

From Gavel to GREATNESS

IN EUROPE, sport horse auctions have been around for almost a century with many venues to choose from today. With only a handful of auctions here, for most Americans, sport horse auctions generally conjure up feelings of fear, anxiety and those “what ifs.” However, what if the famous Hanoverian Brentina—America’s superstar at World Cups, Olympics and Pan-Ams—wasn’t purchased at a Verden, Germany auction by Peggy Thomas in 1994? Brentina could have easily landed in another professional’s barn competing for another country. Instead, thanks to Peggy’s purchase, the incredible longtime team of Debbie McDonald and Brentina has become a worldwide icon for American dressage. In fact, Debbie’s prior World Cup horse Beaurivage was also purchased by the Thomases at the same auction five years earlier.

Warmbloods Today found that with the right preparation, purchasing a sport horse at auction proves to have many advantages. So we sought out two riders, a dressage and a hunter/jumper rider, and asked them to share with us their own experiences of buying at auction.



Finding Camelot

by Susan Rose Marcus

Perched upon her pitch black Lusitano stallion, British-born Athene von Hirschberg entered the ring of their first Working Equitation competition. Images of Medieval England during King Richard’s era could have flicked through minds as the woman picked up a lance with her right hand and maneuvered the obedient steed with her legs. Like its ancestors who battled in wars because of their intelligence, quickness and courage, this six-year-old Lusitano veered in and out of obstacles before coming to an abrupt halt at his owner’s command. Hardly a knight in shining armor, the 55-year-old Connecticut mother is currently living her dream with a horse she bought at an auction, Zulu Interagro.

The Plan

It began in 2008 when Athene decided she wanted to buy a “real horse,” rather than the rescue Thoroughbreds she’d been riding her entire life. She’d learned to ride hunter/jumpers as a youth and had recently started dressage training with Tim Malin, a USDF Gold, Silver and Bronze medalist. After much research and countless hours on the internet, Athene decided she wanted to purchase one of those gorgeous Lusitanos, probably from Brazil. “All that power, nobility, athleticism, courage and charisma in a relatively small package” was attractive to her. When she learned The Lusitano Collection International Horse Auction was bringing horses to South Florida in the winter of 2008, she was delighted she wouldn’t have to travel to Brazil, deal with import fees or the quarantine holding period.

Of the more than two dozen horses in The 2008 Lusitano Collection™ catalog and video which Athene

received upon request, she had eyes only for Zulu. The 15.3 hand black stallion was described as having a positive attitude and being a lovely mover; however, it was his regal presence that attracted her. Armed with her nest egg, investment money she had made from selling a farm in Aiken, South Carolina, she traveled to Florida with trainer Tim Malin and a friend, Lisa, whose job was to be “a voice of reason.” Athene had only attended auctions where people were trying to get rid of horses, and this event presented an entirely different atmosphere.

Hundreds of equestrian professionals and aficionados gathered around the arenas where the auction’s trainers as well as potential buyers rode the horses. Athene watched in dread as more and more riders waited to try out Zulu. She recalls, “Even with all of those people taking turns to ride him, he was so willing to please, so intelligent. He was spirited, but there was nothing aggressive about him.” When it was her trainer Tim’s turn, he began to put the horse through more difficult dressage movements, and Zulu responded so well that Athene tried to get Tim’s attention so he would stop showing him off. “I was so worried everyone would want Zulu as much as I did!”

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Prior to the actual auction, Athene spent time talking to Zulu’s breeder, Cecilia Gonzaga, his Brazilian veterinarian and a Florida veterinarian who had completed a health examination on Zulu. “Because I was about to make the biggest investment of my life, it was comforting to confer with professionals who had intimate information about Zulu,” Athene reports. Each auction horse arrives with a complete set of x-rays and fully disclosed health records, and buyers are encouraged to make a private appointment to speak with the veterinarian.

On the evening of the auction, Athene was a bundle of nerves; yet, she sat through the charming entertainment and tried to eat dinner. Zulu was the fourth horse to be auctioned and the bidding seemed to take seconds. When the price climbed quickly to Athene’s maximum level, she raised her paddle and held her breath. Miraculously no one else topped her bid, and the stallion was hers! She readily agrees it was the most exciting, and possibly, most reckless, thing she has ever done.

Athene and Zulu during an obstacle course at the Festa Lusitana 2009 held at the Casa Lusitana, Tyngsboro MA.



Photos by Amy Cody

