

# A Few Minutes with Sean Cunningham

By Jan Westmark

New Mexico-based dressage rider and trainer Sean Cunningham has an impressive riding history. It includes training with Olympian Lendon Gray and riding for some of the biggest farms in the country, including Iron Spring Farm and Horses Unlimited.

"When I was 12 years old, I decided I wanted to learn how to ride horses because I thought they were cool. I rode my bike to a farm about half a mile from my house to inquire about lessons and it just happened to be a dressage farm with a lesson program," Sean said. "I'm one of only a few people who I know of that started in dressage and stuck with it. Most people convert from another discipline, but I fell in love with dressage from the beginning and it's been my passion ever since."

Sean, who lives and trains out of his STC Dressage in Albuquerque, originally moved to New Mexico to work for Horses Unlimited. When he branched out to open his own business he decided to stay there, even though New Mexico isn't exactly the center of the dressage universe. But that hasn't kept Sean and his students from succeeding, and while he doesn't plan on staying in New Mexico forever, he said it has been an exciting place to start his own operation.

**Sidelines:** What do you like about New Mexico?

**SC:** New Mexico is still in the grassroots stage of dressage so there is a tremendous amount of growth and development taking place and it's exciting to be a part of it. This area has also been a good place to start my own training operation, because I'm kind of a "big fish in a small pond." I've been able to build my business and reputation as an independent trainer very quickly, and my clients and I have enjoyed a lot of success in the process. It's been fun!

**Sidelines:** Did you have a moment that kick-started your dressage career?

**SC:** Yes, I call it my "big break" and it happened at Tempel Farms in Wadsworth, Illinois, home of the Tempel Lipizzaners. Prior to that, I had mostly just ridden at the typical kid-friendly boarding facilities where I certainly learned a lot and grew to appreciate the work involved in horses. The desire to learn all I could was growing though, and I knew if I wanted to be one of the best I needed to train with the best. In the spring of 1999 I started calling and e-mailing Tempel, trying to find any way possible to get my foot in the door. The person on the receiving end of my calls and e-mails was Roberta Williams, George Williams' wife. Thankfully, rather than getting annoyed with my persistence, she was impressed by it. Even though they didn't really have room to take on another working student, she thought I was worth taking a chance on and found a place for me anyway. Over the course of the next three years, I worked there during my breaks from Iowa State University where I was earning my Bachelors Degree in Animal Science. After graduation in 2002, and because my goals were more competition oriented, I moved to New York to take a position as a working student for Lendon Gray.



Sean and his girlfriend Acacia Coast with their Border Collie Duke

Photo by Barbara Coast

**Sidelines:** What was working for Lendon Gray like?

**SC:** Working for Lendon was incredible. It was incredibly difficult, yet inspiring and educational and worth every second. I was exposed to world-class riders, horses and training during my time there and my education advanced very quickly. I only wish I realized then that I know now, which is that I really still don't know a fraction of what there is to learn about horses. If I had, I might have found a way to keep working there longer, but for a variety of reasons, the most pressing being financial, after one and a half years I moved on to take a position at Iron Spring Farm.

**Sidelines:** What did you learn working at Iron Spring Farm?

**SC:** Working at Iron Spring allowed me to develop my appreciation for young horses. I really started looking more and more at bloodlines and the impact they can have on the future quality of the horses. Obviously there are never any guarantees, but certain dams and sires can definitely be shown to produce, on average, good or bad conformation, easy or difficult trainability, willing or easily soured minds, etc. It was a unique opportunity to work for one of the best sport horse producers in the country and again, it was an outstanding learning experience. Then, in the spring of 2007, I moved to New Mexico to work for Horses Unlimited. It was another chance to work with some really nice horses developed by a good breeding program.

**Sidelines:** Who has had the biggest impact on your career?

**SC:** Without question, Lendon Gray. To this day, her voice speaks loudest in my mind when I'm trying to work through something with a horse or a student. Her desire to find the best in each horse and in each person and bring it out so that they can shine is amazing and inspiring. I am always trying to further my education, so I have just recently started traveling out to California to work with Hilda Gurney.

**Sidelines:** You have had great success with your clients in

Albuquerque, what stands out to you?

**SC:** I work with various clients around the Albuquerque area, the most prominent of which is Paradigm Sporthorse Farm. They are a small operation, breeding a maximum of five foals per year, but they are proof of the saying "quality, not quantity." They have produced numerous champions both under saddle and in-hand, and have been steadily climbing the ranks as dressage breeders over the last few years. In 2009, USDF ranked them 28th in the nation, and they tied with Pembroke Farm in Lemitar as the top dressage breeder in the state of New Mexico. Out of over 1,100 dressage breeders on the USEF list, they have been consistently ranked in the top 50 in the country for the last three years. I also work with Camelot Friesians and have shown several of their horses to top placings, including setting high scores at New Mexico Dressage Association shows.



*Sean and Modern Magic, a five-year-old Hanoverian mare owned by Paradigm Sporthorse Farm*

Photo by Kathleen Bryan

**Sidelines:** What are your goals?

**SC:** As a rider, my goal is to compete internationally as a member of the U.S. team. As a trainer, I hope to be able to impart my knowledge and expertise to my horses to make them suitable mounts. As an instructor, my goal is to pass my knowledge along to my students so they can grow and become better riders and trainers themselves. As a member of the board

of directors and the Jr/YR Chair for the New Mexico Dressage Association, I hope to help steer our club, and dressage as a whole, in a direction that will benefit us all and make us ambassadors for the sport.

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