

The Ultimate In Gracious Central Florida Living

# OCCALA



## **BRING ON THE DANCING HORSES**

The art and benefit  
of dressage  
A VISIT TO  
DANCING HORSES FARM



# *Dancing Dressage*

**Bob and Barbara Walla choreograph  
dressage dance at their Ocala training farm**

Text and photography by Cynthia McFarland

*A*NYONE FORTUNATE ENOUGH to have witnessed the masterful performance by a horse and rider competing in the upper levels of dressage will immediately understand the comparison of this equestrian sport to dancing. Elegance and symmetry meld with power

and controlled grace as horse and rider become one unit.

The thrilling harmony of a fine ride made "Dancing Horses Farm" a natural choice when Bob and Barbara Walla were searching for a name for their new dressage training facility and showground.

Dancing Horses Farm of Ocala recently opened its gates and is now accepting horses for dressage training, offering lessons, and both full and partial care boarding at competitive rates.

The farm will also be the site of clinics and dressage demonstrations on a regular basis. Trainer Joan Caldwell, who resides on the premises, holds a Master's Challenge certificate in dressage training and is a member of the Florida Dressage Society.

A native of upstate New York, Caldwell became interested in dressage at an early age and trained under several of the sport's top trainers.

The playful black and white Dancing Horses logo may already be familiar to fans of miniature harness racing, as the facility hosted a series of races for a season. Today the staccato rhythm of miniature hooves racing around an oval track has been replaced by the harmonious footfall of horses training in the classical training of dressage.

Tons of clay, which had originally been put down as the base for the old racetrack, were moved to form the base for a regulation dressage ring. A top dressing of limestone screenings mixed with sand completed the footing. Adjacent to the lighted dressage arena is a covered grandstand and an announcer's/judge's stand. The setting is ideal for lessons, clinics, and demonstrations. A 70-foot diameter round pen offers an excellent location for training on the longe line.

Trees abound on the property which has a total of nine paddocks and 14 stalls. Electrical hook-ups for RVs or horse trailers make it convenient for overnight stays, and there is also a guest apartment over the main barn.

"Although we don't have the room to hold big

shows, we want to hold schooling shows and host clinics, in addition to having the dressage training facility," Barbara notes.

"It seems like the public is so eager to come and see horses. We're thinking of opening the farm to the public once a month when we have demonstrations of musical freestyles.

"Ideally, we want to have full-time boarders who are also students."

Bob and Barbara want to attract vendors eager to help sponsor the local shows and clinics, and also hope to find national sponsors for their two current dressage horses, both Saddlebreds, as they continue competing.

The Wallas' idea of opening a dressage training facility got its start in a somewhat unlikely fashion. Long a lover of horses, Barbara had yet to have her own riding horse. Living in the city when they resided in New York made it impossible, but that dream finally became reality after the Wallas relocated to Punta Gorda, Florida, in 1992. "It took me 50 years to get a horse!" she laughs

*Opposite page: Bob and Barbara Walla at the entrance to their farm. This page, Joan Caldwell astride He's A Class Act.*





now, looking back to the day she purchased "He's A Class Act." The gelding was an American Saddlebred and Barbara had fancied that breed for years.

"A nurse I worked with had a daughter who was training with Joan and when I bought 'Classy' I decided she was the one to help me learn," Barbara recalls. She was intrigued with the sport of dressage and hoped Caldwell could help turn Classy from a saddle seat show horse into one capable of competing — and winning — in dressage.

"This horse had to do a big turn-around to succeed," Caldwell notes. "He was nine years old and because he was a saddle seat horse, his whole configuration was the opposite of what a dressage horse should be. But Classy is a very intelligent horse and responded well." In saddle seat classes, the horses are shown with head and tail held upright, while the gaits are animated and rapid. Dressage, on the other hand, emphasizes the horse's natural movements performed with controlled grace and rhythm.

"Dressage isn't just for training," explains Caldwell, who has competed through the fourth level. "It can improve any horse, no matter their breed or discipline. With dressage, the first thing you want to get is relaxation and suppleness. A lot of dressage training is like yoga. I always wanted to do something where I really communicated with the horse and that's the total focus of dressage. It's a challenging discipline and there's always more to learn. I enjoy working with problem horses. I like the challenge of unraveling the puzzle."

With time and patient training, Classy evolved from a high-headed, hyper horse to being recognized as a world champion American Saddlebred at the training level of dressage. He was honored as the 1999 Saddlebred Select at the Gold Level, based on the accumulation of competition points in a three-year period.

The Wallas' love of horses and their interest in dressage, combined with Classy's newfound success in the sport, encouraged them to pursue having their own public training or show facility. Although they were living in Punta Gorda at the time, they were smitten with the beauty of Ocala the first time they

traveled through the area some six years ago.

"We thought we'd died and gone to heaven when we came here," says Barbara. "It's so convenient with all the horse amenities and services, and the people really work with you."

Although the Wallas initially searched for farms with Realtors, they literally stumbled onto their current property.

The 21-acre property, which is surrounded by some of the county's most prestigious horse farms, was offered by Ed Sherman of neighboring Sherman Oaks. Once the Wallas and the Shermans began talking, the meeting seemed more prophetic than accidental. Barbara is from Staten Island, New York, and Bob hails from Brooklyn, while Sherman came from Brooklyn and his wife was a native of Staten Island. As fate would have it, the two women even attended the same high school and rode at the same stable as teen-agers, although they never met at the time. "When we found this out, we thought it was an ironic coincidence," Barbara says, "almost an omen."

The Wallas closed on the property three years ago, but just moved to Ocala in 2001.

Bob is retired from the sheriff's office where he worked in jail administration, while Barbara currently works as an operating room nurse at Munroe Regional. Since retiring, Bob is learning as much as possible about the hands-on aspects of managing a farm, and is currently taking the two-year course with the International Equine Institute.

Both Bob and Barbara feel strongly that the formula for success requires hard work, patience, good nutrition, proper exercise, good health and a professional trainer. "I think there are a lot of people like myself who are finally able to get their own horse, once their kids are grown," says Barbara. "If they are looking for someone to teach them and take them through all the steps, Joan is ideal. She's very patient and she has the expertise. She's ridden with the sport's best."

If people start thinking of Dancing Horses Farm as synonymous with dressage, that would be just fine with the Wallas. "That's our goal," says Barbara. "We would also like to help preserve Ocala as the Horse Capital of the World. We love the fact that there are so many different breeds and disciplines here." ■

### The Wallas want to attract vendors eager to help sponsor the local shows and clinics.

For more information, contact Dancing Horses Farm at 352-873-7084. The farm is located at 8711 West Highway 40, Ocala, FL 34482. An information packet will be sent on request.