

# Rusty Who?

**Bernadette Faurie profiles the horse with no history (but one heck of a future!) and the rider who made him, Ulla Salzgeber!**

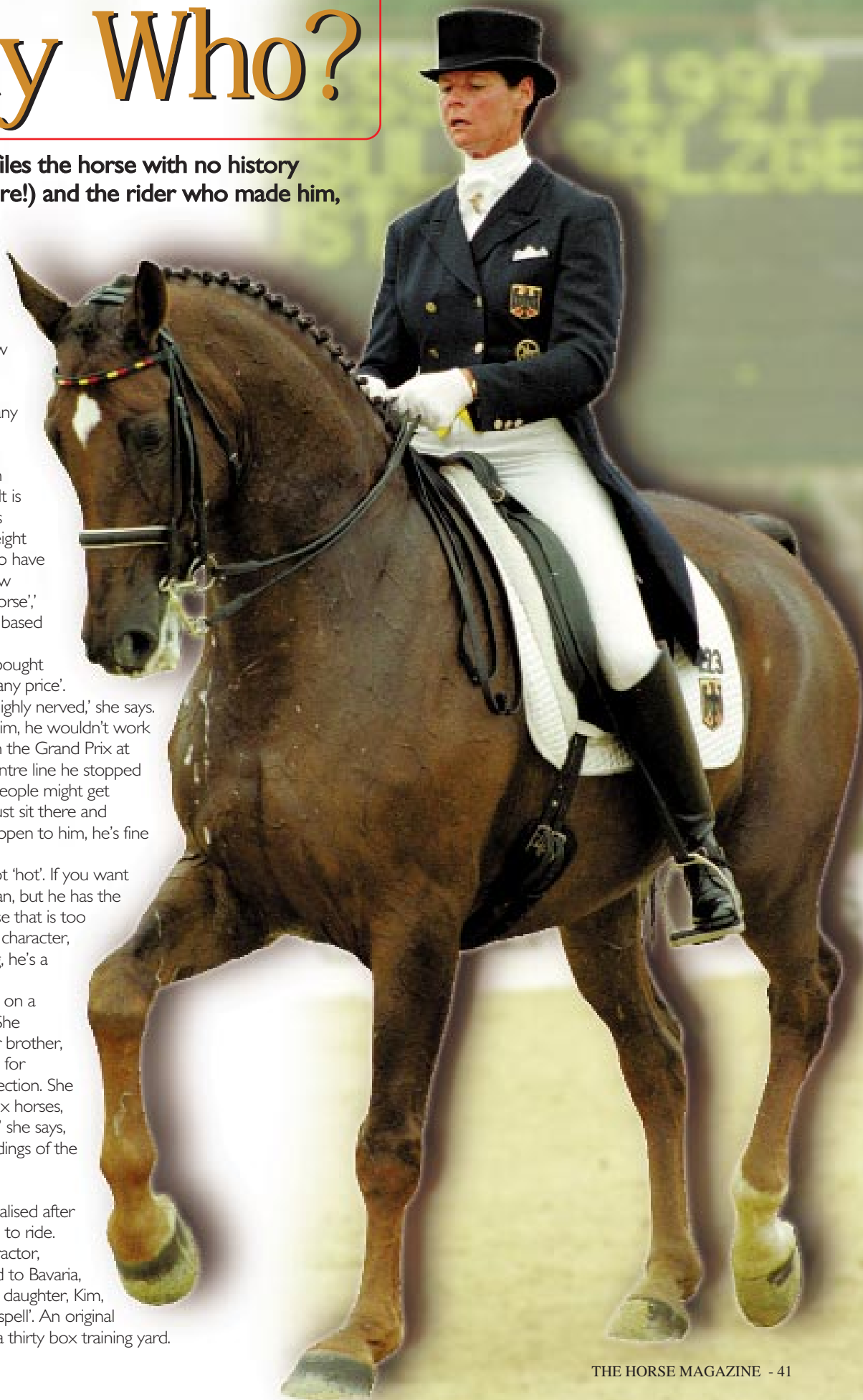
**T**wo and a half years ago, Ulla Salzgeber went over to her neighbour Alexander Moksel's to look at his latest influx of new horses and select some to take home, train and sell on for him. Moksel is well-known in Germany as the former main sponsor of Ludger Beerbaum. One of the batch was a Russian gelding of unknown breeding. 'It is always very difficult to say 'that's perfect' on first sight, but after eight weeks, having had the chance to have him home and take him to a few competitions, I said 'that's my horse!,' recalls the 39 year old Bavarian based professional trainer.

The horse was Rusty, and she bought him. Now he is not for sale 'at any price'. 'Rusty's a fighter but he is also highly nerved,' she says. 'If you were to kick him or hit him, he wouldn't work in that situation. For example, in the Grand Prix at Verden this year, on the first centre line he stopped and looked, and where other people might get hold of the reins, you have to just sit there and when he knows nothing will happen to him, he's fine and he goes.'

'He wants to work, but he is not 'hot'. If you want to make him a bit hotter you can, but he has the optimum temperament. A horse that is too hot is not reliable enough. As a character, he follows you round like a dog, he's a lovely horse.'

Ulla Salzgeber's last appearance on a German team was as a Junior. She followed in the footsteps of her brother, Ralf. Ulla picked up a team gold for herself to add to the family collection. She has produced several Grand Prix horses, but 'none good enough for this' she says, gesturing at the august surroundings of the European Championships. She was waiting.

Ulla started studying law, but realised after her first exams that she wanted to ride. Marriage to Sebastian, a chiropractor, entailed a move from Rheinland to Bavaria, and seven years ago they had a daughter, Kim, christened because 'it's easy to spell'. An original two boxes at home grew into a thirty box training yard.



To get a gold medal at a major championships without having set a competitive foot outside your country could only happen in Germany but that is just what Ulla did at Verden.

'It was great even when you have the discard score which is normally enough to win a Grand Prix. The difficult thing has been to get to this stage.'

Having trained dressage riders in The Philippines for some time after being introduced to the area by showjumper, Denise Conjuango, it was suggested that Ulla ride for the South East Asian archipelago. 'I did think about it, but decided that if we were going to do it at all, it would be for Germany.'

The first inkling that recognition was a possibility came with a letter last year from the German Federation to say that Rusty and Rudolf Zeilinger's Livijno, were the two most successful horses in the national Grand Prix tour.

'When I went to Warendorf it was 'Ah, so you are Frau Salzgeber'. No-body had any idea who I was.'

Ulla was about to fly off on her training mission to The Philippines when the award was followed by an invitation to Stuttgart CDI. 'Rusty had had four weeks holiday and I wasn't nominated, but Gotthilf Riexinger, the organiser, invited me. We were fifth, then sixth in the Special. It gave me a great boost to be able to ride there.'

It opened the doors at Frankfurt, Dortmund, Wiesbaden and Munich, en route to Aachen and the German Championships.

'The most difficult thing in Germany is getting the starts, and you can't get the results without them. You have to break the chain.'

When Ulla got the call to come and ride in the CDIO tour at Aachen, this year, that team prospects came into the equation. 'He was ranked fifth in Aachen of the Germans, and went on the long list. Then at the second selection, the German Championships in Münster, we weren't at our best. I hadn't trained enough. I had been riding him in the fields or lunging him, and perhaps three days before, we trained. It wasn't enough! On the first day, he was a bit excited and I thought to myself 'bye, bye European Championships!'

They were fifth in Münster, which for level-headed Ulla was no big disaster. 'I thought I had plenty of time for the World Championships next year. Everyone said, he is only nine, this year doesn't matter. And, after all, my main goal in Sydney.'

So, having gone home, done one more show, where she and Rusty won the Grand Prix and the Special, Ulla and Sebastian planned a holiday.

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A call from the Chairman of the German Dressage Committee, Anton Fischer, on the Thursday before Verden week, put paid to that idea. 'He wanted me at Kronberg at the team training camp - at once. I had a stable to run, and my daughter to look after so there was no chance. But I got there on Friday, had a vet check, and I was on the team.'

While her husband, Sebastian organised the production of the new Kür tape ('We'd thought after Münster we'd have plenty of time to do it'), Ulla headed to Jo Hinnemann, who has been her trainer for the past eighteen months. 'It was quite funny as two weeks before the show, I had met up with 'Petesie' Merveldt and Olga Klimko, and knew they were going to Verden, but thought I would be staying at home.' (Irish rider, Anna Merveldt and Ukrainian, Olga, are both based in Bavaria).

Organising home was another thing. 'There were a few problems,' says Ulla, 'I'd had to sack one groom, I'd sent one on holiday and the third girl was in hospital. I needed someone to come with me to Verden, but who was going to look after the stable at home? Fortunately Jo sent me an American boy to help. He's coping alone with twenty horses, poor guy. The first thing I'll do when I get home is send him off to sleep, then a holiday!'

The Championship debut failed to disturb Ulla's cool approach.

'I'd done enough important competitions, and being fifth or sixth in the rankings, I thought, that's enough. There was no pressure as there was nothing to lose. There was only a chance to go up.'

That is just what she did.

Rusty, after just a year and three months in Grand Prix, produced his best performances to date to finish sixth overall in Europe.

'I knew everyone would be thinking let's see what she can do, that's why for me it was really good that we could hold our level through the whole competition. Also being able to take the pressure off Nadine was really good.'

'It's funny but the one problem I had with him in the past, was in piaffe, he had not really found the rhythm. It was always 'Oh the piaffe' but on the Monday before the Championships, something finally clicked, and it happened. I don't know why, because I have never put pressure on him, just allowed him to do, at the level he is, so for everyone, including Herr Fischer and Jo Hinnemann, it was 'wow, he's got it!' and when Sebastian

got there that evening, I said you won't believe what happened. It was very good, it made me feel more secure than wondering, will he do it or not.'

To call it a fairy tale wouldn't be quite fair. The story is one of talent, spotting it, and having it, combined with finely judged preparation, but it nearly ended in disaster.

'Rusty is a very happy character in his stable, a bit fond of playing around. He reared up and hooked his front legs right over the top. It was a day when I was busy teaching and just by chance, I had come back into the stables to look for a phone number. I called out 'Hello Rusty' but he didn't pop his head out as he normally does. I went to look and there he was surrounded by blood. It was one of the worst moments of my life.'

'He'd cut one leg open all the way down. For three days we couldn't assess the damage as the leg was so swollen, then we trotted him up and amazingly he was not lame. It was only a flesh wound, but a fraction more to the side and it would have severed his tendon.'

Still it didn't stop them going to the next show on the calendar - Munich.

'Nobody could believe it went we turned up at Munich. They gave us permission to come later and trot up just before the competition. The only thing was that with all the hair clipped away his leg didn't look so nice, although now you can't see anything.'

They won the Grand Prix and were second in the Special.

'But I say now he can't have another injury as we used up all our help from 'up there' on this one.'

Before Verden, Ulla had only met her team mates at the big competitions. In a top sporting team there can be complications, but there was a super atmosphere surrounding this year's all girl quartet, with former international rider, Madeleine Winter-Schultze as Chef d'Equipe.

'If there was any problem, however small, Madeleine would be there to manage it. She is always there if you need someone, and is always the same, so nice. She got us together before the Grand Prix and told us 'OK we hope for the gold, but don't force it. What is more important is that you all go out there and have good rides and do your best.' It made a lot of difference to our confidence. First Europe, now the World awaits next year.

'Now I can take my time, go home and perfect the little details.'

This elegant, assured rider promises: 'Next year he will be at the top.'

And no one would doubt her...

