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MY FIRST GRAND PRIX

Grand Prix for the Rest of Us

By Angelea Kelly Walkup

We've all watched professional dressage riders in Grand Prix tests as they seamlessly guide their equine partners through intricate maneuvers, culminating in a perfectly square halt. But what about adult amateurs who have piaffe, passage and tempi changes on the brain? I'm here to tell you, upper-level competition isn't just for celebrities.

As a country gal growing up on the Gulf Coast of Texas, my first taste of dressage was set to music through the late night illumination of our television. My world of rodeo queens and barrel racers knew nothing of such refinements. How this horse and rider could be so elegant and flawlessly move to music left me awestruck. From that time on, I dreamed of dressage at Grand Prix. Here I am, several decades removed, and I have finally arrived! It's been a long trail ride but not one without a plan. Goal: get my U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) gold medal.

I did my first Grand Prix test in 2006 on Joewell, but I remember when "Grand

Prix" sounded ominous and unattainable. Apart from the sports psychology behind it, there was much I needed to prepare before entering at A and gliding into a well-timed halt, salute. As a Type-A personality, it's been my custom to create lists, so I began by writing down my riding goal: to successfully complete Grand Prix, Test B, across several competitions, culminating in earning my USDF gold medal. Then I had to plan the steps leading up to that goal. Whether it's Training Level or Grand Prix, if you want to successfully compete, you need to actualize the goal by designing the steps to it.

Here is a brief checklist of what I did

*"Improve flexibility."
"Create a deeper seat."
"Enhance back suppleness."
"Create hip independence."*



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at each show to get through that first season. I hope it helps you, too.

1. Look sharp. I always feel better when I am confident in my appearance.

- Make sure your hair is pulled back underneath a net or in a nice bun.
- Put on your best face. No matter how hot it is, I have made tasteful make-up a ritual in my preparations.
- Check your shabby for loose threads, dirt, etc.
- Wipe off the top hat, as horse shows are known to be dusty.
- Wear something over your sparkling white breeches until just before the moment you mount your horse.

2. Make a schedule. I usually take an

hour to prepare not only my horse but myself, and I like to use an extra 10 minutes or so just to hang out and check the gear I cleaned and organized the previous night. This clocks me in for a noon ride time about 10:15 a.m. The key is never be rushed or deviate from your schedule.

3. Hydrate and munch. It's hot at most shows, so keep yourself hydrated.

- Hydration is more than simply drinking water prior to your class. Start a full 24 hours in advance, and keep plenty of water around for the duration of the show. Keep drinking. There's no excuse for you to collapse during your warm-up.



Photos by Scarlett

Angelea Kelly Walkup rides Joewell, a 16-year-old Trakehner gelding.

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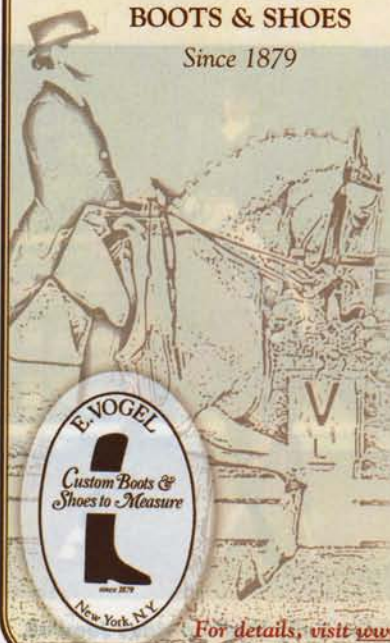
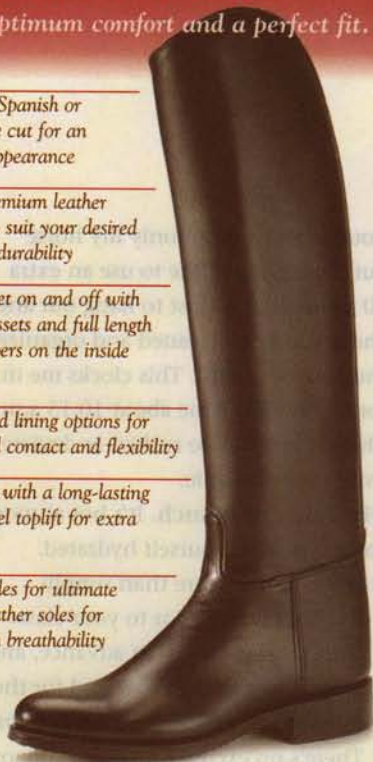
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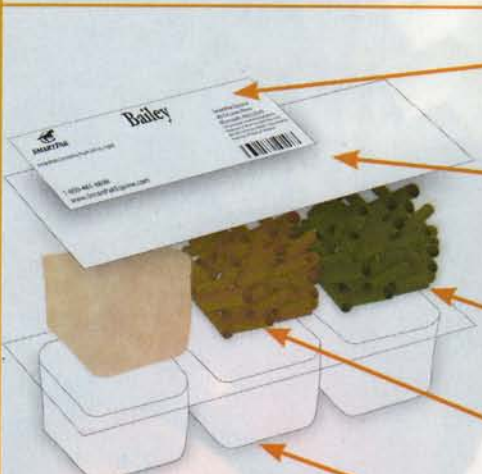
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MY FIRST GRAND PRIX

- It's also crucial to keep healthy snacks around and eat a light breakfast or lunch. You can survive in the most desert-like conditions of horse showing as long as you drink water and consume food.
 - Avoid mouthwash. I learned this one the hard way. Antiseptic mouthwash acts like a sponge and turns the inside of your mouth into one great big cotton ball.
4. **Physical warm-up.** Warm up enough so you're ready to peak when your ride time comes.
 5. **Mental warm-up.** We need to be like that little train approaching the top of the hill saying, *I know I can. I know I can. I know I can.* So ride your test in your mind. See it as perfect. Ride that just-right rhythmical, elastic and infallible piaffe-passage transition. Nothing is as powerful as your mind.
 6. **Enjoy!** As you enter at A in a collected canter for your first Grand Prix, it's all too often that the fun and enjoyment of riding is lost in the tension of showing. Shows tell us what we need to work on and, while ribbons are nice, it's about learning while having a good time. 📺

Angelea Kelly Walkup earned her USDF silver medal in 2001 and her gold medal in 2006. Her post-university career found her working in Internet technologies with online communities. She is now focusing 100 percent of her energies as a podcast maven, producing *HorseGirlTV.com*, a series of free, educational, entertaining video podcasts for horse enthusiasts of all ages and skill levels. Angelea says *HorseGirlTV.com* plugs the wired generation into the classical equine world.