



# Build it AND THEY WILL COME

BY HOLLIE MCNEIL

**P**eople of a certain age will recall the 80's movie with Kevin Costner that brought us the phrase “build it and they will come.” The movie was about the improbable success of a baseball field in an Iowa cornfield. Fanciful concept or not, there is truth that we can find something we didn't even know we were looking for when opportunities present themselves.

**Does the “build it and they will come” philosophy extend to dressage?** No doubt, some horse loving person can discover dressage on their own. Quite often though, it's a student who arrives at a barn not knowing much about the sport. Their passion and love for dressage started with the seed planted by riding in a basic lesson program.

**A growing segment of dressage is the youth competitor.** There's a saying that without a base there is no top and the sport is certainly stronger with a vibrant, solid base. When you look at all the big names in dressage you know they didn't just arrive in the big leagues. Laura Graves is a perfect example. A rider from a very early age, Laura was just 15 years old when she bought a foal in Europe. That foal is Verdades, her Olympic partner. As Laura or anyone else at the top of their game will tell you, dressage takes



Top: Julia Houser and Rainmaker. Photo: Hollie McNeil  
Middle: Lendon Gray and Merritt Perkins. Photo: Hollie McNeil  
Bottom: Youth Dressage Festival. Photo: Don Espey

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## DRESSAGE4KIDS - cont'd

years to learn (some say two lifetimes) and that means world-class riders really need to start out as youngsters.

**There's an argument that dressage is not a sport for kids.** They want jumping and adrenaline filled sports like eventing. However, evidence abounds that kids actually like dressage and can be quite serious even at a young age. For proof, look no further than the non-profit organization Dressage4Kids. D4K was started in 1998 as the brainchild of two-time Olympic Champion Lendon Gray. Its mission, "to encourage riders under 21 to become true horsemen; to offer scholarships; to develop good sportsmanship; to support programs for adults who in turn educate youth; and to have fun." In twenty plus years D4K has gone from hosting the annual Youth Dressage Festival, to having YDF events in various parts of the country, developing TEAM (Training, Education & Mentoring) clinics, WEP (Weekend Education Program), WIT (Winter Intensive Training), and many more programs.


**Lendon Gray and her team of supporters** have hit a home run with the "build it and they will come" concept. Can a grassroots barn grab onto the coattails of D4K? The answer is yes and here are some proven paths to success.

**A barn with a lesson program in place** has the basic ingredients; kids and horses. To introduce competitive dressage try organizing a low-key schooling show. Making it as inclusive as possible will get the best results. So often, the biggest barrier to getting kids involved is the lack of a horse. A good solution is to have them ride school horses or borrowed horses from boarders or friends.

**Once these young riders are hooked** a fun next step is to form an actual team. The team can have "practices," take road trips to audit clinics, and go to big dressage shows as spectators. Kids love getting team shirts, jackets, hats, and saddle pads. Many teams that were formed in this method make a goal of participating in the annual Lendon Gray

Youth Dressage Festival. It's the perfect event to help focus their dressage education by defining a very attainable goal. The beauty of the three-part competition of dressage test, equitation class, and written test is that it's an equalizer for the grassroots farm. Knowledge counts as much as a nice dressage test. A well-positioned, functional rider on a basic school horse can still do extremely well.

**That small group of riders that started on** schoolies can grow into a big group of very serious-minded dressage riders in no time at all. Soon enough the kids will be wanting their own horses and will want to attend recognized shows and climb the dressage ladder. From grassroots barns to the Olympics: build it and they will come.

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## NEDA Partners in Education Program Tier 1 - Advertising Assistance Level

**TIER I provides ADVERTISING assistance to any NEDA member organizing a clinic in exchange for discounts for NEDA members.**

### TIER I - ADVERTISING ASSISTANCE

The NEDA Partners in Education program has been developed in an effort to address the membership's request for more clinics, including riding and auditing opportunities for dressage enthusiasts of all levels. Since it is nearly impossible for NEDA to organize clinics that would be equally accessible to its almost

1,400 members across 7 states, NEDA has implemented the Partners in Education Program to fill that gap.

TIER I provides advertising assistance to any NEDA member organizing a clinic (non-profit groups are exempt from required membership). Advertising opportunities will be

given to help promote your event in exchange for auditing (and sometimes riding) discounts for NEDA members at your clinic.

**See the NEDA website under the "Learn" tab for more detailed info or contact: [edpartners1@neda.org](mailto:edpartners1@neda.org).**

