

## INTERVIEW WITH BILL WOODS

Interviewer: Elizabeth Waller

It's well known that Marion County boasts more than its fair share of equestrian luminaries in every possible discipline, thanks to an environment that has fostered and supported the horse industry for more than 100 years. Now we can add an accomplished author to the list: Ocala resident and dressage instructor/judge Bill Woods' first book, Dressage Unscrambled, was published by Half Halt Press last October to rave reviews from readers and riders all over the United States. According to the publisher, the book consists of a "slightly off-center" collection of stories and anecdotes that "elucidate, illustrate, and demystify hoary dressage principles while managing to skewer the sacred bovines, both two and four legged—of our sport." Readers have described it as "brilliantly hilarious", "hysterical", and "full of wisdom".

I managed to catch up with Bill in between book signings and ask him a few questions about Dressage Unscrambled.

***Q: Your schedule of teaching and judging is quite demanding; how did you find the time to write DU?***

A: Well, I didn't really try to write it – it just happened. I had always rolled my eyes when people suggested I write a book. Seems to me there are more than enough dressage texts out there, and—pardon the observation—most of them are pretty darn boring and hard to read. If you don't know what the author means, they're usually as clear as mud, and if you do know, well you already know!

My head was stuffed with a bunch of stories I wanted to tell to more people than I see in my regular lessons and clinics. I started out thinking I was writing a blog to eventually put up on my website in little segments. That freed me from the constraints of the normal structure of a "dressage book." Once I got going, caffeine and my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder wrote Dressage Unscrambled in one giant torrent without any additional input from my conscious self.

***Q: Why did you think the world needed another book about dressage? What makes your book unique?***

A: Initially, I wanted to address some of the topics that riders have trouble grasping, using analogies and images that I've found work for people when they hear them. Second, I wanted riders to "lighten up" and discover that most of the personal misery they think dressage and their horses inflict on them is really manageable if they just realize that practically everyone goes through them as they're learning. Finding out that they aren't alone and being able to laugh at their own misadventures is very liberating for most people. I don't think these ideas are especially unique, but I don't see them being said enough to the people who need to hear them.

***Q: Lots of horse people think of dressage as a rather specialized and (to put it kindly) somewhat boring sport. What does DU have to offer riders and trainers from other disciplines?***

A: Riding is riding. Down-to-earth practicality stripped of fancy jargon where riders understand how horses work and how to communicate with them applies across all disciplines. Discovering that dressage riders don't wear their top hats in the shower makes the rest of the world find our sport less off-putting.

**Q: Please tell us just what Michael Jordan, ocean liners, magnetic bottles, juke boxes, cannibalism, crop circles, Babe the Blue Ox, Mitt Romney, Dilbert, Barbra Streisand's brother, or green Jello (taken from the description of your book on Amazon.com) have to do with dressage. Pick one, any one.**

A: Someone observed that good writing "... succeeds or fails on the strength of its ability to engage you, to make you think, to give you a glimpse into someone else's head—even if in the end you conclude that someone else's head is not a place you'd really like to be." I believe this. Dressage shouldn't be viewed separately from the regular, real world. Nor should dressage riders get so wound up in their riding that they can't appreciate or relate to all the other day to day fascinations of our lives. All those images you listed (and a zillion more) have their places in my world. I wanted to remind others of them.

As a for instance, we learn feelings through pictures and imagery better than from dry words. We especially remember ones that are familiar. The story of how the Celtics' Dennis Johnson guarded Michael Jordan—go where his belt buckle goes—relates exactly to controlling your horse's center of gravity and not getting too distracted by where his nose is pointing.

**Q: What's your favorite story in the book?**

A: I have a lot of favorites. Even though the book is 123 short chapters, it must contain hundreds more vignettes or anecdotes. I like some of the serious ones like "the vending machine" and "the template model," but I also enjoy the ones with punch lines: the woman who accidentally set her llama on fire, the horse with the dished face, the Maynard G Krebs of Dressage, and so on.

**Q: Is there another book in the works? Will it be similar or different?**

A: One is "in the works," but whether it turns into an actual publishable book depends on how funny and useful we think it's turning out to be when it gets further along.

**Q: How has your life changed since DU was published?**

A: Pigeons now alight on my shoulders when I stand in the park.

More About Bill:

Bill and his wife, Susan Woods, own and operate the Four Winds Farm dressage training facility in North West Marion County. Residents of the area for over twenty years, they have developed national reputations as outstanding coaches, judges and clinicians. In 2003, the United States Dressage Federation, national governing body for the sport, named Bill one of their lifetime Twenty Most Influential Members. You can learn more about Bill and Susan by visiting their web site, [www.woodsdressage.com](http://www.woodsdressage.com),

which provides professional biographies as well as insight into their unique perspectives on things equestrian and otherwise.