

Learning to Fly (and what happens next when you do)

I'm not *always* crotchety. We who teach are many times proud of our students' accomplishments and of what we have taught them. Less often we ourselves learn a valuable lesson in the process.

The backstory: I teach a girl (though perhaps only by the AARP's definition thereof) whom we shall call "Samantha." She's ridden with me for a good 20 years—amazingly through all that time on the same horse. He was not a foal when first we met.

Samantha is devoted to her horse, Tyler. Over the years she has shown him as a hunter, in the 3'6"-3'9" jumpers, in lower level eventing, and all along the way in progressively higher levels of dressage. I remember helping them map out the figures of Training Test 3 in the early '90s. Tyler is intelligent, athletic, and handsome in the manner in which only a thoroughbred can be. But he was never a "Wellington" sort of mover.

Ten years ago—at the age of 17—he was laid up with what vets called a career-ending injury. Through diligence, faith, and a certain amount of black magic, he overcame the odds after a year and made it all the way back to the show ring.

Tyler thoroughly loves his owner and loves his work. [He has also let me do tempis on him bareback with just a halter and a single leadrope. He is clearly a good sport!]

This year he finally figured out the Grand Prix well enough to show it. After four schooling shows, he just made his recognized-show GP debut. These days his trot is not that extravagant, but the canter work was all "Satisfactory" to "Fairly Good" including a 7 for his one-tempis.

What I find instructive is not so much Samantha's perseverance, although watching her explain for years to Tyler that piaffe aids are not supposed to produce polite "mini-rears" did demonstrate that quality. And the attitude I mean to describe can't be called "unspoiled" or "ingenuous" because that would imply a lack of self awareness on her part. What I admire is—despite her acknowledgment that if any fancy horses showed up, she wasn't going to win—she and Tyler were there anyway *to take part*.

We pay lip service to riding for the score, not the ribbon, and taking satisfaction in achieving a Personal Best. But you have to be more ego-free than I can muster to pull it off with sincerity.

I hear riders who have qualified their horses for the Regionals say, "Why would I bother to go if I can't win?" Yes, that's one point of view, although if carried out at the international level, in most sports that would leave four or five countries competing for all the Olympic medals, and the rest of the Olympic Village would be a ghost town.



In a Charlie Sheen/ Donald Trump culture I don't want to go overboard holding Samantha's attitude up as a sticky-sweet Kumbaya Moment, but I do think she has the answer whether she articulates it in so many words or not. Why take a 27 year old horse to his first Grand Prix?

Because they *can* go do it together.

Because it's farther than they'd ever been before.

Because he likes to go for rides and have a big fuss made over him.

And, besides, what good is going on vacation if you can't go with your best friend?