

Lunalee Barboza: A Young Dressage Rider's Journey to the Top

By Daina Behe, Top Line Media Team



Photo by TLMT: Luna with Donatus and Pop Starr

It's always refreshing to see a level of dedication in a young person that rivals that of world class athletes, and you have to take a moment to pause and watch junior rider Lunalee "Luna" Barboza when she gracefully enters the ring on one of her mounts. With a poised air about her, Luna fluidly dances with her horses, showing the makings of a future Grand Prix rider.

Luna has had the horse 'bug' for somewhat of a short time now, and at the young age of 15, she is currently competing at Third Level with a goal of qualifying for the FEI North American Youth Championships this July. She has ridden delightful freestyle tests at [Rosinburg Events LLC](#) spring and summer shows and is a girl with a plan on how to achieve her goal.

I had the chance to chat with Luna and her mother, Penny, about her horses, her riding and her life outside of the barn. Luna had her first experience with a pony at age 5, and she recalls never wanting to ride again after being bucked off. I assured her that most of us have been there, especially when it comes to ponies, and I was happy to hear that she gave it another go.

"In 2014, I got my first official horse, an OTTB mare," said Luna. "I rode in a western saddle for a while. I then got an English saddle and I found I loved to jump, so riding for me was more of a recreational hobby at first."

After two years of riding for the pure joy of it, Luna acquired one of the horses she currently competes on now. "In December of 2016, we bought our first schoolmaster who had many Intermediare 1 awards, Pop Starr, who is now 22 years old," Luna reminisced. "My mom graciously let me ride him for a year so that I would put off my jumping career for awhile. I

learned everything I could from training level up to third level. I did my first recognized dressage show in December of 2017. That's when I really got into dressage and saw the competition part of the world."



Photo by TLMT: Pop Starr, KWPN gelding, ridden by Lunalee Barboza

During a regular lesson on Pop Starr, Luna noticed another horse in the ring that was destined to become part of her life. "Donatus, a Wurttemberger gelding, was being ridden in the ring at the same time I was on Pop Starr," Luna mentioned. "We knew the owner's trainer, and the trainer said we should take the horse, as he would have a good home with us. I gave him a try and the horse just loved us. It was like he chose us to be his owners. We bought him in September 2017. He was a schoolmaster from Germany once listed as a developing young horse, and he's 17 this year. We are fortunate to have gotten him."



Photo by TLMT: Donatus 107, Wurttemberger gelding, ridden by Lunalee Barboza

With horses of different breeds and disciplines to ride several times per week, plus a full-time school schedule, Luna has quite a full plate and her whole family is right there to help her manage everything. Mom, Penny, helps to create Luna's curriculum, and they integrate three-hour riding sessions into nearly every day. "I do online schooling," said Luna when asked about her studies. "I received several yearly scholarships to NCSU to work with the STEM program, and it's fun to sit in the college classroom. I also take Chinese Language Arts courses in the evening, and that has been a great experience." Currently, Luna is taking classes from a tutor for both the ACT and SAT exams and holds her education as a top priority alongside her dressage training. Her other hobbies include playing the piano and reading.

Over the past few years, Luna has worked diligently to achieve set goals in the dressage world. She acquired her USDF Bronze and Silver Medals on both Pop Starr and Donatus, mentioning that she would like to continue to gain more experience riding at USEF Fourth Level and FEI PSG, knowing it will give her the advantage to understand the higher levels. When asked what her most memorable ride to date was, Luna excitedly spoke about a [North Carolina Dressage and Combined Training Association](#) (NCDCTA) show back in 2018. "I was riding in Second Level at the NCDCTA championships in November 2018 with Donatus. I received the best score I've ever gotten – a 72%," Luna said with a huge smile. "I beat everyone – the open, amateurs and juniors – some of the other competitors were even notable judges."

With her horses right in her backyard, Luna has the luxury of riding daily at home. She also meets with area trainers and attends clinics at [North Star Training Center](#) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. "One of my favorite horses is right at home," Luna said. "Rockstar, my Oldenburg eventer. We found him in 2016. I haven't competed on him recently due to minor physical issues, but I like the idea of competing on him in the future. Mom is good at rehabilitating my older horses."

Luna is extremely responsible when it comes to creating her show schedule and tracking entry status, winnings, and scores earned. "She has spent every hour of entering events online by herself," said Penny. "She keeps track of vaccinations, coggins, show dates, agendas – everything. I've never entered an event once for her."

At age 15, Luna's list of achievements is quite impressive. She has ridden with Mary Wanless, Michael Poulin, and Susanne von Dietze to name only a few. She is part of the high school lettering program offered by the United States Equestrian Federation and has earned a letter and lapel pin at each level. Luna has also secured numerous awards, including All Breeds with USDF, as well as, eight NCDCTA Horse of the Year awards in the 2018 competition season.



Luna and family pictured at the NCDCTA HOY Gala

Luna is excited to continue her equestrian endeavors, whether as an athlete or through another avenue. “I like the thought of being an emerging athlete but it’s really hard work,” she said. “If in the future I don’t go pro, there are other ways I would like to serve in the horse world. I enjoy fox hunting quite a bit, helping out show management, and caring for horses.”

Whichever direction Luna chooses to go in her future looks bright. Her determination and discipline represent the makings of a professional rider, and with the support system she has at home, Luna certainly is an up and coming equestrian to keep an eye on.

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About the author: Daina Behe, digital marketing specialist for [Top Line Media Team](#), holds a Master of Science degree in Integrated Marketing Communications from West Virginia University as well as a certificate in User Experience Design, and is well versed in many areas of digital marketing and design. Having been involved in the horse industry for years, she specializes in equine marketing as it brings her passions together. While not working behind a computer, you can find her training her Moriesian horse in the Western Dressage discipline, or teaching riding lessons to young equestrians.