

Heather Blitz - Dressage

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Guadalajara, Mexico. The Pan American Games. It is time to announce the outcome of the equestrian competitions. The results are in: Winning a team gold medal and individual silver medal in dressage is a remarkable rider who is originally from rural Kansas. Thanks to Purina's Better Horses Network for this story idea. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Heather Blitz is a professional rider and horse trainer in dressage. Dressage is a French word meaning "training." It's the name of a competitive equestrian sport where a skilled rider puts a horse through a series of precision movements. Dressage is a high-class competition. Sometimes the riders will even wear top hat and tails.

The International Equestrian Federation describes dressage as "the highest expression of horse training." It has also been described as "horse ballet."

Heather Blitz grew up around horses. Her parents are Karen and David Anderson of Hutchinson, Kansas. Heather's mom Karen had grown up riding hunters and jumpers. Karen wanted her children to enjoy horses as well. When Heather was little, her folks bought a farm north of Hutchinson and west of the rural community of Medora, which has a population of perhaps 200 people. Now, that's rural.

In this rural setting, the Anderson's four children learned to ride horses. Heather's first pony was a Shetland, aptly named Rebel. When Heather was five, she insisted on saddling Rebel by herself. As Karen was watching out the kitchen window, Rebel threw Heather off his back. Karen hurried outside but before she could get to them, Heather ran after Rebel, jerked the reins, and got back on to try again. "Heather's career was launched," Karen said. That determination and love for riding would serve Heather well.

Heather joined 4-H and competed in lots of equestrian events. She got a degree in equine studies at Colorado State and while there, discovered the sport of dressage. Heather was fascinated by its precision movements and the connection of horse and rider. She took on the sport herself, learning from clinicians and owning and showing several horses.

Heather became a manager of a dressage facility in Florida. She moved to Louisiana where she taught dressage before relocating to Florida after Hurricane Katrina. A visiting horse owner from Europe was so impressed by Heather's work with horses that he invited her to come train his horses in Denmark, which she did. This enabled her to show her horses in international competition all over Europe. When she went to Europe, Heather brought with her a young horse she had bought named Paragon.

Paragon had been born in Louisiana from very good breeding stock at a place where Heather was head trainer. "I've known Paragon since the day he was born," Heather wrote. "I actually helped him to stand for the first time on his long, baby legs that night." She bought the horse with the idea of training and selling him, but as he grew she became amazed with his abilities, temperament, and natural gait and decided to keep him.

In 2008, Heather and Paragon moved back to Florida, where she rides him in dressage events and teaches clinics all over the country and overseas. In October 2011,

they won the gold and silver medals at the Pan Am Games in Guadalajara. In March 2012, they won the Grand Prix Freestyle at the Global Dressage Festival in Florida.

Heather has a goal of competing in dressage in the 2012 Olympics. It's an expensive task, but Heather and Paragon have now earned enough points to qualify for the Olympic selection trials to be held in New Jersey in June 2012. If she makes the team, Heather and Paragon will travel to London for the Olympics in August.

For more information or to support Heather, go to www.heatherblitz.info.

It's time to leave Guadalajara, where a rider from rural Kansas has just won gold and silver medals in dressage at the Pan Am Games. We commend Heather Blitz and her parents Karen and David Anderson for making a difference by building a career based on the beautiful equestrian sport of dressage. Good luck to Heather on her quest for Olympic gold.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.