

INTERVIEW WITH DRESSAGE JUDGE

“POSSUM” RICHARDS



HKEF List A Dressage Judge “Possum” Richards recently attended and passed the inaugural FEI Young Horse Course in Warendorf, Germany. Here we chat with Possum about her equestrian career and future aspirations.

Introduction to Possum

My name is Shiranne Richards - aka Possum. I am a HKEF List A Dressage Judge. I came from an eventing background and competed up to international level and represented Australia. Now my focus is on dressage judging and attaining FEI Dressage Judge accreditation.

When did you start being a Listed Dressage Judge in Hong Kong?

I cannot recall exactly when I became a listed Judge in Hong Kong but I have been judging here since I ceased my role as HKJC Senior Riding Instructor at Beas River. I judged in Australia for many years before coming to Hong Kong, but it was never my sole equestrian focus until the past few years.



What is your motivation to continue judging?

Essentially it is because I love horses. Secondly, I want to remain active in equestrian – a sport I have been involved with all my life. But the love of horses is what keeps me turning up.

Who was your judging mentor?

I have a number of people who have mentored me along the way. In Hong Kong, Alison King was a terrific help to me both as a mentor and as an inspiration, being Hong Kong's first accredited FEI Dressage Judge. I think her value to Hong Kong was immense and I miss her very much. She was a dear friend.

Additionally, I turn to two ladies from my home state of Queensland (AUS) – Mary Seefried and Maria Schwennessen who are both FEI 5* dressage judges. Especially Mary. They are there whenever I need some guidance and have been invaluable to me in the last few years. They are at the very top of international judging – World Championships, Olympics, Asian Games, Regional Games – they both have judged at pretty much every top competition in the world in the last 10-15 years. Funnily, they both used to judge me in my eventing days so it is lovely to still be in touch with them albeit on a different level.

I also have a couple of other close go-to friends both in Hong Kong and Australia who I turn to – I think they know who they are. I am lucky to have access to such amazing achievers who are even more amazing people. They always help me keep my eye on the target and gently remind me of the bigger picture.



Which Judge do you respect most, either in Asia or Internationally?

In Asia, for me it was definitely Alison King. I will always have the utmost respect for her and all she achieved. Currently, Asia has some very notable judges who are holding their own around the world and who are very respected. Personally, I have huge respect for Vic Barba from the Philippines. I have watched him make the transition from a leading competitor in Asia to an FEI dressage judge (currently 3*). It's not easy to do. Also, Sunil Shivdas from India is a stand-out who is currently at 4*. We have lots of talent especially when you consider we are in the FEI Group 8 region that includes Australia and New Zealand.

On an international level, of course I cannot look past Mary Seefried. Amazing judge and even better person.



Possum and Alison King 2019

What has been your most memorable judging experience?

I have a couple from this summer. The first one was in the UK at Hartpury Dressage Festival, which is a very big dressage show held over 5 days. I was undertaking some of the FEI sit-ins that I need to do for my FEI accreditation. For my very first sit-in, I was with the Number 1 judge in the world, Stephen Clarke (GBR). I had heard so much about him over the years and he is a legend and so respected. It was somewhat intimidating in the lead-up but he was the most delightful and helpful man who had a twinkle in his eye and a lovely sense of humour. While I was sitting in with him, Charlotte Dujardin was doing a Prix St Georges test in the next arena. Was most surreal. Loved it!

The second memorable experience was again this summer, this time in Germany at the Schafhof Dressage Festival held at Gestüt Schafhof in Kronberg. Again, I was there doing some FEI sit-ins. The venue is quite small, very intimate and absolutely beautiful. I decided to go a couple of hours before my class to enjoy the venue and watch the Grand Prix. The first combination I saw was USA's Stephan Peters and Suppenkasper followed next in by Isobel Werth on DSP Quantaz. Both riders were having a final hit-out before the World Championships in Herning and were ironing out a few cobwebs. Neither test was error free but being so close to the arena, it was amazing to be able to watch – no spectators, just a couple of interested onlookers. Isobel Werth stayed at the same hotel so I saw her a couple of times off her horses.

What do you enjoy most about being a dressage judge in Hong Kong?

Probably the horses. And Wendy Hung's fabulous organisation of the Beas River Shows – she's as good as any OC (organiser) in the world. She makes our job easy and most importantly enjoyable.

I enjoy the horses here. They are challenging to judge as the majority are ex-racehorses. This is somewhat unique and really doesn't happen anywhere else in the world. There are very few jurisdictions where the horse population is almost entirely made up of thoroughbreds off the track. We have very few imported performance horses, such as warmbloods who are bred to do dressage. Thoroughbreds are bred to gallop. It's challenging to judge as it is challenging for the horses. It's a struggle for them physically and mentally. These horses are making the transition to a completely different life. What's required from them in their new life is far removed from the expectations on the track. Their bodies, and all too often their minds, do not always allow them to just become dressage horses. So, the transition is difficult. Tension brings the biggest issues. I find breaking down these issues as a judge is a real challenge and I find it very rewarding. There are some beautiful horses here and there is nothing more stunning than a beautiful thoroughbred.

You are one of HKEF's List A Dressage Judges, what is your next target?

I can go no higher at National level. As I want to keep improving, the next step for me is to gain international accreditation – FEI Dressage Judge accreditation. I am now in the process of completing the requirements for this. My next target is to complete the remainder of the prerequisite tasks as set down in the FEI Education System. I have to complete a series of assessment tasks known as shadow judging and sit-ins with various FEI 5* Mentor Judges at CDI competitions anywhere around the world. Covid has been a hurdle and delayed me somewhat, but this summer I started this process at last. So far, I've done some sit-ins and also just completed another mandatory course – a Young Horse Course held in conjunction with the Bundeschampionate show in Warendorf, home of the German National Federation. Once the remainder of my sit-in and shadow judging tasks are completed, I will attend an examination course, where or exactly when I do not know at this stage. I have an English language assessment to complete at some stage too. If all of that is successful, I shall be an FEI Judge. It is a long road.



As mentioned, you have just attended (and successfully completed) an FEI Young Horse course in Germany, can you tell us a little more about this?

As part of the FEI system, it is now a mandatory requirement for any level FEI dressage judge, to complete and pass an FEI Young Horse Course. It is a new requirement that the FEI introduced during Covid. The first course that the FEI offered was the one I attended in Warendorf, Germany this month (in September 2022). I am relieved to say I was successful – not all candidates were – and I was the first Asian to pass this course and I am very proud of this achievement. It was very stressful and difficult as it was very new to me. We do not have many, if any, young horse competitions in Asia. We definitely have none in Hong Kong. The format differs from the usual dressage format. But it was a great trip and I learnt an immense amount. But my first Young Horse judging experience was in an FEI practical exam! Not sure it is the ideal way of doing it.

How did you prepare for this course?

I put in a tremendous amount of preparation. The course involved both a theory and a practical exam as well as an oral assessment. I put in hours of preparation as we just do not have the exposure to international competitions as the Europeans do. The theory preparation was along usual lines with research, knowledge of the FEI Dressage Rules and knowledge of the Young Horse Guidelines as well as the theory behind the basic dressage principles. It is quite an in-depth theory requirement. Some of it was just learning but most goes back to correct application of the principles on a practical level – so this means how you apply or use the dressage principles when you are sitting beside an arena and judging. Daunting at times!

The practical preparation involved hours of watching past Young Horse competitions – Ermelo in the Netherlands, Bundeschampionate in Germany plus numerous others. YouTube was a valuable tool. A friend of mine from Australia, who was also doing the course, formed a study group which turned out to be all of us from the Asia/ Pacific region (or FEI Group 8) so we had regular zoom sessions in the 3 months leading up to it. We also started a Messenger Group from this study group and had fun with some random theory questions and scenarios which we were all able to access from wherever any of us were in the world. This made it all a little more fun and certainly provided the motivation to knuckle down. And we forged some lovely friendships as none of us knew everyone in the group.

What kind of investment is needed to become an FEI judge?

For me the biggest thing has been the emotional investment. The pressure I put on myself to achieve and be successful is high. On top of this is the financial outlay. Travelling at the moment is exorbitant especially in comparison to pre-Covid travelling. This adds to the emotional investment and makes it all very stressful which can be a little daunting at times. I think it is much the same for all candidates on this road. Having said that, so far it has given me the most amazing opportunities to visit some extraordinary places, meet incredible people, see some magnificent horses, watch the world's best horses and riders and sit beside and share the knowledge and experience of the best judges in the world! Amazing stuff that I find exciting and which makes all the investment worthwhile.

What are your future plans?

My plans are to complete my FEI accreditation as soon as I can. This means more CDI shows to complete the shadow judging and sit-in requirements. Then I will need to attend the FEI exam course and hope to do that at the end of next year all going well. Meanwhile, Covid allowing, I will continue judging at our local competitions which I enjoy very much. I have been invited to judge in Australia in February next year at a wonderful venue called Willinga Park. Looking forward to that and looking forward to what next year brings.

To the HKEF members who have an interest in becoming a dressage judge, what is your advice to them?

I would say to give it a try and see if it is for you. Dressage judge training has been halted thanks to Covid but HKEF has plans in place to offer judge training asap, so sign up when that becomes available.

Additionally, myself and my fellow local judges are more than happy to give their time or advice, to help and have a chat. If you decide to take it further, I think commitment is vital, be it emotional or financial commitment as you need to be educated in order to obtain any level of accreditation even at a local level. Also, I think most importantly, a love for horses is essential. This sport involves you sitting at the edge of an arena watching them all day, breaking down the movements and asking yourself if they satisfy all the basic requirements according to the level. If you don't love horses, this makes the job really difficult.