



Qualifying in Para-Dressage for the World Equestrian Games, 2010 — An Interview with Susan Treabess

by Betty Staley

*Interviewing Susan is like catching a coastal breeze.
Refreshing and invigorating, there's lots of energy in this breeze.*

Staley: Susan, you have an interesting riding and life background, tell me about it:

Treabess: Basically, I came out of the chute with the love of horses and my parents fostered my horse love. It was the usual horse mania: toys, rocking horses, etc. At five years old, I was getting regular trail ride lessons, in Squaw Valley. This progressed to “real” English riding lessons, weekly, then daily riding lessons and horse camp, too. All this led to my first horse, Choco, an American Saddlebred, when I was twelve.

Staley: What's the story on Choco? I know he has an interesting history.

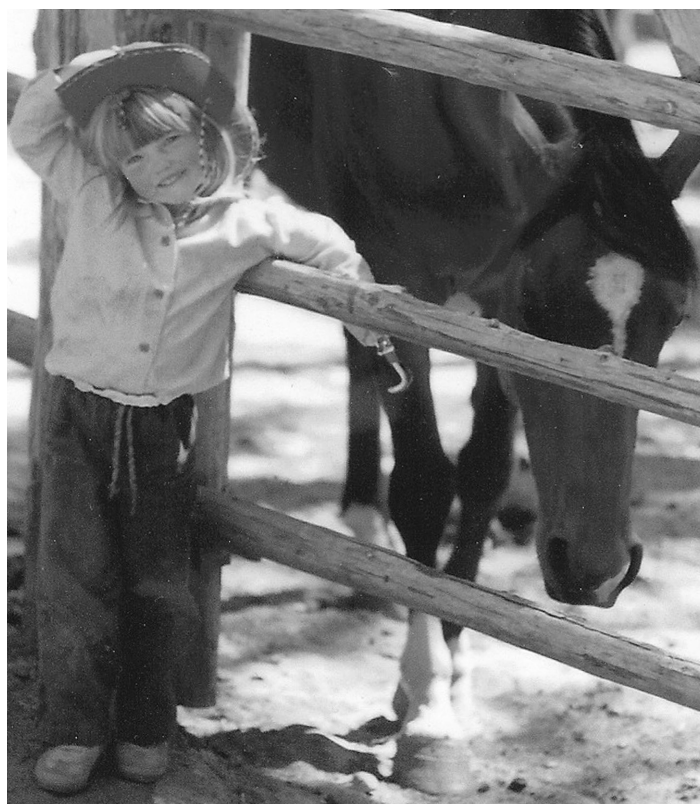
Treabess: When Choco came into my life, he was a two-year-old. The idea was that my then riding instructor would guide me through the process of starting a horse. Unfortunately, Choco was not good material for a kid's project and it was not going to be a forgiving start. None of the “traditional” training methods worked with Choco. My family was new to the horse owning world and the instructor got stuck. Choco's story includes multiple trainers. I think, more than one got hurt. I have vivid memories of Choco scared to death.

It looked like dog food was the next path. Looking for better options, my father ended up talking to Oscar Thompson, who had just moved to California, from Montana.

Through Oscar, Choco became Dave Hillman's project. Through Dave, I met Tom (Dorrance), and through Tom, I met Ellen (Eckstein). Edith (Clark) is another important person in my life, who was a fixture at the “Tom and Ellen three ring circus.” Those are their words describing their joint clinics, not mine.

Ellen is still my rock and mentor. Like my parents. Dave is, too, but he doesn't know that. Important memories of Dave working with Tom have come back to me recently. As a child, I took him (Dave) for granted. But he's right up there as being influential in my life, as any other mentor.

Staley: What sort of memories are coming back to you?



A young trail rider, Susan, age three. Susan was born without her left hand.

Treabess: Memories from the clinics with Tom and Ellen, in Turlock. At one of those clinics, Tom taught me how to tie the rope halter backwards. I didn't know why. I didn't even ask why. Just recently, a friend saw me put the halter on my horse backwards and showed me the correct way to tie a halter. I thought, “That's weird.” I remember my lesson with Tom, like it was yesterday. Tom had me tie it backwards.

After my friend showed me the “correct” way to tie the halter, I decided to tie the halter that way and promptly tied myself (indicating her prosthetic hook) into the halter knot. The hook got caught. That got me thinking. I called Dave to



Above: (Left to right) Dave Hillman, Choco, and Susan's father Ron Treabess. Circa: 1990.

Right: Susan, age 15, on Brownie. Circa: 1992.



ask him if he thought that was why Tom had me tie the halter backwards; I asked Dave if he thought Tom saw that difficulty coming ... way out. Dave said, yes.

(Pauses)

With Tom... the little things were often the most important.

Staley: What stands out in your memory as your most valuable horsemanship lesson?

Treabess: There have been lots of valuable lessons. They just keep coming.

(Pauses)

Okay. Here's a recent revelation. Through horses, I'm beginning to learn the real value of ego; I mean the value of not having one. It's hard as a human to release your ego. But it's the best thing for your horses to lose your ego. That has crossed over into my personal life. I've struggled a lot with having a really big ego. (Laughs)

Tom set it up (for me to change in this area) a long time ago, as a kid. At one clinic, Dave was working with my dad to ride Chaco with no reins. I was riding my POA pony, Sunny, around bareback with my arms crossed. I rode by Tom and said, "I've got this." I was maybe thirteen years old. I remember Tom saying, "Yes, but do you have it with your eyes closed?" It was about the value of developing feel for little things; the ability to pay attention. It's not the big things that are important: it's the preparation for things.

There was always something more (to learn). With both Dave and Tom, I remember lots of rope tying and puzzles, too. Just when I thought I knew it all, they made it clear I didn't. But (they did it) in a way that I didn't fight back. Debating is my nature, my personality. My parents encouraged strong opinions, and even as a child, I was allowed to have an opinion. But the adults in my life never took me on when I was wrong; they just redirected me to something else to figure out, on my own.

Sunny was a more appropriate horse for me at thirteen, but that pony contributed to my ego.

Staley: In what way?

Treabess: Sunny was so tolerant. I got away with murder. My pony let me be king. He wasn't the only horse that let me get away with everything. But, other horses in my life are bringing that ego down.

As a teenager, I got way off track in my horse thinking, toying around with various restraints. I lost my focus, the love of the horse. It became more about competition.

Staley: How do you feel about competition, today?

Treabess: Reentering competition, I'm in a much different mental space, now. I believe in things working out the way they should. I am still very competitive, but my job is my outlet for that. So now I can be fairer when competing with horses... and won't abuse them.

Staley: By abuse, what do you mean?

Treabess: (Laughing) ... take advantage of ... I did this to people, too, but I didn't actually know that I was taking advantage. Now, I'm trying to learn how to keep my opinions and my strengths, and also acknowledge my weaknesses, not lie to myself. I learned about this through the horses and the people. I look up to these people. I was always seeking approval, from Tom, Dave, Ellen and Edith. But I didn't like getting to know "me."

That's a gift my arm gave to me.



Susan riding Money Penny, 2008.

Staley: What do you mean?

Treabess: Growing up in a small town, I was not the girl with one arm. Everyone knew me, accepted me, and treated me like every other person. At college, where no one knew me, my life changed. I became the girl missing her arm. I lost my identity. It changed my identity to “Susan, missing the hand.”

I notice wheelchairs, people with physical disabilities. But, that never related to me. I didn't view myself as missing a hand. That part was great; except for the ego.

Staley: How did missing your hand contribute to your ego?

Treabess: I was raised to be a confident person. My parents allowed me to be me. But when I realized I had just one hand, my self-confidence tanked. I became physically aware. That shot right into typical girl issues, “I'm not pretty enough, not good enough.”

Staley: Did this manifest with your horses?

Treabess: I had two horses at college and I don't remember a lot about working with them. There was lots of time off from riding. It was an emotional crisis. (Softly, tears filling her eyes.) This is hard. I didn't expect to cry. (Pause) I would go sit with my horses. I didn't need to ride. I just needed to be with my horses.

Staley: What is your current greatest challenge?

Treabess: Figuring out how to put it all back together. I'm getting to a point where I'm taking all the lessons as gifts, the people and horses, and doing what I want to do with it. I'm learning how to be competitive without being unfair or untrue to self. And still being good at riding; being competitive. (Smiles)

Staley: How are you doing that?

Treabess: I had another ego check, last year. At a dressage clinic, Dennis Callin asked me about becoming a Para-equestrian, “Was I interested...?”

My initial attitude was, “Excuse me?! Who do you think you are?”

Fortunately, maturity made me keep my mouth shut... sometimes I can do that at the right moments. (Laughs) Dennis explained that it was a great opportunity; for training, travel, that I am a good rider, and I ought to consider that.

What was so hard sorting out: What, I'm just a good rider with one arm? I'm just a charity case?

But, once my ego withdrew, the opportunity came through (to me). Most people would have to go a long way to get to this level of riding, the time involved, the money... I have an opportunity to ride horses I might never have an opportunity to ride. My mindset changed.

Staley: Specifically, what are your immediate goals?

Treabess: This year ... get notches on my belt competing in dressage.

Staley: What level?

Treabess: Third to start, maybe fourth ... see how it goes. Get a variety of showing experience. Get comfortable in the show rings, training, learn how to fix things right then and there, how to make mistakes and move right on.

There are other things I'm really interested in learning; roping, for example. The more you learn, the more you see, the more you want to learn.

I almost said this earlier... to me, Choco is a yearbook, a living memory. Everything I learned influences who I will be. Choco represents a lot. Choco went from no ego, to a very confident horse.

We swapped places. That's a good thing.

Epilogue

Susan still owns and rides Choco, who is now in his twenties. Choco accomplished all the movements to compete at Fourth Level dressage. Susan also has a young dressage prospect, Amigo, who is being started under saddle by Dave Hillman, of Orange, California. In dressage competition, Susan is riding Money Penny, a 13-year-old, KWPN, owned by Katy Peterson, of Carmel Valley, California.

At their first open dressage competition together, Susan and Money Penny scored a 65% and 71%, winning both of their Third Level classes. At this writing, Susan and Money Penny have won seven out of eight classes entered.