

# Success with EA Cygnus+//

Written by Mimi Stanley



If EA Cygnus+// could tell you about himself, he'd boast. He'd start by telling you that he is the only Arabian to earn a USDF JR/Young Rider Grand Prix Horse of the Year Award. He would remind you he is only the second horse in the country to earn a USDF Horse Performance Certificate at every level of dressage and that he is in the top 50 horses of all time for number of USDF Grand Prix tests completed in his career (72). He would go on about his four national championships and five reserve national championships, and how he taught a horse-crazy teenager from North Dakota how to ride, making it sound like he planned it all.

And then I would gently step in, as I often do with Cygnus, and tell the real story.

## THE ROAD TO CYGNUS

That tale begins before Cygnus and I met. Growing up riding my mom's old jumper, Ibn Bee Zahr, and my Half-Arab pony, Merry-legs+//, gave me the skills and courage I would need to handle the journey that was ahead with Cygnus. One taught me to be assertive and keep my heels down while the other taught diplomacy and the art of getting a horse on the bit. I rode Merrylegs in the last USDF Young Rider Clinic that Conrad Schumacher instructed, where I began to understand what real dressage meant. It was also the event that made me realize I needed a schoolmaster.

At the age of 15, when I saw an ad for a grey Grand Prix Arabian gelding named Cygnus, I immediately knew he was the horse I was looking for, but actually getting him was another matter. Bringing him from Louisiana to our farm in North Dakota involved a 3,400 mile trip and some creative financing. We maxed out a low-interest credit card, refinanced the family pickup and trailer and Cygnus' owner agreed to take payments over the course of a year. My end of the bargain was to work our training horses for free through high school.

## BUILDING A GRAND PRIX PARTNERSHIP

Cygnus and I meshed right away, but he was not a quiet or tolerant schoolmaster. He wants to call the shots and requires a completely focused ride. In those early days, Cygnus regularly tested my ability to stay aboard, especially with his penchant for recreational shying, but we pushed

through to a great first summer together as I learned his rules. We were able to get most of the scores for my USDF Silver Medal and we were Reserve National Champion Fourth Level at the Canadian Nationals.

The next season I started showing him in the FEI small tour (Prix St. George and Intermediare I), finishing my silver medal and the I-1 scores for my gold. During a double show weekend, I decided to change our final ride to Grand Prix to see if we could pull it off. Adding piaffe, passage, one tempis and zig-zag canter half-pass was quite a challenge. Our first time to ride it was in the show ring! While our test was far from perfect, it was an exhilarating confidence-builder.

With conscientious work and me listening carefully to my horse, we made consistent progress. Later that summer, we got one of the scores for my gold medal at Grand Prix and five "almosts" between 58 and 59.7. Those were painful. At this point, we were ready for Conrad Schumacher to help us form a real Grand Prix partnership.

## MAXIMUM EFFORT

Our next challenge was getting a crafty Cygnus to work as hard in the show ring as he would schooling. The same horse that could perform 41 flawless one-tempis changes in training might choose to quit at four in competition if I let my guard down for even a moment. To encourage him to put in maximum effort more consistently, I focused on keeping him through to my hand with the power on. We went out to the fields to school the hard work, like piaffe, passage and pirouettes. Asking for these movements on a hill increased the difficulty, making the ring work seem easier. It also helped to only ask for a few steps of piaffe at a time, give him a sugar and praise him, gradually asking for more steps. I became his personal cheerleader. With two more seasons of training we were able to complete my gold medal and Cygnus' Grand Prix Horse Performance Certificate. The most amazing award was winning the USDF Jr/Young Rider Grand Prix Horse of the Year in 2008.

Another element of our training that improved his overall performance was adding freestyle into the mix. Cygnus loves working to music -- the bigger and louder, the better -- so his





Aladdin-themed Kur came to life. With this, his regular Grand Prix execution improved and he gradually became more expressive in his performance. I still had to work for everything I got, but he was seeing me as a better leader.

That season we decided to compete in the FEI freestyle at the 2009 Sport Horse Nationals in Kentucky. Torrential rains, nearby construction and flapping ringside tarps got the better of Cygnus in the Grand Prix where he bolted across the ring, but he pulled off a National Championship at Intermediare 2. On the final evening, just as the music started for our freestyle, he reared. The audience loved it, thinking it was planned but I was sure surprised! Cygnus went on to give a fire-breathing performance and was named National Champion. I was so proud; he had given me everything he had.

## GOING AFTER DRESSAGE'S "ROYAL FLUSH"

By 2010 Cygnus was a more finished, reliable Grand Prix horse and I was a better rider. Now a new challenge seemed within our grasp. Cygnus had earned seven of the possible nine USDF Horse Performance Certificates during his career. For each level, the horse must achieve 10 scores above 60 percent. With two more certificates, we could sweep all nine levels. Although achieving these 90 qualifying scores is an achievement so rare it could be called dressage's "royal flush," I believed for Cygnus it was possible. In 2011 we went back after those missing Intermediare I and II scores.

The start of 2012 was scary with Cygnus' Equine Metabolic Syndrome and Cushings Disease flaring up causing a slight laminitis episode. We got him through it and continued on for the last score, which he got early in the season. Cygnus was now the first Arabian and the second horse of any breed to achieve all nine USDF Horse Performance Certificates!

We were also able to complete the scores needed for my USDF Musical Freestyle Gold Bar and at 22, Cygnus performed his first Grand Prix Special test, earning a 64 percent! Then it was back to Grand Prix for the Sport Horse Nationals. There we missed our goal of a national championship by .6 percent with a jig step at the walk and 17 one tempis instead of the required 15. It was a hard pill to swallow but Cygnus was sound, fit and excited about life, so the most important things were in place.

## THE FUTURE 1/13

While it would be tempting to view success with Cygnus as a string of

accomplishments, my own view is that success is the everyday journey with him and the privilege of working the important details of the upper level dressage horse. Looking at 2013, those details will be in focus. There is room for improvement in things such as more engagement of his right hind leg and suppleness through his ribs to make his half passes bigger. I am so lucky to have a horse that can and still wants to work at 23. I am still learning from him, but now he's learning from me, too. We are aiming for a season at Grand Prix and Sport Horse Nationals, but it's all up to Cygnus.

## Our Final Chapter Final Test 1/14

Cygnus started 2013 as he always did, my White Charger that ruled our kingdom but 2013 was to be his final season. He accompanied us to Cheyenne, WY for his Grand Prix tests. It went well the first day with a definite glitch the second. Something that those not close to Cygnus might not know was that Cygnus was extremely sway backed and had been almost his entire life. Only through the magic of a very unique hand crafted saddle was he able to be ridden. His saddle of 18 years cracked in half during his test! The saddle was rocketed back to Canada to be remanufactured and Cygnus and I went bareback for over a month. During this time I felt lucky to not fly off of him as he never felt a need to make any ride easy.

We ended up passing on the Arabian Sport Horse Nationals. He was ready as was the saddle but the reality was there were not the funds for the show. Instead we went to an open USDF show in Minnesota. That test was to be special in all ways. It was his 75th Grand Prix test, it was one of his best tests ever and he did it in his snaffle. We were one and Cygnus was happy.

He left us December 10th, 2013 at 4:00 AM. He was healthy & full of life until slight colic symptoms showed in the evening. By 12:00 AM the surgical team was assembled and at 4:00 the inoperable tumor that had invaded his small intestine left us with no decision but the most difficult one. Cygnus' time with me was over. He went out at the top of his game -no retirement.

## Beginning

It is hard to think of my life without my best friend and partner. Now it is just me. I trust in the knowledge Cygnus gifted to me and the legacy he left me. I will begin again and stay true to our path.

