an unwavering commitment to produce horses with the finest traits from the best bloodlines.



only eight offspring, four of them being colts. Out of those four colts, two are now fully licensed stallions, an amazing feat that is so rare from such few progeny.

Leonberg, another bay stallion in Horses Unlimited's collection, also contributed to the 2013 Year-End Award. The dark bay Zweibrucker has himself acquired multiple CDI Grand Prix wins, been of member of the Danish National Team and competed in the CHIO Aachen. He currently is based in Germany where he is coveted not only for his unique pedigree but his ability to pass on his movement and type. Sparks still uses him in her program and sells frozen semen to North American breeders.

Horses Unlimited's most successful foal to date is the Pik L x Rohdiamant stallion, Pikko del Cerro HU. In 2013, he competed in his first year at the CDI Grand Prix level winning several classes in Wellington. In Ankum, Germany, Pikko del Cerro HU swept both the Grand Prix and GP Special classes against some of the best riders in Germany.

Cerro, as he is called, has a list of wins that is starting to resemble his father's. Those include three USEF National Dressage Championships and the Stallion Championship at Dressage Devon.

Recently, another one of Horses Unlimited's babies, Gallant Reflection HU (By Galant du Serein x Rohdiamant) was the Reserve Champion

Few American sporthorse breeders have had the success that Horses Unlimited has experienced over the past several years. In a market dominated by the Europeans, Sparks' program has the sport's elite taking notice.

Anne Sparks and Horses Unlimited own and stand six licensed stallions, one of the very few breeders in the country who can make such a claim, with three of those being stallions that she bred herself. The 2013 USEF Dressage Breeder of the Year award is the result of 18 offspring by four of her stallions—Pik L, Leonberg, Glorioso Noir and Galant du Serein.

When assessing the stallions of Horses Unlimited, what you see is a collection of some of the great bloodlines in the sporthorse world. For many breeders, this is the most important factor when choosing a stallion. While bloodlines are important, Sparks believes that the traits a horse possesses are critical to producing superior performance mounts. It's important to Anne to breed horses that show athleticism, really great gaits and exceptional rideability.

One of the stallions producing those characteristics on a consistent basis is Pik L, a licensed bay Hanoverian stallion who placed fourth in his 100-day test in Adelheidsdorf, Germany. Some of his fans call him "The Professor" due to his high intelligence, amazing character and generosity and "ring smarts."

In the dressage ring, Pik L is one of the best small tour horses ever to compete in the United States. Numerous CDI wins, USDF Horse of the Year, Pan American Games and Aachen competitor are just a few of his credentials with his professional riders. With his three Junior riders, he was equally dominant. USEF Junior Dressage Championships, NAJYRC Gold Medal and more. How many stallions have done this?

As a sire, Pik L passes on many of his desirable traits. He has validated Anne's belief that the traits a horse carries and passes on are critical. Sparks doesn't just want the best bloodlines for her clients; she wants the best horse, period!

Another gorgeous bay, Galant du Serein, has taken Sparks to the three biggest shows in the world. Owning a horse, much less a stallion, and watching him compete in the World Equestrian Games in Aachen, the World Cup Finals in Las Vegas and the Olympic Games in Athens, is unforgettable and educational. Sadly, Galant du Serein's untimely death in 2007 left Anne a limited supply of his frozen semen. Galant produced



Pikk Elena HU, Presumido HU and Por Fin HU all earned points towards Horses Unlimited's 2013 USEF Dressage Breeder of the Year win.

Photo by SusanJStickle.com

Anne Sparks won the 2013 USDF Region 5 Reserve Championship—2nd level aboard her own Pik L.
Photo by Chispas Photography



at the 2013 North American Stallion Testing and will compete with Lisa Wilcox in the 2014 FEI Young Horse Dressage classes.

Anne's stallions, mare herd and their offspring have made her a star in the breeding world but Pik L went a step further and became Anne's riding muse, getting her back in the saddle after decades and helping her earn a USDF Bronze Medal and a USDF Region 5 Reserve Championship—2nd Level.

There is always luck involved with turning out great horses, but you can also help make some of your own luck, and Sparks certainly did her homework regarding her breeding operation. She talked with numerous stallion owners in Europe and the U.S., researching what bloodlines fit with what traits and how to find the best mares. She knew what kind of horse she wanted to produce and she was patient, thorough and the results now speak to the vision she talked to me about all those years ago in that empty barn in Albuquerque.

Horse Connection sat down and talked with Sparks at her farm about her horses, her breeding program, and what it takes to produce champions.

HC Did you ever have the goal of winning Dressage Breeder of the Year when you started out?

AS God, no, but I'm not surprised because we have really been working hard at it. I think it says to the U.S. breeders that doing your homework can really pay off.

HC How long have you been breeding?

AS We bred a few horses in 1999. The first foal crop I was really involved in was on the ground in 2001, so it has been about 13 years now.

HC When you developed your breeding program what goals did you set for yourself and how did those goals change over the years?

AS The first goal I had was to sell horses; the original plan starting out was to buy and retrain Thoroughbreds, but that didn't last very long because buyers would come and spend a thousand dollars vetting a four

“Warmbloods, as prospects and trained amateur mounts generally had a higher value than Thoroughbreds. The calmness you get from the draft blood in the breed helps produce that calmness and quietness.”

thousand dollar horse, and it just didn't make sense. As a business, the cost of maintaining Thoroughbreds versus warmbloods is similar, so we decided to get into breeding warmbloods and producing our own offspring to sell. And that was, and still is the goal.

HC Did you feel that there was more value and marketability in breeding warmbloods over Thoroughbreds, especially in horse sport?

AS One of the things that I found was that warmbloods, as prospects and trained amateur mounts generally had a higher value than Thoroughbreds. They can be easier to ride for the Adult Amateur and that was our target customer. The calmness you get from the draft blood in the breed helps produce that calmness and quietness. There is a reason that the Thoroughbred is called a hot blood.



By Glorioso Noir, Golden Darling HU was named High Scoring Horse at the 2013 Gold Coast Fall Fling with 75.338%.
Photo by Sharon Packer



The stallion Leonberg had a special bond with his rider Mikala Gundersen. On this day they swept the CDI Grand Prix division at the Palm Beach Dressage Derby. Together they were also Danish National Team members, CHIO Aachen competitors and multiple CDI winners. Photo by Sharon Packer

the path for Horses Unlimited in the next decade. What has not changed is that my goal is to produce an athletic horse that sits on their hind end and has excellent gaits.

HC You started out breeding hunter and jumpers but moved on to incorporate dressage, producing many successful dressage horses. What brought about that shift from one sport to another?

AS Kismet, I guess. The path that I've been on the last decade kept bringing me back to the dressage ring. Yes, I have had, and still have, successful jumpers like my Grand Prix jumper stallion Galante HU, but the connection in dressage between horse and rider has always had an extra pull.

HC Did you ever compete in hunter or jumpers?

AS I did two hunter classes in my entire life and my horse refused in both classes so that was my hunter jumper career right there. That was back in high school and I loved riding, I rode bareback and loved spending time on my horse—hours and hours every day riding the ditches and through the bosque. That taught me at an early age that if you put in the work and the time you could teach horses to do anything.

HC So flashing forward all of these years later, you have developed an impressive stable of award-winning stallions and their offspring. Why and how have you become so successful?

AS When I started out I was very fortunate to have a mentor. Her name was Elanora "Lora" Schorlemer. I spent hours on the telephone with her and she helped me find a number of my mares. We discussed how to breed them and how to pair them with certain stallions. Lora stressed that in order to be successful at breeding you had to constantly be refining the warmblood. Without adding in the other breeds like the Thoroughbred, Arabian, Anglo-Arab or the French

HC Did you have a specific sport in mind for your foal crop?

AS Our initial focus was on hunters and jumpers but quickly we added dressage.

HC Who was your foundation stallion that got your breeding program off the ground?

AS That would be Noble Champion, who was the first stallion, then Glorioso Noir and Pik L came along. We bought Noble as our hunter/jumper stallion, and all three of our foundation stallions were imported here from Europe. Noble is now 26 years old and not ridden but still exercises every day and happily breeds.

HC When you started breeding were you looking to do more than sell quality horses? Did you have a bigger vision such as elevating the American breeding standard or competing with European breeders?

AS In all honesty, it started with just breeding quality horses and making them available so that buyers wouldn't have to go to Europe—that they could buy the same quality horse here in the United States. But, experience has taught me, and my goals have become more focused. My instincts have served me well over the last decade and I will be just as determined about

"My instincts have served me well over the last decade, and I will be just as determined about the path for Horses Unlimited in the next decade."

blood, you lose a lot of that refinement. If you look at my stallions they all have Thoroughbred, Anglo-Arab and/or French blood in them. It took a lot of research to get my program to where it is.

HC Bloodlines are important when breeding to a stallion, but aren't the traits a stallion is known to pass on equally important?

AS Yes, absolutely. The stallions I've had are strong in the characteristics that they pass on. Mare owners need to know what their mare lacks and needs from a sire. Noble Champion produces elasticity in all of his offspring, a swing in the back and a really strong hind leg. Pik L produces fantastic walks and canters in every one of his offspring. Glorioso Noir always produced quality gaits and great rideability and all of my Galante HU babies have been stunningly beautiful and athletic. Knowing your stallions and what they pass on is critical in producing the kind of foals that you envision.

HC Knowing the bloodlines and traits doesn't always insure you'll get what you want in a foal. Is there anything else involved in the process?

AS Yes, luck. I got very lucky but I also learned some hard lessons early. As a stallion owner, with a mare herd, if you're going to have a successful breeding program, one of the most important parts of your breeding program is culling. Does your mare pass on her best traits in general? Does she do that when bred to your

stallions? How many foals do you have with similar pedigrees? You have to progress with each generation. Is the daughter better to keep in your herd or is the mother? It's not always easy, but if you don't get the foal that you want you have to be prepared to sell them, give them away or find a better job for the mare. It's easy to hang on to every foal. I was guilty of that at the start, but I soon came to realize that I had to reduce my herd to a manageable number. I have downsized over the last seven years and now I have around 35 horses, a number that is manageable for me.

HC You have started riding again after many years, and are doing dressage with Pik L, earning your USDF Bronze medal. Having owned Pik L for so long is it thrilling to be riding him?

Homebred stallion Galante HU, by Galant du Serein x Landor S, is proving his talent for Grand Prix. He will start in his first CSI this year in Wellington with rider Rikke Poulsen. Photo by Sportfot





No More Rocks by Noble Champion, currently competes in Advanced Level Eventing with Bruce "Buck" Davidson Jr.
Photo by Amy Drago

AS It is, we've been doing dressage for about a year together and I must say it is a huge time commitment but I am having so much fun with Pik L. I have had him since he was seven and now he is 21 years old. I am finally riding him and enjoying it very much. In regards to riding my horses, one of the most important factors in the success of my program is that I always hired professional riders. And they always appreciated the fact that if they were training one of my horses or had them in a competition schedule, I never once asked if I could sit on one of them. They have a job to do with these horses and I never wanted to get in the way of them doing their job.

HC You've had some pretty impressive riders on your stallions over the years. Could you name some of them?

AS Lisa Wilcox is riding my stallions Pikko del Cerro HU and Gallant Reflection HU. Mikala Gundersen, who has ridden many horses for me including the stallion Leonberg, has the mare Golden Darling HU, a Glorioso daughter. Rikke Poulsen has my jumper stallion Galante HU and will be showing in the CSI in Wellington this year. She also will do the CDI's with the Pik L daughter Pikk Elena HU. One of the difficult things in the U.S. is finding riders for stallions. I'm very lucky with the team I have now. Every rider has a type of horse that they enjoy riding—some people

"The stallions I've had are strong in the characteristics that they pass on."

Owned and ridden by amateur Karen Williams, Pikturesk (Pik L x Don Primero), has a lengthy list of wins including Horse of the Year. In 2013, he was USDF Region 3—PSG Champion and at the USDF National Dressage Finals he placed 3rd at Prix St Georges. Photo by SusanJStickle.com



want a horse that they have to jazz up and some want a horse that they want to calm down; every rider is different. And it's really important that you get the right combination of horse and rider because if that rider doesn't have the same goals that you have, it's never going to happen.

HC In regards to American sporthorse breeding versus European—are we there yet? Are we getting better or do we still have several years to go?

AS I think we can really get better. We're breeding some great horses and some super nice mares are being bred here, but the really important thing, and it goes to what I was saying earlier about having luck with my stallions—it is a lot harder in the U.S. to be a stallion owner looking for and finding the right mare to fit the stallion than it is for a mare owner to find an appropriate stallion.

HC And why is that?



2013 North American Stallion Testing Reserve Champion, Gallant Reflection HU will start his FEI dressage career with Lisa Wilcox this year. Photo by LL-FOTO.de

that particular horse show, just watching him in the ring doing his piaffe and passage gave me goose bumps. I had to pinch myself and say, "is this real?" Fourteen years ago I had met Lisa Wilcox, and now I was watching her ride my young stallion around with all of these European trainers watching my horse, a horse I bred and nurtured as he took his first breath, by my treasured Pik L. I always told people that

"this horse was going to be amazing" and to have him there—that was my proudest moment so far. I was there! I had arrived!

AS In my case, I have four broodmares and six licensed stallions. Do I need to go out of my herd to find a mare? No, I know what these mares have and I know which traits my stallions have so it's not a guessing game for me as to what kind of horse I am going to produce. That knowledge came about from years of work, trial and error and research. If you own a stallion and are looking for a specific mare type, the choices are limited and hard to find. On the other hand, a mare owner has hundreds of licensed stallions readily available.

HC All of the awards your stallions and their get have earned are a testament to the quality of your program throughout the years. What is the proudest moment for you among all of the recognition, trophies and accolades?

AS I know this is going to sound odd, but my proudest moment was sitting in Denmark next to dressage master Ernst Hoyos, watching his student Lisa Wilcox ride my Pikko del Cerro HU around the warm-up ring. Even though we didn't show at



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Hanoverian stallion Pikko del Cerro HU (by Pik L x Rohdiamant) had a successful first year at the CDI Grand Prix level. With Lisa Wilcox, he won several FEI Grand Prix & GP Special classes in Wellington, Florida. In Germany, at the CDN Ankum, they won both the Grand Prix and GP Special classes against some of the best dressage riders in Germany. Photo by SusanJStickle.com

EM Pikko de la Nube HU as a newborn foal. This full sister to Pikko del Cerro HU is now part of Horses Unlimited's broodmare band. She produced her first foal by Leonberg in 2013. Photo by Sophie Ghedin

