



Horse Of A Lifetime: Spelga Dam

On the back of this chestnut mare, Cathy Wieschhoff rode into the events of her dreams.

BY DARLENE RICKER

A young Irish Sport Horse trotted into Cathy Wieschhoff's life at a dark hour. A barn fire had just claimed all her tack and equipment, her truck and trailer, and worst of all, seven horses. Among them were two talented eventers, one competing at the preliminary level and the other at intermediate.

While Wieschhoff was still struggling to re-establish her business, the phone rang. It was her mother, calling from England: "I'm buying you a horse," she

told Cathy. "She's 6 years old and has already gone intermediate three times and has done a preliminary three-day event. I want to do this for you."

Kitty Wieschhoff, herself a lifelong rider and trainer, wasn't wealthy, but she managed to buy Spelga Dam, the horse that would one day establish her daughter as a world-class competitor.

Bred in Ireland to be a show jumper, the stunning 16.1-hand chestnut mare (Evros—Kilgarron) who came to be known as "Kate" was shipped from England to Cathy's base in Lexington, Ky., in 1995.

"Kate came along at just the right moment, exactly when I needed her," said Cathy. "When I first rode her, I knew I liked her, and I felt a connection. I think that's how it is with any horse—you either know it's a fit or it isn't. And I trusted my mother to send me something that was going to do the job."

That Kate did—and then some.

"There are certain horses that really want to go to work, and Kate is all about work," said Cathy. "She always showed up for me. She knew exactly what was expected of her and went out and did it. I trusted Kate to jump anything. She was amazing."

"As soon as we were on course she was like a house on fire," said Cathy Wieschhoff of her first four-star mount and horse of a lifetime, Spelga Dam. KIT HOUGHTON PHOTO

Building The Foundation

Kate had advanced through the levels quickly before coming to the United States, so Cathy didn't want to pressure her at first. They ran a few preliminary events to get to know one another before going intermediate.

Cathy was training with Ralph Hill and Jack Le Goff. "Jack loved her. He told me not to move her up too fast and to keep her at intermediate for a year," said Cathy, who followed his advice.

Cathy moved Kate to advanced the next year. When the mare was ready for her first three-star competition in 1997, Rolex Kentucky was the logical choice, practically in Wieschhoff's backyard, less than 30 minutes from her base at Carriage Station Farm in Lexington, where she and Kate still reside.

Kate finished 20th and received the Best Conditioned Horse award at Rolex Kentucky that year. That fall, she finished the Fair Hill CCI*** (Md.), again in 20th place.

Kate was always deceptively patient in the cross-country start box. "Then,

as soon as we were on course, she was like a house on fire,” said Cathy, now 54. “The first three or four fences I was just kind of hanging on. Then she’d say, ‘Oh, I was just kidding. Where do you want me to go; what do you want me to do?’”

In 1998, Rolex Kentucky offered its first four-star, and Cathy felt Kate was ready. “Here it was, the first four-star event ever in America, and Kate and I were going to get to ride in it,” she said. She found the cross-country obstacles larger and the combinations more technical than anything she’d ever encountered with Kate.

“I think people who are looking at eventing now don’t know just how much we did with those horses back then,” said Cathy. “You were out there for 25 to 30 minutes on your first roads and tracks, and then you did a 4½-minute steeplechase, which had eight or nine fences on it. Then you were on roads and tracks for another 45 minutes, and then you went into the 10-minute box—all this before you even started your four-star course.”

The course in 1998 had a bounce into the water, and Kate was early on in the order. “Someone asked if I was going the long way because that bounce looked pretty stiff. I said, ‘No. I came here to do a four-star, and I’m going to find out if I have a four-star horse.’ So we

smoked down through there and did the bounce,” said Cathy.

The next day Kate came out fresh and sound for show jumping. “On the last fence she jumped me right out of the tack!” Cathy recalled.

They finished 14th, and Kate became a cover girl. A photo of Cathy piloting her cross-country was featured on a poster for the next year’s event.

Heading Overseas

With Cathy’s parents still residing in England, Burghley was the next logical step. Cathy and Kate flew to England six weeks before Burghley in 1998 to condition and train with Ian Stark.

“When I shipped her, she was so relaxed that she gets to the airport and lies down in the stall,” said Cathy. “Another time she stood patiently on the trailer for 24 hours when we were trapped in a blizzard and the interstate was closed. To Kate, there’s been absolutely no stress in her life at all. I think that’s why she and I got along so well—I don’t stress about anything, either.”

Shortly after they arrived in England, they competed at

“Here it was, the first four-star event ever in America, and Kate and I were going to get to ride in it,” said Cathy Wieschhoff of the 1998 Rolex Kentucky CCI****, where they finished 14th. KIT HOUGHTON PHOTO



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Cathy Wieschhoff and Spelga Dam faced a huge bounce into water at the first Rolex Kentucky CCI. “I came here to do a four-star, and I’m going to find out if I have a four-star horse,” she recalled. “So we smoked down through there and did the bounce.”

BETH RASIN PHOTO

Thirlestane Castle as a prep for Burghley. Kate’s performance drew the attention of selectors for the U.S. event team, who were there observing U.S. competitors preparing for the 1998 World Equestrian Games.

After Thirlestane a team representative asked Cathy if she would consider changing her plans. The U.S. team needed a strong competitor for one of the alternate slots, and the prep schedule did not include Burghley. Tempting as it was, Cathy decided to keep to her plan. While honored to be considered as possible team material, she’d spent her own money to go England and felt strongly that Burghley was the next step for Kate.

“If I got picked as an alternate for the team but didn’t get to run, you couldn’t reimburse me enough expenses to cover missing our chance to compete at Burghley,” she said.

Then came the big day. The dressage phase was a bit difficult, said Cathy,

because Kate was not a big, lofty mover and tended to get a little tense. They earned a respectable score and stood in the middle of the rankings.

Cross-country was Kate’s forte, and Cathy came to know the true meaning of endurance at Burghley.

“It started raining Friday night after dressage. I’m sleeping in a lorry and hearing the rain pound; it never quit all night and all the next day. On steeplechase I kept moving Kate from left to right to get some good footing because over 70 horses had gone ahead of her. Then coming back on Phase C we were going through the stubble fields, ankle-deep in mud,” she said.

“I was worried that she was already exhausted before cross-country, but she started out great and just kept going,” Cathy continued. “We jumped the hood of a truck and two more fences.

Then, after fence 8 or 9, we got held on course for 20 minutes in the pouring rain, getting colder and wetter. At that level and the first time for me riding at Burghley, it was total pressure. It was like, ‘When do we get to go? When do we get to go?’ And I’ve still got all this course in front of me.”

Nearly every fence was enormous, she recalled, and the competition at another level. “I’m in a different country; the terrain is hilly and trappy, and there are 100 horses competing instead of 30,” she said.

Despite the weather, the hold and the pressure, Kate went around clear with only a few time faults. “I’ll never forget coming across the finish line and hearing the announcer say, ‘Cathy has moved up onto the leaderboard.’ I thought, ‘How did *that* happen? Last I knew we were in the middle of the pack.’”

They finished 15th. “Kate was so amazing; she did the course perfectly. She was one of best horses all day through there,” said Cathy, who calls their success “a testament to the partnership we had, moving up levels that neither of us had experienced before. Our first four-star, Thirlestane, Burghley. . . Kate and I had so many firsts together.”

An Ending, A Beginning

Always even-keeled, Kate had never shown signs of being a mare.

“She was the same horse every single time. She’d come out and go to work every day,” Cathy said.

But eventually Cathy noticed a change in Kate’s demeanor: “I took her to Foxhall [Three-Day Event (Ga.)], and she was all over the map in dressage. I was warming up to do the [cross-country], and she was whinnying to the other horses. I knew she wasn’t focused on her job. It was so weird. I was like, ‘Seriously, Kate? What’s going on?’”

She conferred with Karen and David O’Connor, with whom she was then training, and told them, “I can’t run her cross-country if I don’t feel like I’ve got her mind.”

She withdrew after dressage and sent Kate home with Bruce Davidson

► Fit As A Fiddle

Throughout her decade-long competitive career, Spelga Dam “never took a lame step,” said Cathy Wieschhoff, and she retired fully sound.

Cathy attributes that to Dr. Louie Enos, a former equine surgeon from Washington state, who treats many international mounts through his physical-mental process called Equine Manipulation Through Mind. By simultaneously changing Kate’s emotional attitude (which was linked to spinal and related issues she had), Enos and Cathy worked together to maintain her physical and mental soundness.

Enos recalled Kate as a determined competitor. “She developed an attitude as a strong and tough mare, so much so that Cathy would often comment to me before a ride, ‘I hope she doesn’t pull my arms off!’ Still, I saw in Kate a willingness to shift her strong attitude to strong health and new functions,” he said. “Cathy was a huge part of Kate’s health and success in eventing.”

to be bred. "It was obviously what she wanted to do then," said Cathy.

Le Goff had previously spoken to Cathy about breeding Kate, an idea she had discussed with Davidson, whose successful breeding program with Irish Sport Horses continues to this day.

"Bruce knew a lot more than I did about breeding, so I trusted him to pick the stallion. It was either going to be Lion King or Lust," said Cathy.

Lion King won, resulting in another successful eventer, Simba. He was born in 2003 and evented for many years. When he reached the intermediate level, Cathy realized Simba didn't want to go higher. She sold him to a family who offered to give him a lifetime home, and their 12-year-old daughter is enjoying him as a packer.

After Simba, Cathy realized she couldn't afford to continue breeding Kate and raising foals, so she leased the mare to Jacqueline Mars, who got three foals out of Kate, all of which she foxhunted.

Kate then returned to Carriage Station Farm, where one of Cathy's students borrowed her for her "A" Pony Club test. Now 24, Kate is in semi-retirement and happily at work in her new career, trail riding and teaching adult amateurs the ropes.

With Kate leased to a long-time student at the farm, Cathy remains involved in the mare's day-to-day life. She closely supervises how Kate is ridden, fed and cared for. If the person leasing her can't come to the barn, Cathy grooms Kate herself or ensures that a member of her staff does. She does the same for her other retired international horse, Ocotillo ("Opie").

"Kate likes to look nice," Cathy said. "When she came home to retire, I made sure she was taken care of the way she has always been."

Anyone who drives onto the property and notices a retired four-star mare in her pasture, she added, "sees a horse who is groomed daily, whose mane is tidy, whose tail is banged."

And if they look closely, they can still see the determination that took her to the top of the sport and wove her forever, irreplaceably, into Cathy's life. 🐾

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