

Showing it's more about what's on the **inside** that counts

Overcoming Adversity and Rising above it on a QUARTER HORSE



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Joyce Mueller has battles to fight. Not only does she ride a somewhat unusual breed of horse in dressage competition, but health problems have provided some major challenges as well.

In the dressage ring, observers who don't know Joyce might be hard-pressed to imagine the hardship she is facing when they see the grace and beautiful relationship of horse and rider as Joyce and her Quarter Horse, Tia, compete. They may not know that Joyce is battling Stage Four metastatic melanoma and the difficult treatment that goes with it.

But on the first day of her second schooling show ever, at Heartland Stables near Stevens Point, WI, Joyce and Tia took 4th and 5th place. On the second day, they took 2nd and 3rd out of fifteen riders. Joyce was surprised at her results. "The judges had remarks like, 'lots of potential', and promising pair. Frankly I was just happy to get through it and not fall off!"

Joyce is keenly aware that Tia is likely to be one of only a few Quarter Horses at many shows, but never doubts the ability of her horse. "Maybe I'd feel a lot more comfortable if I was riding a 16-hand horse of one of those other breeds, but I know that I can ride *my* horse," she says. "Some horses might look better than mine but Tia's got a lot of movement and is a real sensible horse. She is very level-headed."

Joyce bought Tia from her friend, Charlie Vesbach. Vesbach is known for his versatile Quarter Horses, who notably have partnered with him to win the world championship title in team

penning. Charlie told Joyce that he used Tia a lot around his farm. Tia, he said, was the horse he picked when he had an especially hard job to do. Joyce instantly had faith in Tia and her abilities to compete with any breed. "They're just awesome horses. I know Tia can compete in team penning and roping and then turn around and do dressage," she says.

Ten years ago when Mueller and her husband decided to get horses, dressage wasn't on their minds. Joyce had grown up with horses and after not riding for forty plus years, she decided to take lessons. These lessons gave her the opportunity to practice dressage on school horses and gave her a new sense of confidence as well as the desire to compete on a different level.

While Joyce's husband, Jim, continued to ride Western, he supported Joyce in her desire to ride dressage. "My husband has been so great through all of this. He shows foundation Quarter Horses, but is always there to support me," Joyce says. "This has been great for my husband and I - it's our hobby. It's good for us because we spend time together."

Time is something Joyce and Jim never take for granted. Joyce's battle with Stage Four metastatic melanoma has shown them that. Last year Joyce was traveling from Hazel Green to Oncology Associates in Cedar Rapids, IA, for treatment three times every month. "Generally over the weekend I wouldn't feel too well. As the week went on I'd start to feel better and then I'd have to go back for another treatment," Joyce recalls. "But then I'd have that one week off and I'd go to the shows."

Joyce is currently receiving treatment every other week and says she's lucky because, "Generally there's no good treatment for it. But things just worked out for me to get into this clinical trial and it's almost 75% gone." The clinical trial is an experimental program in which Joyce was one out of only 45 people to participate.

Competing with Tia has been a great outlet for Joyce during her treatment.

"There's always such a connection to horses.

Winston Churchill said, 'There's something about the outside of a horse that's good for the inside of a man.' Just being around them is comforting," she says.

And of her husband, Joyce also adds, "Jim not only grooms and saddles my horse for me for at the shows, but he's also my reader and photographer. He also comes with me for all my treatments and gives me lots of encouragement - both for the horse shows and the treatments."

So the next time you see a Quarter Horse enter the dressage arena, don't lose your seat. It may be Joyce and Tia and they may just surprise you with how elegant a Quarter Horse can be!

Thank you to Deb Malone for the concept of this article.



TOP: Joyce rides Tia in a dressage competition.
BOTTOM: Husband Jim - Joyce's number one fan and supporter.