



(Equi-graphics Photo)

Sandi Chohany is an aggressive competitor. Chohany and her Ambiance recently returned from nine months of study in Germany.

SANDI CHOHAANY BENEFITS FROM GERMANY

Mary Daniels

Last year, after winning the individual gold medal in dressage at the National Sports Festival in Houston, Texas, in July, and then the Intermediaire I class at the finals in Oklahoma City in September, Sandi Chohany decided to realize a long-standing ambition to go to Germany.

She drove from her home in Wayne, Ill., to California, where she has been a student of Hilda Gurney for the past nine years, entered her then 10-year-old Danish Warmblood Ambiance in their first Intermediaire II class in an Agoura show, and won it. A week later, she and "Max," as Ambiance is known around the barn, were on their way to Heilbronn, a village 30 miles from Stuttgart where Gerd Politz is the professional at the riding club there.

Chohany says that Politz has been coming to California for the past five years to give clinics at Gurney's "and I have been going to them. The last couple of years I've been following him up and down the West Coast. I like him so well I wanted to go to Germany and spend 24 hours a day riding horses."

She didn't quite make the whole 24, but managed a good 12 nearly daily for nine months. "At 7 in the morning I started riding horses and just kept on riding them till 7 or 8 at night—all different kinds of horses. I only rode one young one who could only walk, trot and canter.

"I rode Gerd's Grand Prix stallion Wotzman, who is fabulous and beautiful, and does 'ones' on the circle. I rode some that could do everything but piaffe and some that could do everything but passage. Everything I rode was third level and above," said the ebullient Chohany, who was still excited upon her return the end of May from her German hiatus.

"All of them were humongous monsters. One was 18 hands, 4 years old. It was a riot," said Chohany, who is 5'6" tall.

But anyone who knows Chohany knows she thrives on challenge. "I had a wonderful time," she said, adding, "I never worked so hard in my life.

"I didn't get bored, I got exhausted. I did lose weight, I'd fall in bed at night. I didn't have the energy to eat."

While she was riding other horses, Max was undergoing an education of his own. "Max had all the 'tricks,' I taught him piaffe, passage and the 'ones,' but he had no transitions and his changes weren't nice and forward," said Chohany.

"Gerd rode him once a day. He made him a lot lighter, he made him a lot more engaged, gave him better extensions. His body now looks entirely different. His muscles are so hard, his veterinarian came to give him his shots to fulfill his passport requirements, and he bent the needle trying to get it in."

Even while she was successful showing Max, she received a lot of negative comments from American judges, "who don't like the two of us together. Max is too big, they say. Maj. Gen. Jack Burton," she said, "calls him 'The Elephant.'" Max is the proverbial tank of a horse, 17.1 hands, 1,600 pounds and feet the size of dinner plates. But "not one judge in Europe said anything about his size."

Max, she said, does have durability. "He was ridden twice a day, six days a week, for nine months, and he is sound. That's the best thing about him. And he's unflappable. Most of the German national tests are in 20- by 40-meter rings. And you do your Grand Prix test in them." How she fit everything in, she wasn't sure, she said, but Max took it all in his large stride.

Acquiring Max

Max is Chohany's first warmblood, and she admitted, "I don't like them as well as Thoroughbreds. They're a little bit bored. Once they know how to do something, anybody can make them do it. With a Thoroughbred, you have to have a relationship with them," she said, adding, "With the warmbloods, it usually takes seat, legs and spurs.

Chohany acquired Max as a result of her honeymoon trip with husband Don Paschal in Denmark in fall 1984. She stayed with Rudiger Blume, a young German rider who worked 10 years ago for Edith Kosterka's Trakehner farm in Wayne, and helped Chohany while he was here.

Gurney told her to look every place she went for horses, and the itinerary included Germany, Sweden and Switzerland as well as Denmark.

"I'd seen Ambiance, and didn't want him for myself. He was fourth level then. His previous owner was a boy 6'3" tall, who had to go to college. I sent a tape of him to Hilda and asked did she know anyone who wanted him.

"She wrote back and said she was sending a girl over. The girl rode him, but they didn't get along. I came back to Wayne and I called everybody I knew and said, here's this wonderful horse! Two days later, Hilda, who had Chesapeake (Chohany's Thoroughbred) in training at the time, called and said 'Chessie's sick, and we think he's going to die.'

"They did an autopsy on him. He ate something out in pasture that fermented in his stomach before it passed into his intestine and it burst," Chohany said. Her relationship with Chessie was long and close but troubled by health problems and plain bad luck.

At that point her husband called Denmark and told them to ship Max to Wayne. She said, "He was bored when I first got him. He's very expressive now. He's developed a personality."

As for the difference the nine months in Germany made in herself, she said she came back home to Wayne and got on some of her students' horses, "and it was just easy. I got on my own horses," Fabuleux, Ebn Chaleur, a youngster by Chryso, and Au Revoir, "and it was also easy. When I was riding there (in Germany) I was so tired all the time, and Gerd would yell and scream. I didn't really think about what I was doing. I was just doing my job. Now that I'm back, what I learned does work."

Politz spent 10 years in England, was educated at Oxford, and speaks with a British accent. He "had me on a longe line six days a week for the whole time," Chohany said. "He finally let me off when another American came over. I was so grateful to see her. He couldn't stand to do two of us a day, I guess.

"The first month I had so many blisters I'd take Vaseline and grease the inside of my legs before I rode. Sometimes I thought I would pass out. But I never told him. He told me if I was on his longe line for two years, I would be a wonderful rider. After months, all he said to me was, 'you know, you really are getting better.'" Chohany said with mock chagrin.

Friday, June 26, 1987

The Tests

"I started showing in May and we went eight weeks in a row," she added. Although she could not show German horses, she said she got permission from the American Horse Shows Association to show Max there in their S level test, which is a Grand Prix equivalency test.

"My best class was a Grand Prix test at Mannheim," an international show. "I've never seen such riders! It was like a 'Who's Who' of dressage," said Chohany. "Every name you read in the magazines was there. Johann Hinneman, George Theodorescu, Herbert Krug, Monika Theodorescu. And this nothing little American (Chohany) was there!"

She said it rained at Mannheim during her test and she was glad because "I was weeping and sobbing. Look what I was riding against! What was I doing there?"

"I didn't do well," she said candidly, "but I got what would be a good score in America. I wasn't ashamed of my ride and I wasn't ashamed of my horse. Everyone was friendly and helpful. I expected them to go 'pooh pooh Americans,' but they didn't. They came to talk to me."

She found showing intriguingly different there. "We offer every test, they don't. They wear double bridles in second level. They wear draw reins in warm-up. They carry whips in Grand Prix. At my first show in Heilbronn in April, I was the only person in Prix St. Georges that didn't carry a whip. There were 44 Grand Prix horses at Mannheim, and I didn't see a bad one either. There were 110 in the Prix St. Georges class at Bad Kreuznach. I was 10th in that."

Chohany, 40, is a native of Washington, D.C. She attended college in California, and returning home by car had a flat tire passing through Wayne and stayed.

"My mother wanted a girl an got me instead," said Chohany, who says she always loved horses but never was allowed to indulge in one until she was an adult. She began with an Appaloosa, went on to her first foxhunter, then did open jumpers for a while; then three-day, which led to dressage.

"I still hunt, I still like to run and jump." Chohany is a whipper-in for the Wayne-DuPage Hunt. "But dressage is so hard," she said, somehow making that sound appealing. Chohany believes that may be its attraction for her. "I never give up, I never quit. I ride every day," she said.

TRANSFORMING ACTIVITIES

Charles de Kunffy said in his book *Dressage Questions Answered*:

The body can be used in two different ways in transforming activities: (1) *As weight*—The torso can tilt forward or backward from the perpendicular position. It can also tilt slightly right or left from the same perpendicular position. It can also weight one or the other of the seat bones by rotating lightly one shoulder forward and the other backward from their parallel position. (2) *As power*—The rider can flex or relax some or all of his back muscles, thereby indicating cooperation or resistance to the horse's offered movement.