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By Janet de Acevedo Macdonald

# We Speak *Horse*

**“As we strolled between the Beaux-Arts-style Grand Palais and Petit Palais I said to Ian, ‘I smell shavings and horses!’”**

## WE SPEAK HORSE

I love going to horse shows. At the larger shows, I stroll by the large barns, fascinated at all the work that goes into what real estate agents call ‘curb appeal.’ I love the smell of fresh shavings, warm water and shampoo, detangler, finishing spray, and all the sights, sounds, and smells that tell me horses are nearby. Horse people are my people. I believe, and I think you’ll agree that we communicate in a common language centered around our love of horses.

A few years ago, pre-pandemic, my husband Ian and I were visiting Paris walking along the famous Champs Elysees boulevard toward the Louvre museum. As we strolled between the Beaux-Arts-style Grand Palais and Petit Palais I said to Ian, ‘I smell shavings and horses!’ But we’re in central Paris where wafts from fresh baguettes would be more usual. Not a half block later, we spotted temporary stalls, wash areas, and warm-up spaces busy with grooms, riders, and les chevaux (horses). It was a sold-out, multi-day FEI jumping event so I breathed deeply thinking “You cannot make this stuff up,” and we kept our Louvre date. In the coming days as we enjoyed the city on foot, we learned this FEI event was quite the equestrian soiree. Throughout the city, each neighborhood had a designated park set up with screens live broadcasting the competition. It

was springtime in Paris with marvelous weather, so Parisians and les touristes alike watched the classes as children played, all cheered, ate, toasted, and marveled at the athletes. Won’t it be fun to watch the Summer Olympic equestrian events next summer as Paris hosts the 2024 Games?!

## HOW ABOUT THAT PREPARATION?

As an adult amateur of a certain age, my jumping-over-fences years are behind me. I loved it in my teens, but now the horses are too tall, the fences are too high, the courses seem more complicated, and the ground far too hard. And to be honest, this horse-crazy girl hopped on, and off we went. I don’t remember many lessons. I cleaned stalls for free so that I could ride. Those were wonderful years, and I wouldn’t give them up, as much as I’d love to be able to add in equitation. No doubt, I’d have found it boring, but how I love to watch a steady rider with his or her hands well placed, with good leg and upper body position, and a solid seat. To me, the best horse/rider connection looks as if they are one creature - a centaur. Or another image, not as mythical, is of the swan gliding effortlessly on a pond while paddling madly beneath the surface. Both analogies are apt, and as riders, we can attest to the fact that the horse is not doing all the work.



Lately, to better prepare me I've taken to dressage. I didn't like it at first. I wanted to do rail classes, but I found those exhausted me and I was embarrassed that during downward transitions I would fold in the middle, and at the canter, I couldn't keep my butt from bouncing around on the saddle. I also felt bad for my beautiful horse that stood quietly in the lineup as all others were called before we were. I went from main ring competitions to sport horse disciplines and learned that in French 'training' translates to 'dressage.' Yes, there are the Sport Horse Under Saddle classes and I expect I'm a bit more glued to the saddle than before. However, for me, competing alone in the 20 x 60-meter dressage arena with the judge and scribe seated behind C, and receiving a report card afterward is fantastic! OK, it's not really a report card, but that's how I explain score sheets to nonhorse people. What I truly like is that I compete against myself using my last score from an earlier ride at the same level and test as a measure. This year, I'm riding Training Level Test 3. My goal is to

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*Photos courtesy of Janet de Acevedo Macdonald*



*Photos courtesy of Janet de Acevedo Macdonald*

ride well enough to consistently score in the 70s with comments from the judges that compliment the connection I have with my horse.

### **WHAT ELSE NEEDS LOOKING AFTER?**

Did you know there are horse brushes made for sensitive horses? I didn't until I was looking up which grooming brushes are the best (horsehair), how many I need (two, face and body), and how to care for them (horse shampoo, hot water, rinse well, and air dry thoroughly). My horses aren't sensitive but cheaply made brushes could have your horse fidgeting in the cross ties.

Confession: I buy shower caddies from Walmart and use these to carry grooming tools. At less than \$6 each (versus \$12-\$20 for a 'horse grooming tote') I have several to help me stay organized.

At the beginning of each show season, I empty the huge Craftsman toolbox on wheels we use as our show tack/grooming box and shake, toss, refill, or replenish every item new - from shampoo to

detangler, to hoof polish, sunblock, towels, Ibuprofen (for humans), and bug spray. Once repacked, I make sure to check it again a day or so before we leave for a show, just in case. I also buy new rubber bands and toss the ones I hadn't used from the previous season. I'm not the best at braiding. I start out nicely behind the ears but as I go down the neck, so does the neatness. I've tried, but I'm hopeless at running braids, too. For me, there is nothing more nerve wracking than to have rubber bands that snap and break one after the other as I'm standing above my horse's neck, running my test pattern in my head while managing show nerves and getting ready to show.

I'm also a sales watcher. I don't do this to brag about how cheap I am - I'm not, I like well-made things for me and my horse, but I work at staying in my lane for what I can afford. That, and I like a good deal. I subscribe to my favorite online saddlery shops and I shop the clearance. I've also become a whiz at finding good buys on eBay. A neighbor has the loveliest



Janet trail riding with her stallion Legacys Renoir.

**“Because of our passion, we all speak horse - some fluently, some haltingly, and some of us are flat-out beginners.”**

**-Janet de Acevedo Macdonald**

Albion dressage saddle that suits me as a rider, but I needed a 17.5-inch, medium size with a narrow twist to fit my Arabian horses. I set up a filter on eBay some months ago and last month a used Albion that met all of my criteria at \$500 + shipping came my way. Another eBay filter I set up two weeks ago netted me a pair of darn-near-new Le Mieux splint boots for \$9 from a fellow equestrian living in the heart of Florida's horse country, Wellington.

Another type of deal shopping that I do is with equestrian trainers and coaches that are active on social media. I developed this skill through my Google searches. When I looked up info about a dressage term or command/complaint/cue from a coach, I noticed a handful of online trainers had YouTube or Vimeo videos or blog posts answering my question. Perfect. I watch their playlists and determine if their teaching style suits me. If it does, I subscribe to their channel or sign up for their newsletter. Many also have courses behind paywalls, but I haven't purchased any yet. For me, still, very much the dressage novice, if I am to buy online coursework it will most likely be from Amelia Newcomb Dressage. I find Amelia to be incredibly generous with what she offers for free. I value and respect that.

#### **MEMBERSHIPS AND OTHER NECESSARIES**

I've been a member of the Arabian Horse Association since 2006, and when I can I'm an active volunteer with my local club. Amazingly, I'm still learning about programs or aspects of AHA programs I compete in that I didn't know about. It's crazy to me, but sometimes I only read far enough to answer my specific question. For instance, there's a Frequent Rider Program that costs \$25 for tracking non-competitive rides. I love that and why wouldn't Ian and

I do that with our Arabians that we trail ride?

Of course, if you compete in the Arabian breed shows in addition to annual membership fees paid to the national association and local club, you'll purchase an AHA competition card plus join the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF). I realize the USEF's SafeSport component can feel like a chore, but there's a lot to be learned from it, and this is a true case of when it's 100% better to be safe versus sorry.

With an active local club and regional AHA association, you will have a lot of opportunities to show with just those purchases. To wring the most out of the memberships I buy, I look for opportunities to give back through volunteering because it's good for all involved. Sometimes you or your horse aren't ready to show or you choose to only show once or twice during the season. Fine, that's how life is for 95% of horse people that show. It's about choices around our horse passion. I encourage you to volunteer at your local and regional shows. It's fun. Volunteers make the horse show go around. And, these are your people - our people. Because of our passion, we all speak horse - some fluently, some haltingly, and some of us are flat-out beginners. You know the love we have. You know the smells. You know you're one of us if you point out the car window and say, "Oh, look horses!"

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