

# USDF Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient Maryal Barnett on What Young Trainers Need Most – Education and Dedication

By Lynndee Kemmet



Marylal Barnett has devoted decades of her life to supporting the development of dressage as a sport in the U.S. That commitment earned her the U.S. Dressage Federation's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014. Her long career as a professional in dressage has included training and then successfully competing horses up to the Grand Prix level, teaching riders and judging at both the national and international levels. She is a retired International Equestrian Federation (FEI) "C" dressage judge and is still active as a U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) "S" judge and as a Canadian Equestrian Federation Senior Dressage Judge. She also continues to be actively involved in training the next generation of American dressage judges through her work as both an instructor and examiner for the USEF "r," "R," and "S" dressage judges training programs, and she is on the USDF "L" faculty that teaches future dressage judges.

These days, the Michigan-based Barnett, 76, is almost fully focused on teaching the next generation because her greatest concern is that future professionals are missing an element that is critical for the survival of horsemanship – education.

"I think we have a generation that has been told they are wonderful no matter what they do," Barnett said. "They learn on schoolmaster horses that make it easy for them and they come away thinking that they know more than they do. They didn't have to think about what they were doing with the schoolmaster but then they are going out there and trying to train without knowing all the steps. They only know to make a movement, such as a shoulder-in, but they don't know the purpose of it. They just go for getting the movement any way that they can and you've just got chaos."

Barnett said the younger generation isn't missing talent. However, she senses that many lack a passion for constant learning and a willingness to put in the effort it takes to become educated. The process of becoming a professional, she said, should be difficult enough that those who truly want it must work for it.

"We face the challenge that we must make the younger generation work harder without chasing them away from a career with horses," she said. "They have to take it upon themselves to explore and learn what is right and what is wrong. When I was young, we didn't have much money, so there was no chance of me going all over the country or to Europe to take lessons. But I educated myself and every time I could, I investigated training approaches and methods. If you have a real passion for this, then you can't stop yourself from learning because it so fascinates you."

Even though sport dressage is the world in which she works as a professional, Barnett said what the next generation needs is not an education in how to win in the show ring but rather an education in how to properly develop horses. "I'm afraid of where competitive dressage is going. If we're not careful, we're going to end up with riders and trainers just going for the flash. I am afraid that people see what is winning out there – all front end – and they think that is how it should be."

When asked how to encourage aspiring professionals to focus their self-education on horsemanship rather than blue ribbons, Barnett admits she's a bit at a loss in knowing a strategy. Professionals in the sport, and that includes

her, face the challenge of balancing what they feel horsemanship ought to be with the need to make a living. “We professionals have to eat. I make my money in competitions so it’s hard for me as well. When you are judging, you have to give scores and place a class but in your heart, you know that much of what you saw is not that good. What happens is that riders go away thinking they have accomplished something,” she said. “For some, the most important thing is winning these ribbons but it doesn’t really mean as much as it once did. There are more classes today so they have gotten smaller and everyone seems to get a ribbon.”

Barnett said her best hope for change is that aspiring young professionals take it upon themselves to switch from chasing victory in competition to chasing knowledge. “We need to develop young professionals who have the basics of good horsemanship and who have been taught a philosophy beyond the importance of winning ribbons at shows – a philosophy of care for the horse and of bringing horses along that is focused on enhancing them and not destroying them. If we can find a way to do that, then maybe we can preserve horsemanship in the next generation.”

That responsibility of preservation, Barnett said, rests with today’s current generation of professionals, especially today’s trainers. “We have trainers who want to send out their young people to win because that will then enhance their own name.” What trainers should be doing, she said, is educating their young protégés in the practice of good horsemanship. But educating aspiring young professionals in good horsemanship won’t completely solve the problem. Unless horse owners are also better educated, young professionals will feel pressure to sacrifice good horsemanship to meet client demands.

“Clients want results and that puts stress on young trainers,” Barnett said. “But if clients can better understand what is good and what is bad, then maybe they won’t put their horses with trainers who will break them down. A problem right now is that horse owners are seeing a lot that is bad but being advertised as good. They see what is on the front page of the latest magazine and think it must be good. They don’t see things like the dipped back and understand that it is bad. They just look at the legs.”

Like so many older, successful professionals, Barnett pulls no punches about the difficulty in making it as a professional. There was even a time in her life that she almost gave up on a career. “I was having a difficult time in my teaching career. I was having a life crisis and decided that I needed to know that there would be something else I could do. So, I went to school in computer programming and I loved it. But then I had to decide – do I further my career in computer programming or continue with the horses?”

Barnett said she just couldn’t leave the horses because ultimately, a horsewoman is who she is. She was also blessed with strong support from her husband Charlie, an avid horseman. “He was very supportive and he also really loved the horses.”

As she looks back at her own struggles to succeed as a professional, Barnett said she has no regrets over her decision to choose horses rather than computers. Nor does she have any intention of ending her quest for more knowledge and her work in educating as many young professionals she can. Despite her concerns about the next generation of professionals, life has also taught her that people do change as they age and therefore, one cannot judge the younger generation too sharply. “I try to be optimistic about the next generation because I do understand that when people are young, the ego can get in the way because you are pretty much about yourself. But hopefully, as you age, you realize that you’ve been taking from the world and that you must start to give back. That hopefully will come at some point in everyone’s life.”