

Riding High: Martin Downs Equestrian Club

Trainer Heather Bender helps to build the MDEC into a 'top class' facility

By Aimee Ford Foster

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PALM CITY — In the nearly two years since the Martin Downs Equestrian Center was sold, new owner George Cosman has transformed the facility from the ground up.

In fact, though MDEC still takes care of its local horse community with lessons, boarding and trail rides, its emergence as a player on the international horse scene was secured in January when the prestigious 2009 Lusitano Collection moved into the new, 26-stall competition barn.

The arrival of the horses, in advance of a once-a-year auction next week in West Palm Beach, was facilitated by trainer Heather Bender.

Bender is the director of USA Trainer for Interagro of Brazil, Yearly Collection of Stallions. She is also a long-time trainer who has earned countless accolades from the United States Dressage Federation and the United States Equestrian Federation, and gold medals at a Can/Am Challenge and an Olympic Festival hosted by the IOC.

She now works out of MDEC and played a key role in the efforts of Cosman and his wife Sandi to revamp it.

"The barn manager here had heard of Heather," Cosman said. "She decided to come here. She told us if we had a good facility, the people would follow."

Bender, who owns Treasure Coast Dressage which is her riding specialty, made the move mostly because Martin County felt like home to her. She was not impressed with MDEC, at first, despite the fact that Cosman had already built a lighted, enclosed arena.

"It was like building a beautiful tennis facility with amazing chairs and a great location, but a lousy court," she said. "They hadn't attended to the footing and what riders need. No top player would want to play on the court."

Tons of fill was used to improve the facility and what emerged is a venue that is "top class, but small and quaint.

"We're not trying to compete with Wellington," Bender said. "But a beautiful show barn with safe accommodations, plus bath and showers — in the horse world that's great."

Bender further helped showed off the facility last week by filming several DVDs that will be available for purchase online at www.dressageclinic.com, an educational Web site for riders.

Cosman, who readily admits he knew nothing about horses when he bought the facility, is clearly enthralled with how the business has changed. He's hoping that next year, in addition to housing the Lusitanos, the auction will be held at Martin Downs. The horses left this week for the auction, but will return afterwards while their new owners prepare to take possession.

"They really like it here," he said. "We did a good job."

AUCTION

What: The 2009 Lusitano Collection International Exhibition gala and auction

Where: Jim Brandon Equestrian Center, West Palm Beach.

When: Feb. 19-20.

How: Limited to 400 attendees. Fee to attend, a portion of which benefits the American Cancer Society and the JBEC. Register at www.lusitanocollection.com

MDEC OFFERINGS

Martin County Equestrian Center offers:

Lessons in hunter/jumpers: children to adults

Lessons in dressage: children to adults

Horse for sale

Horses for lease

Training in dressage and hunter/jumpers and horsemanship

Full board

Arenas and show barn available for event rental

MDEC facilities:

Box stalls and yarded stalls

Covered lighted arena

Lighted open arena

Jump course

Two round pens

Private riding trails

Permanent bathrooms with showers

Individual turnout paddocks

Professional staff on premises 24 hours



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