

Secret Lives of Horses

Curioso the Jumper

By MARY JANE HOWELL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY KNOLL

If these Secret Lives articles have proven one thing, it's that there is an unbreakable bond between older horses and the women and men who love them. That said, the energy and love that flow between Sharer Dale and Curioso, her 22-year-old Dutch Warmblood, is something very special.

Sharer was 26 when she bought Curioso (Curi for short.) Regally bred in Germany by Jan Brauer, Curi is the grandson of the world-renowned Furioso II, one of the most influential sires in sport horse history. Some of this stallion's noteworthy offspring include Heisman (whose rider was Michael Matz), For Pleasure (Gold medal winner at both the Atlanta and Sydney Olympics), Voltaire, Cocktail, and FBI. Besides being both a beautiful and correct sire, Furioso II had the ability to stamp his offspring. Based on money earned by his progeny, he was the top producing stallion in Germany from 1979-1989.

Curi is the mirror-image of Furioso II. He has the same brilliant chestnut color, white blaze and magnificent neck and shoulder. Sharer has several magazine articles that feature Furioso II, and there is one photo in particular that shows him jumping, legs beautifully tucked and one ear slightly cocked back, as if listening to his rider. Sharer also has a photo of Curi jumping, and you could easily mistake him for his grandfather – even the ears are in the same position.

Curi was imported to the United States by Dariush Elghanayan and Tjeert Rijkens. Dariush operated a stable in Ohio, just outside of Cleveland, and Sharer was one of his clients. Although Sharer had ridden horses as a youngster, she went without a horse for 15 years – a long, long time for a horse lover.

"A friend of mine knew that I yearned for a horse, so she gave me an Appendix Quarter Horse – a barrel-racer named Moon On Top," says Sharer. "I eventually trained that little guy to jump, but he wasn't the horse of my dreams!"

Sharer rode Thoroughbreds as well, but never found a perfect match. Then she saw Curi. "He was jumping five-foot oxers with my trainer and I couldn't take my eyes off of him," Sharer says, stressing that the "him" was the horse, not her trainer. "I knew he was for sale, but truthfully I had no business owning a horse like him. At Dariush's urging I rode him – and what a feeling! He was big and powerful, and I felt more at home on him than on any horse I had ever ridden."

In order to purchase the gelding, who was 6 at the time, Sharer sold almost all of her worldly possessions, including her car. "I still came up short, but fortunately Dariush put him on an installment plan for me – and in a year he was all mine," she laughs.

Although Sharer likes to say that Curi was a Ferrari and she was still using training wheels, the pair became a force to be reckoned with on the show circuit.

"He should have been the mount of a professional rider," Sharer muses. "I was an amateur owner and truly blessed to have him – although at that point in my life I was not the rider to take him to where he really belonged, and that was at the Grand Prix level."

Sharer recalls that in those early days of showing, Curi practically breathed fire, he was so excited about showing. Just to take the edge off the horse before a show, Sharer had to ride him twice a day and even then he was a handful. He only relaxed on the final day of the competition.

"It wasn't that he was mean or aggressive, he just loved it all so much – and he was naturally strong and filled with pent-up energy. Sometimes I felt that I had little or no influence on him, but it was my job to get him around the ring," recalls Sharer.

The pair competed throughout Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania,

while also making the journey to Florida in the winter. They showed for 14 years, and Sharer figured that in that time they competed in about 300 shows.

"I was a real estate agent when I lived in Ohio, and there were some nights when I didn't get to the barn until after 9:00," remembers Sharer. "Curi would hear the click-clack of my heels on the bricks and would start nickering. We had a lot of wonderful late night rides in the arena because that was the only time I could ride."

Sharer admits to putting Curi through "a lot of trials and tribulations" during their years together. Case in point, at a show several years ago at Chagrin Valley Farms in Ohio, Curi lost his footing after a jump, slipping to the ground. Sharer came off and when Curi got up he simply looked down at her and then proceeded on his way, which included taking the next jump in perfect sequence, much to the delight of the crowd!



At another show Sharer found out there would be a big open (ten-foot) water jump, something that Curi had never encountered, to her knowledge. Her trainer, Ken Smith, had this advice: "Lift your hands, keep kicking and stay tall!" They jumped it perfectly.

"He was always so forgiving of my mistakes in the ring – and his boldness and sheer athleticism saw us through the rough spots," she says. "He was not always the winner, but he did what was expected of him and was always so willing. Curi would rise to the occasion with grace, each and every show."

When Curi was 17 he started to develop a bit of lameness. For two years he was rehabbed in Goshen, Ky. by the Hall of Fame Thoroughbred trainer Jack Van Berg, conditioner of the Kentucky Derby winner Alysheba and the Preakness Stakes winner Gate Dancer. This came about because one of Van Berg's major clients, Bob Alick, was Sharer's business partner. It was he who suggested that Van Berg could be instrumental in getting the big horse sound. It worked. After many months of doing simple trail rides with no signs of lameness, Sharer decided to take Curi to Wellington with two of her other show horses, mostly to get him away from the cold Midwestern winters.

Sharer's trainer at that time, Wilhelm Genn, was nearby when she happened to be riding Curi. "I was trotting him on that hard ground and he wasn't lame – in fact he never took a bad step in Wellington," she says. "So Wilhelm told me to start jumping him again."

Curi started with low schooling and worked his way up to high schooling (three foot, nine inch fences). The big horse was on his game again! For two years Curi was back in the ring. But then came a show when he just wasn't quite himself and Sharer called it quits.

"I wanted him to go out on top, and he did," she says. "At that point he was 20 years old and truthfully, what else did I want him to do?"

Sharer moved to Aiken fulltime two years ago and she calls her training operation Greystone Farms, where there are currently eight horses in residence. Besides Curi, Sharer owns Antares (her Grand Prix horse) and Longitude. Curi loves his turnout time, but Sharer makes sure he is still ridden on a regular basis. He occasionally will be used for



a lesson and loves to be hacked through the woods.

"He has Cushing's syndrome, but my vet – Dr. Sarah Thompson – keeps a good eye on him and he's doing very well," Sharer explains.


While Sharer has all the usual show photographs of Curi, her favorite is not one of the jumping photos at all, but rather a black and white family portrait, taken several years ago at Christmas. The photo is of Sharer and her sister Dierdre, who is holding her new baby with the proud father looking

on. Six nephews and nieces are lined up in the front row. And who is that next to Sharer? None other than Curi, obviously quite content to be placed in the middle of his human family.

"I didn't have any children," says Sharer, "but I knew just who I wanted in the portrait with me – Curi. Our family still adores that photograph!"

Curi and Sharer have gone through so much of life as a team, a true journey taken by two friends.

"He took care of me for so many years, in and out of the show ring, so now I feel that it's my turn to take care of him," she says quietly.

And though Sharer finds more and more grey hairs sprouting up in Curi's coat, his whole attitude speaks of a horse who plans on being around for another 20 years, taking those five-foot oxers in his dreams. 



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