



Photo: Allison Zarembowicz

ALLISON ZAREMBOWICZ'S EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY to INTERNATIONAL DRESSAGE

A “hot and crazy” failed driving horse is helping make Zarembowicz’s dressage dreams a reality

by Alice Collins / Jump Media



Photo: Andrew Ryback Photography



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N

ot many riders make their international dressage debut at age 33. Fewer still do it on a failed driving horse deemed dangerous to ride that was bought on the cheap. Then again, not many dressage riders take the circuitous route that Ocala-based Allison Zarembowicz has carved. She was a teenage horse trader,

a racehorse exercise rider, handled a string of pack horses in Utah, competed in eventing, worked at a therapeutic riding school and as a veterinary technician, taught camp, and was a four-in-hand driver's groom in Europe, which took her to the 2014 World Equestrian Games in Normandy, France. It's an extraordinary CV.

Zarembowicz is bemused and delighted to now find herself competing on the CDI small tour dressage scene on a horse she only began riding when he was 10 and whose specialty was spinning uncontrollably. Over the 2024 Easter weekend at World Equestrian Center – Ocala (WEC), the pair hit the magic 70% mark in their Intermediate I Freestyle – a level new to both horse and rider. It

represented a high-water mark in Zarembowicz's eclectic career, which is characterized by zigging and zagging like a pinball – until now.

She puts much of her success down to never being afraid to try something new and believes that her years of riding horses of all breeds, shapes and sizes are now paying dividends. She grew up in a family of seven children in Utah, and when her parents told her she needed to fund her new-found horse obsession herself, the dogged 12-year-old managed to persuade the U.S. Department of Agriculture to give her a \$4,000 loan to start a business.

As a teenager, the enterprising Zarembowicz would purchase ponies at auction, then back and ride them, and sell them on. With the proceeds, she

managed to keep an off-the-track Thoroughbred and do Pony Club. As a young adult, she spent time as a working student in Idaho before she serendipitously heard a segment on NPR Radio about a pack horse guide. Despite having no firm contact details, Zarembowicz sent a letter to a P.O. box and was stunned to receive a reply and a job offer. She backed and rode the pack horses and “basically lived in a cave in Southern Utah.”

“In Utah, I could have been a cowgirl or barrel racer, but I was obsessed with English riding. I wanted to move to Florida and had

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Inspiration: Allison Zarembowicz

worked as a driving groom before; I didn't know how else to get into a paid job – and I really needed the money – so that was my first job in Florida, 10 years ago,” explained the 34-year-old.

She subsequently met her husband Torsten Zarembowicz, a FEI Single Horse Individual World Champion in driving for Germany and former USEF Combined Driving Coach. Together, they now run the sales business Zarembowicz Sport Horses, which by necessity has meant nice horses have never stuck around long. Then came Happy Khan, an unassuming bay gelding recently imported from his native Holland. He had a driving background and noteworthy lineage: sired by the Rousseau son Zjengis Khan. Luckily for Zarembowicz, he was a serious handful.

“Every time a horse gets fun, I have to sell it,” she explained. “But during COVID, Happy was sold as a dressage horse to the U.S., and it did not go well at all, which is lucky because



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I would have never gotten this horse if he wasn't such a punk. The lady called and asked if Torsten could sell him as a driving horse, but he was so hot and athletic and really a professional's horse, plus they had almost \$100,000 into him at that point and we weren't going to get close to that for a driving horse.”

“I had just sold a horse – we needed the money – so I didn't have anything interesting to ride. I started with Happy to see if we could find a job for him. Getting into the arena was a challenge. Every time I tried to go in, he would spin in circles and rear and run backward in panic – it was pandemonium. He had a flying change from all the driving, but it was late and he would get super crazy. Everything was hyper,” added Zarembowicz.

She subsequently discovered from a girl who had ridden him in Holland that the only way she had found to get Happy into the arena was to coax him in backward. Slowly, Zarembowicz managed to channel the horse's abundant energy in a more positive direction and build an understanding.

“I've mostly had Dutch Harness Horses because that was the only thing I could afford,” explained Zarembowicz. “I've never had a nice warmblood. Once Happy calmed down, he was pretty fun. I thought about how much to offer the owner – I didn't want to offend her – but he wasn't worth much and was honestly dangerous. I offered her \$10,000 and she said, ‘Yes, please!’ She was thrilled and so happy that he had a job.”

“I knew that if I could work with him then I could have a decent dressage horse. Getting him to relax and do the clean changes was a huge milestone and I brought him up from Second Level to Prix St. Georges in a year,” she recalled.

The result is partly thanks to Zarembowicz's tremendous breadth of horse knowledge – there is little she hasn't seen – coupled with her husband's daily eyes on the ground and help from locally-based trainer Anna Marek. Zarembowicz completed four national Prix St. Georges classes with Happy before taking the plunge and entering a CDI. They have finished first or second in all four of their CDI small tour starts to date.

Despite her breakthrough success with Happy, there was a moment at the end of 2023 when the Zarembowiczs were on the verge of relocating to Europe, but a timely advertisement and the magnetic draw of WEC made them change their mind.

“We sold our place and the horses were booked on the plane, but we saw this property advertised

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Inspiration: Allison Zarembowicz

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just 15 minutes from WEC and we changed our minds and decided we needed to stay in Ocala,” she explained.

Their new property is a work in progress. It was 10 acres with just a polo barn and the Zarembowiczs are in the process of finalizing the fencing, adding stalls and putting in an apartment and an arena. It’s no small undertaking.

“We’re always doing something a little bit wild, but it’s the only way to make it work and I’m not



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afraid to try something new,” added Zarembowicz, who still has to fend off her husband’s threats to steal Happy back as a driving horse. “I know I’m not the best and I don’t have the background, but I feel like all those difficult horses that I broke and

rode made it so I could have the skills to do this with Happy. I could be jealous of the other riders with a half-million-dollar horse, but here we are just a couple of percent behind and I don’t feel bad at all. I feel lucky.” @

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