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Coming Back

Adversity in the show ring taught this top rider how to be a better athlete, trainer and competitor.

By Jan Ebeling with Kelly Sanchez

Sometimes, no matter what you do, you can't seem to get ahead. You think your horse is going really well at home, and then at a show your plans fall apart. It's a hard nut to swallow and it's not fun, but it's part of competing—not just in dressage but in any sport. We must accept defeat because defeat teaches us many things.

An example of this was my ride on Rafalca at the 2009 FEI World Cup Final in Las Vegas. After entering the arena, she became frightened and refused to perform her test. Each time she got close to the judge, she would not go forward. As a pupil of the German riding system, I know that going forward is fundamental, but at that moment it was all I could do to complete the test. It was the ride—in front of thousands—that no one wants to have, and it was one of the biggest disappointments of my career.

I should mention that my journey with Rafalca has been long and emotional with ups and downs and more than a few bumps along the way. This is typical in the career of an international horse, and many of my colleagues have experienced similar frustrations, but I will tell you my story.

In 2007, Klaus Balkenhol [former

U.S. dressage *chef d'équipe*] had dedicated much of his time to working with some of the top riders in the country, focusing on the developing horses. I'd spent a lot of time working with Klaus, and I was encouraged and proud that he thought it fitting that Rafalca and I do the test ride at the 2007 World Cup in Las Vegas. At the end of our ride, we received a standing ovation. I could not have had a more exciting time, as we were not really expecting to wow the crowd. Rafalca wasn't bothered by the people, the proximity of the seats, the clicking of the cameras or even the occasional burst of applause. Klaus and I had wanted her to get some valuable experience, and now we knew she had the ability to be a top contender on the international stage.

After that performance, I obtained a U.S. Equestrian Team (USET) training grant to train with Klaus in Germany and compete in Europe. Our goal was for Rafalca to be a top contender for the 2008 Olympic Games. Unfortunately, the trip started in disaster. On her third day at Klaus's, Rafalca took a bad step and sustained an injury, and it took 60 days before she could be worked again. That set her training back about a year. Although we were able to compete in 2008 at Grand Prix, Rafalca was ranked 13th and just missed the cut to compete in the dressage national championships,



Terri Miller

Jan Ebeling and Rafalca finished their test at the 2009 World Cup Final in Las Vegas, even though the mare became uncharacteristically frightened.

which also served as the Olympic selection trials. Rafalca's owners—Beth Meyer, Ann Romney and my wife, Amy—were very disappointed. Nevertheless, I stuck to my schedule and set as my next goal qualifying for the 2009 World Cup. I was excited when Gil Merrick, then the USEF director of dressage, called to say that I'd received a wild card to compete in Las Vegas at the Final. I felt that my hard work was paying off and that, finally, Rafalca could show the world the brilliance I experienced every day at home.

At the Final, when we came down the chute into the Thomas & Mack Arena, I thought we were going to have a super ride. She was forward and went in nicely, but when she hit X, all of a sudden, it was over. And that happens—either your horse loses it or you as a rider lose it. People said later they thought it was the smoke in the air or the judge in the white outfit or the noise or the photographers or the lighting—everybody had a reason for her refusal. I never knew what it was and I don't really care. My horse shied and refused to go—end of story.

I received a lot of positive press for finishing my ride and smiling. That's part of who I am. I don't quit. I got a lot of support afterward from rider friends like Robert Dover, who was there when I came out of the arena. He said, "Do you remember at the Los Angeles Olympics when I could not get my horse out of the piaffe? Stuff like that happens to all of us. Be done with it, and get on with life." My coach, Wolfram Wittig, told me, "That's horses. Today there was nothing you could do."

The 2009 World Cup was a very dramatic event for my wife, Amy, because she's so supportive of what I do and puts so much effort into it herself. I think she almost took it harder than I did. I was certainly upset, mostly with myself, but I would never blame the horse. The horse is an animal, and she was afraid



Ebeling and Rafalca, a 14-year-old Oldenburg mare, competing two years later in 2011.

Terri Miller



Terri Miller

Ebeling says every rider must be brutally honest about his or her training program. This leads to changes that make an important difference.

of something, and it's my job to train her so that she is not afraid even of something that's really scary. It was my failure. I went back and thought, *What can I do so this doesn't happen again?* Of course, you're never really covered 100 percent. Your horse can always shy or make a mistake. But after reflecting on the previous few years, I saw a trend: I'd get close to reaching a goal, but I wasn't able to finish. I had to take a hard look at my program and make some important changes.

I believe in every rider's life there comes a moment when you have to be brutally honest about the structure of your program. If there's a problem, you have to probe deeper instead of just chalking it up to bad luck. You make transformations that make a difference.

Preparing for Success

My experience was on an international

stage, where I was representing my country and there was a lot of pressure to do well. But this could happen to someone in a First Level test at a small show. We all take it hard when we have a bad ride. But the trick is not to say, "I don't know what I'm doing." There's always something positive you can learn from the negative.

First, you have to analyze your rides—and not just the bad ones. I like to see my scores, but you can learn a lot by reading the comments at the end, and it's even better if you can watch a video of your ride at the same time. On a great ride, there's always something you can do better, and on a not-so-great ride you can always

come up with something that you have done well.

You can also practice things to make your horse trust you more. Say you're working at home and your horse shies at a jacket that was left on a chair. If you ask someone to put it away, you'll probably have a great ride. But what if somebody has a jacket at a show and your horse doesn't like it? You need to deal with those scenarios.

I realized I'd been avoiding things my horse didn't like, but I changed all that. Now if it's windy, I know I'm not going to have a very pleasant ride, but I'll work through it. Instead of saying, "Today's going to be a wash. Maybe we'll go on a trail ride," you say, "Maybe the arena doesn't look normal, but we're going in there anyway." Perhaps the horse doesn't like to go in the morning or when it's dark or during feeding time. There are a lot of things

that are unpleasant that I make myself do, and it has really helped.

The Mental Game

Negative thinking is a pattern that you can get into very easily, especially when something dramatic happens. At a show it can spiral out of control if you're focusing on your last ride that was really miserable. From a sport-psychologist perspective, there's much you can do to mentally prepare yourself.

I have a good friend who was a professional baseball player, and he suggested I talk to a sport psychologist who has worked with athletes from just about every sport you can imagine—baseball, figure skating, skiing. He gave me a lot of ideas and tools—things that I knew about but had never really used.

I definitely had a show routine before: I knew exactly how long my warm-up had to be, what time I had to get ready and when to do a quick run-through of my test. Now about an hour before my ride, I go into a zone and really focus. It's not just going through the movements, it's sitting down and mentally riding my test. You can either do it from a bird's-eye view or from the point of view of the rider. If you can do both, it's a really good tool, but you have to do it in real time, so that you're breathing and giving your half halts just the way you would on the horse. I mentally go through my test every day for a week or two before a competition. Two weeks before the 2011 World Cup in Leipzig last spring, I visualized my rides several times a day. Visualizing is a tool used by any good athlete, but it can be difficult to focus. Sometimes I'll be visualizing my first diagonal at medium trot, and suddenly I'll start thinking about something else—the movie I just saw or what I'm going to do tomorrow.

What happened at the 2009 World Cup could have affected my confidence if I'd allowed it to, but I made sure that didn't happen. Right after Vegas we

made sure to show Rafalca again, and she did great. Of course, you cannot replicate the atmosphere in Vegas. It wasn't until we competed in Germany in 2010 that it crossed my mind—what if it happens again? It gave me a tremendous amount of confidence that it didn't happen, and it also gave me confidence that what I'd added to my training was working.

The Physical Preparation

There are many ingredients that go into a six-minute dressage ride. Finding the right physical program, in addition to the right mental preparation, is important. I ride a lot of horses every day, but I'm always working the same muscle groups. You don't get a lot of cardio when you're riding, so I changed my workout routine. I start off with stretches and I do the bike. Adding another workout is hard. After riding 15 horses and teaching lessons, when I come home, the last thing I want to do is get on a bike. Let's just say my day has become a lot longer!

You should also analyze your warm-up. It's not just for your horse—you have to have a routine as well. Everyone has his or her own unique ritual. My friend Christine Traurig puts on her show clothes in the morning even if she rides much later. I'm always trying to figure out ways to make my routine easier on the horse so that our results get better. You have to be open to adding and learning and improving. When you say, "I'm done," you're toast. You're never truly perfected, which is the nice thing about competing.

In the end, it's important that you trust yourself and your judgment. You don't want to be overconfident, but you have to believe that what you've changed or added will work. Rafalca's done a lot of growing up, but now I have many more tools to get myself ready for a big event than I had several years ago. I've learned a lot about my horse, about what I can add to my training and what I can do just for myself. I hope some of this works for you, too. 🐾

AMY EBELING: A WIFE'S PERSPECTIVE

It's so much easier to ride yourself than to watch your spouse ride. I think of it every time I look in the mirror because when Jan's competing, sometimes I bite down on my lower lip. The scar there is a reminder of just how hard this sport is.

At the 2009 World Cup, Jan was completely convinced that he was going to have an amazing ride. I never sensed that he doubted it. We had a large group, and we all followed Jan down the ramp together. I'm really involved with what we're doing and how we're doing it. I'm out there every day watching the horse, videoing, talking about the rides with Jan, thinking about our strategy, making show plans, and the list goes on. So when Rafalca started spooking, I could tell by the look on Jan's face that it wasn't going to be a one-time thing. We were all in complete disbelief as if it were a bad dream. In the end, none of us could believe what we had just experienced. Everyone left the arena, except for me. I just stood there, frozen. Finally, I was able to move. But I could not go and find Jan. I knew he needed to be by himself. I immediately saw Hilda Gurney who was incredibly emotional, and that was very touching. Then Willy Arts came up and gave me a hug, and I started crying.

Everyone from California was so supportive. They had seen Rafalca so many times and knew this was not in her character, and to have this happen when it was Jan's first time to represent the United States was a disaster. Debbie McDonald came up to us and said, "At my very first World Cup [1998], I scored last in the Grand Prix with Beaurivage. It happens to everyone. This is a necessary part of your learning."

The next day, I was standing next to our coach, Wolfram Wittig, who was warming up Isabell Werth, and I was *still* crying. Isabell looked at me and said, "What's wrong with *you*?" Now, Isabell is a tough nut. She's seen it all, and I told her, "I just can't believe what happened," and she said, "Aaaach, stop it! It's not the last show he's ever going to go to. You're being stupid!" In her way, she was telling me that this is something that happens in dressage with horses, so move through it. It really woke me up.

When I did see Jan, we didn't say a whole lot to each other. I think I just hugged him. While at the moment, that ride was the most horrible thing I could have imagined happening, it definitely had a silver lining. All the changes in our program were a direct result of that crisis and were our response to turning around a negative experience.

At the 2011 World Cup Final in Leipzig [where he placed 11th], when Jan and Rafalca came out of the arena, he gave Wolfram a high five with a force you wouldn't believe. The image and the sound of that high five will forever be embedded in my brain. It was not just about that moment but about the last two years of hard work, and we all achieved it together.



Kelsey Edwards

SHOW-RING SUCCESS

Pan Am Games gold medalist Jan Ebeling shares tips on preparing the horse for competition.

Interview by Hilary Moore

Jan, please tell us how you prepare for show-ring success and plan for consistent, high-caliber performances.

First, we honestly assess each horse and develop clear goals. Then we might go to several local/national shows, which helps us further assess each horse. Then we move

At home, your training goal should be to have a very good ride every day. Then, at a show, just ride as well as you do at home.

on to the CDI shows. My focus for the 2012 show season is twofold: to qualify for the selection trials and the Olympic team and to qualify for the World Cup.

For long-term achievement, it is important for me to look at the next five years. We have successfully lined up a string of international horses at different ages to provide our program with depth. For example, at 14, Rafalca is my most experienced Grand Prix horse. Rosenzauber 8 is getting ready for the Intermediaire II. Then we have a Third Level stallion, Breitan, who I am training with hopes of his entering the Developing Horse (Prix St. Georges) classes soon. I have another stallion, Louis Ferdinand, that we are trying to move up to the Grand Prix next year. This year, he will do more national shows.

Do you prefer getting young horses and starting them yourself or working with trained horses?

Everyone has their own preference about buying youngsters versus trained horses but I prefer getting a horse that has a flying change because it saves a lot of

time. A horse with a flying change can most likely do two-tempis, so you know they will at least go to the small tour. However, starting a 3-year-old is also very rewarding because you can establish a strong relationship.

What is your daily routine?

First, I don't believe in giving my horses a "day off" to stand in their stalls. Humans are OK to relax on the couch for a day, but for a horse that is meant to live on the prairie, keeping them closed in a stall for a day is not good. Also, a day off is not just 24 hours off. If you ride Saturday morning and then your horse is "locked up" until Monday night when you ride again, remember that is almost three days. Our stalls have runs attached so the horses, even when in stalls, can go in and out all day long. Many, but not all, are turned out on pasture. Some horses just run so much that you worry they will hurt themselves. All of them are at least hand-walked when not ridden.

We typically work the horses five days per week, Monday through Friday, with a sixth day hacking on the trail and the next on a hand walk. Monday is a warm-up day with few movements. That isn't to say that a Grand Prix horse won't do some movements like passage to play or a change or a pirouette, but we don't repeat and drill the movements. We are elasticizing and gymasticizing the horse—a lot of forward and back and getting the horses soft and round. It is intense work on the basics and the low-key movements. The rest of the week depends on whether or not we are in show season.

In the off-season I typically do a lot of trail work or just ride in the jumping arena around the fences with transitions, playing with changes just to change direction as we loop around the jumps. In the off-season, I don't let the horses fall apart. I will work more on loosening and exercising them in a frame that can



Terri Miller

build on throughness and suppleness without the stress and repetition.

During the show season, I focus more or less on test movements always with an emphasis on frame and tempo, especially as we want it to be in a test. Work with the horses is very specific with the focus on things like piaffe—passage transitions with the piaffe in place, when in the off-season the piaffe was allowed to be a bit more forward. I will ride through and sometimes repeat the movements I am preparing to perform in the test. For example, several times a week I practice halts and salutes at the beginning and end of my rides. In general, I move on if there is no problem. If there is a problem, I try to improve that particular movement. I always make sure to give my horses many walk breaks.

Show preparation plans do not end with the horses. For high-performance dressage competition, riding is more than just a job—it is really a lifestyle. I encourage the riders at my barn to take care of themselves. This includes eating right, cross-training and mental preparation. Although I used to smoke, with what we know now, I find it bewildering to see high-performance riders smoking.

What are the keys to successful performance that apply to every dressage competitor?

I tell my students to compete at the level where they know they can succeed. Then, they can build on that success. It's a mistake to overface yourself with unrealistic expectations at a show, even if your horse is capable of doing more. While it's important to have goals, your plan to get there begins with competing at a lower level than your goal and working your way up, building a solid foundation.

At a show, remember that horses can get tense, so plan for an extra 15

minutes to walk or maybe extra trot or canter in order to relax him. Abilities and nerves can change the time frame of your warm up, but don't overwork your horse. Learn to read him and know what he needs.

The next step is to stick with the warm-up you do at home. After practicing your warm-up at home for a few months, you will get a pretty good idea of how much time you need at a show. Look at the training scale as a way to think about your warm-up goals. I first focus on the basic outline of the horse, the rhythm and tempo. I make sure my horse is relaxed, his back is loose and swinging and his frame is in order. When my horse and I are relaxed, I am ready to work through some of the movements in my test.

If a rider is not ready, it can be stressful for everyone. For example, if you are doing Third Level and you can't get a flying change in the warm-up, you can become so upset that you can't even do a shoulder-in! To regain your own and your horse's confidence, break things down into simpler movements. Frequent walk breaks are important, too. Don't make the mistake I often see of riders doing the same thing for 20 minutes. Leave it alone. It will only get worse and worse and not better. Come back to it when your horse is more relaxed.

It all comes down to understanding how important the basics are for both



Rosenzauber 8 is a Hanoverian mare owned by Deborah Harlan.

Terri Miller



Terri Miller

Anyone can make a mistake, says Ebeling. Having a realistic understanding of yourself and your horse is what can take you to new heights.

horse and rider. The rider needs a relaxed seat and good balance. The horse must be rhythmical, relaxed and be properly on the bit.

Particularly if you don't have a trainer, you must understand the importance of the basics and work on them. This means riding your horse forward at a nice brisk tempo in posting trot and canter, riding some loops and then going on to transitions within and between the gaits. School for rideability: a few steps of a slower tempo then increase it, always improving the frame.

The movements are technically difficult, but being able to find quality in the basics is the big battle we face. If you can do that, you will be able to be successful. Don't overuse your hands (trying to get the horse on the bit with the hands), as I often see at shows. It is technically

incorrect and shows a fundamental error in your understanding of the training scale. It is easy to think of the front end because you can see that. You don't see the hind end and it is very hard to feel. That is the one big, big, big mistake.

Practice your halts before the day of the show. They are worth as much as a more difficult movement, like piaffe, and you have to do at least two in every test. Ride square, immobile halts with the reins in one hand for a salute. Practice this a lot. It can be challenging, but sloppy halts with bad scores make it difficult to catch up, as well as creating a poor first impression with the judges.

Knowing the math of your high-value movements is important. And *never* perform a test in which your horse hasn't confirmed the movements that have a coefficient of 2.

The most common error at shows is riding inaccurate figures. For example, it drives judges crazy when a rider doesn't bend the horse correctly through the corners. Do that two or three times and your scores will drop. Another often-seen inaccuracy is not riding your diagonal lines between the letters. A good diagonal begins with a proper corner. Then point your horse at the next letter so you can see it between his ears.

What about attitude?

Never forget that this sport is a team effort. It is not just about you and your horse. You want the right equipment and horse, but you need more than that. You need a trainer/coach that you believe in. You can question something that's not working, but you have to trust your trainer and click with him, and that is different for everyone. Once you find that person, stick with that person even through the rough times. Long-term relationships only become deeper and more successful.

This might be the most important thing to remember: Ride at a show the same way you ride at home. Every day

at home I'm focused and my goal is to have a very good ride. Then, when I go to the show, I just want to ride as well as I do at home. You set yourself up for disappointment when, at a show, you think to yourself *This is going to be the best ride of my life*. Instead, think of the show as just another day at the office—an extension of the good rides you have every day.

What kind of mental preparation does a rider need at a show?

Mental preparation is another key element show riders need to focus on. Many other sports encourage this more than ours does. Over the years, I've seen a sports psychologist and it has been very beneficial. Our team coaches have started to encourage this, too. It is more than just learning how to do your test. It is about learning to breathe and learning how to relax.

A good show rider knows her test and is prepared. Remember, anyone can make a mistake. Compete with yourself as opposed to the other riders. Having a realistic understanding of things is what can take you to new heights. 🏆

Jan Ebeling was trained in his native Germany by the late Herbert Rehbein and worked as his assistant before coming to the United States in 1984. He was the 2000 U.S. Intermediaire I Champion and, in 2003, was a member of the gold-medal-winning Pan American Games team. In 2009 and 2011, he represented the United States at the World Cup Final riding Rafalca. In 2011, he was a member of the U.S. team at CHIO Aachen. A popular clinician, he teaches riders and trains horses at all levels with his wife, Amy, at their facility in Moorpark, California (theacres.com).

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The Benefits of Cold Therapy

By Christina "Cricket" Russillo, DVM

I like to think of ice, and thus cold therapy, as nature's anti-inflammatory. There are many modalities these days for providing cold therapy (cryotherapy) to equine distal limbs with options as low-tech as a feed pan with water and ice cubes or as high-tech as machines that include compression and massage action in addition to controlled sustained cold therapy.

There is increasing evidence of the value of cryotherapy for recovery and rehabilitation of injury in human athletes. Whole-body cryotherapy is not currently an option and not likely to be approachable for equine athletes. But the idea of providing post-exertional cold therapy has been validated and this will likely continue to push available technology toward advanced methods of regional cooling. I generally recommend cold-hosing and cold therapy following exercise rather than prior to exercise. Cold-hosing has the additional benefit of potentially providing some massage action, which can increase lymphatic circulation and has direct benefit in cases of distal limb edema such as cellulitis or lymphangitis.



Dusty Perin

There are many modalities for providing cold therapy that range from low-tech to high-tech.

When using ice boots, it's important to pay attention to the general hygiene of the boots themselves. Since the boots are often constantly getting wet and being re-applied across multiple horses' legs, you can inadvertently spread bacteria.

When faced with an acute injury and lameness, I recommend cold-hosing or cold therapy as much as possible during the acute phase. This usually means using ice boots or cold-hosing for 15 to 20 minutes, three to four times during the day for five to seven days. I have had really good success using a combination of ice, water and

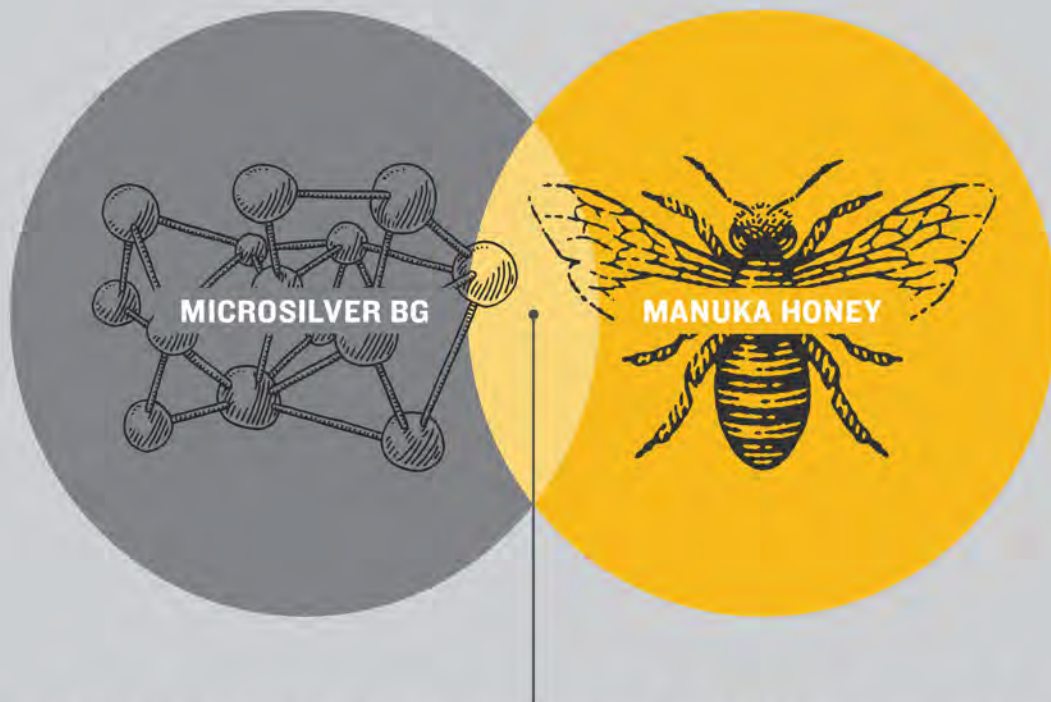
The biggest downside to hosing the horse is the potential to increase the risk for localized dermatitis secondary to the increased moisture that can be trapped in the hair coat or under bandages applied to a wet limb. This risk exists even with simple bathing and especially when in warmer, more humid climates.

My typical recommendation is to dry the leg well and allow sufficient time for the legs to dry before putting the horse back in a stall and on bedding. Sometimes a fan is helpful, as is baby powder under bandages.

Epsom salts and will sometimes also include a liniment. This combination really keeps the temperature cold and helps it last a bit longer.

When a horse is starting back into work after an injury and time off and there is no longer an acute injury to worry about, I will curtail the cold therapy to after exercise only. I recognize that a pair of ice boots doesn't get nearly as cold as some of the currently available cold-therapy devices, but they are relatively low budget and easy to use and one can leave them on a horse while doing other barn chores, and that generally means that clients are compliant with the recommendation. A machine may be more beneficial, but only if it actually makes it on the horse. Sometimes low-tech is better than nothing at all. 🐾

Christina "Cricket" Russillo, DVM, graduated from the Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in 2001. Following graduation, she completed a large animal medicine and surgery internship at Texas A&M and realized her desire was to work on elite sport horses. After 13 years of practice at Fairfield Equine Associates in Newtown, Connecticut, focusing on high-level show-jumping and dressage horses, she joined Virginia Equine Imaging in 2015. Russillo relocates to Florida every winter to support her clients in the Wellington area. She is a member of the International Society for Equine Locomotor Pathology and hopes to attain certification next year. In February 2017, Russillo was appointed the U.S. Dressage Team veterinarian. In addition to her busy schedule focused on sports medicine, she enjoys spending time outdoors with her husband and daughter. She has competed through Third Level and loves to play tennis.



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