

# STEFFEN PETERS

*European by Birth, American in Spirit, World Class in Dressage*

Story & Photos by KENNETH J. BRADDICK

*Ravel*



As Steffen Peters prepares *Ravel* for what his backers hope will be a place on the United States dressage team on the world's biggest sports stage, the 2008 Olympic Games, he sometimes has to pinch himself at the success he has earned since coming to America as a working student living in a \$200 a month garage two decades ago.

A barn in San Diego, Calif. full of horses that are the equal of any in the world, owned by four different sponsors that most riders in any high performance discipline would be ecstatic to have just one. The lineup of horses is nothing short of remarkable. With his wife, Shannon, a successful international level competitor in her own right, he oversees a pool of talent at the facility owned by longtime sponsor, Lila Kommerstad, that is extraordinarily deep.

*Ravel*, a powerful nine-year-old black gelding with an extended canter Peters describes as "out of this world," was bought by Akiko Yamazaki and her husband, Jerry Yang, the co-founder of Yahoo!, right after the 2006 World Equestrian Games for Peters to contend for a place on the U.S. squad that will compete in the 2008

Olympics. *Ravel*, a Dutch Warmblood, had been kept as an approved Anglo European stallion while being trained and competed up to Intermediaire by Edward Gal of the Netherlands, who became a star to American dressage fans at the 2005 World Cup in Las Vegas on the stallion *Lingh*. An infection when *Ravel* was in quarantine led to the horse being gelded.

*Ravel*



*Lombardi*, also owned by Yamazaki and Yang, a 15-year-old Holsteiner gelding confirmed to Grand Prix two years ago and then laid up for a year, has come back perhaps stronger than ever. Klaus Balkenhol, the U.S. dressage coach, was heard to remark recently after a week working with Peters and other top riders on the West Coast that *Lombardi* “looks very, very good.”

*Floriano*, the horse with the heart of a lion who at age 16, the fourth oldest at the 2006 WEG, came within one-tenth of a point of winning an individual medal for Peters in the Grand Prix Special. The last time an American won an individual dressage medal at the Olympics or World Championships was U.S. Cavalry officer Col. Hiram

*Lombardi* back in a full Grand Prix work schedule after a year off, feeling stronger and doing better than ever.



*Steffen Peters and Floriano finishing the Grand Prix Special at the World Equestrian Games*

Tuttle on his horse *Olympic*, winning both team and individual bronze at the 1932 Los Angeles Games. To be fair, if an individual medal had been awarded in the Grand Prix Special at the politically-riven 2002 WEG in Jerez, Spain, Debbie McDonald and *Brentina* would have won silver and, by the reaction of the non-local fans and most of the world’s equestrian media, she was “robbed” of a medal in the freestyle. It went to a Spanish rider, of course. *Floriano*, a Westphalian, creates legends without knowing it. After Peters and *Floriano* were the alternate pair for

the 2004 Olympics in Athens, the gelding was put up for sale as the owners had specified in advance. In spring 2005, Laurelyn and Stephen Browning were new boarders with Peters. *Floriano's* x-rays were so clean, that despite his age of 14, Peters had no hesitation in asking the Brownings if they would be interested in acquiring the horse. That was at 4 o'clock one afternoon. Three minutes later the Brownings called back to say, "yes." At the ripe old age of 16, *Floriano* became U.S. Grand Prix Champion then the pair went on to become the top finishing American combination on the U.S. bronze medal WEG team.

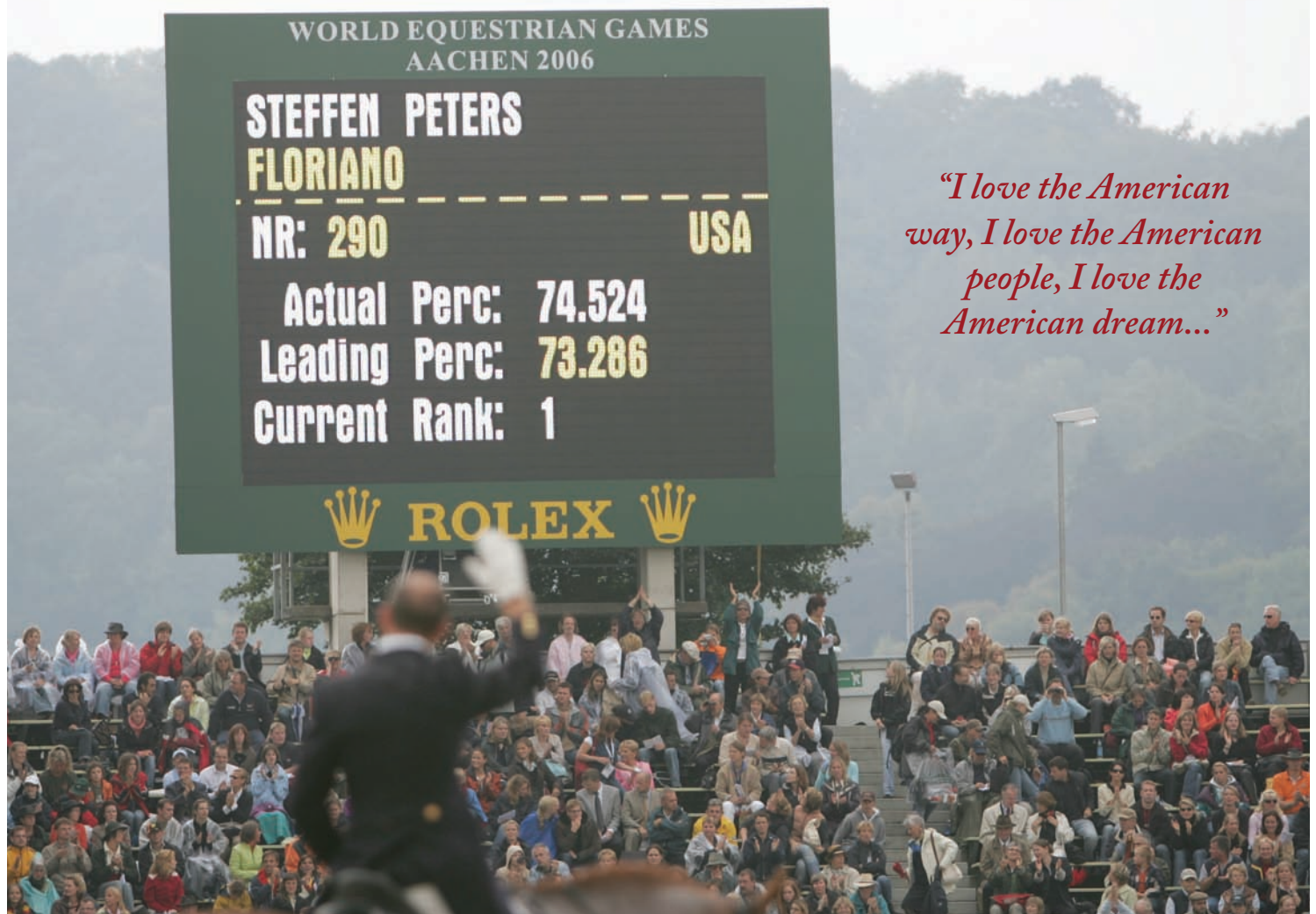
*Lord Chalk Hill*, a seven-year-old Oldenburg stallion performing Prix St. Georges, owned by Peggy Furth who, with her husband, Fred, owns Chalk Hill Winery, a 1,200-acre estate in the Sonoma Valley. The horse will start competing in small tour classes this year.

*Don Antello*, an eight-year-old gelding owned by Chris and Alaska Culmone. The horse is working at Prix St. Georges.



Don Antello performing Prix St. Georges movements.

*Steffen Peters on Floriano acknowledging applause from the crowd as the score in Grand Prix Special is displayed at the 2006 World Equestrian Games.*



*"I love the American way, I love the American people, I love the American dream..."*

*Steffen on Marlando and Shannon on Luxor in victory gallop at 2005 National Intermediaire Championships*



*Marlando*, the 2005 USEF National Intermediaire Champion, owned by Lila Kammerstad. The 13-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding was also 2003 Prix St. Georges Horse of the Year, who continues to perform well. If that continues, Peters will seriously consider pursuing a berth on the U.S. team for the Pan American Games to be held in Rio de Janeiro in July.

And if that was to happen, he might find himself competing with and not against his wife of 2 1/2 years.

Shannon trains and competes *Luxor*, owned by Annie Hewitt, with so much

success that although the pair finished second overall to Steffen and *Marlando* in the 2005 National Intermediaire Championship, they beat Steffen-*Marlando* in the Grand Prix phase of the competition. And that was her first competition ride on her first ever trip to the one time U.S. Equestrian Team headquarters in Gladstone, N.J.

Shannon is campaigning the 14-year-old Dutch Warmblood for a place on the team, and their record so far indicates they have an excellent shot.

## A HORSE NAMED UDON

Steffen's story has been well documented, but it is worth repeating.

While growing up in Germany, his parents had a weekend home near the Dutch border. When Steffen was seven years old, although they were busy operating a retail business, his parents bought him a pony. His parents, he recalls, made time for Steffen and his sister to ride their ponies in weekend dressage shows.

"When I was 16, my dad purchased my first horse and we ended up at Jo Hinneman's barn in Germany," he recounted recently. "The horse was *Udon*, three years old."

Laurie Falvo, an American trainer stabled at Hinneman's barn, invited Peters to work for her in the summer of 1984. The location was San Diego. The weather and lifestyle captivated Peters. After returning to Germany to perform Army service, he moved back to San Diego a year later, bringing *Udon* with him.

Germany may be the pinnacle of dressage, "but to be very honest, the climate in San Diego was tempting."

"I love the American way, I love the American people, I love the American dream," Peters said.



*Shannon Peters working Flor De Silva*

Although his parents wished him well, they also made it clear he was on his own. Living in a \$200 a month garage and riding a motorbike, for the next five years he worked in Southern California, including two years with Guenter Seidel, before going out on his own in 1991.

A year after starting his own business, he was riding in a clinic with the late Dr. Reiner Klimke. Lila Kommerstad, whom he'd recently met asked Klimke if he thought Peters had any talent. Klimke apparently thought so. She bought *Udon* from the Peters family, and became Steffen's first sponsor by providing him with the ride.

He became an American citizen in September, 1992, right after the Barcelona Olympics.

Then in 1996, he realized his dream of being selected with *Udon* to the U.S. team for the Olympics in Atlanta where they won team bronze and was embraced by the fans the way he'd seen on TV what had happened in Barcelona.

"I feel extremely honored to have represented the United States at the Olympics in 1996. It was a huge honor. The whole idea of being so patriotic, of feeling so close to one's country makes a difference. There are not too many other countries where the people are so patriotic. I really, really enjoy this about America."

### **LISTENING TO HIS HORSES**

Other talented horses followed, bought by Lila and Brad Kommerstad for Peters to train and compete. *Akeena*, who won individual and team Gold at the 1994 Olympic Festival in St. Louis, and *Grandeur*, who went to the World Cup in 2002 and competing at top shows in Europe, including the CHIO in Aachen.

In 1994, he was invited to Canaan Ranch in Houston for a clinic where he was offered the ride on *Floriano*. Ten years later, the pair were the alternate at the Athens Olympics.

Talking recently of his life in America, Peters, now aged 42, says that, of course, he would have loved to have won an individual medal at last year's WEG, but he doesn't dwell on what might have been.

"I feel very, very lucky with the horses and the sponsors, very lucky with what *Floriano* did for me. I appreciate what I have and not always what I just want.

For this correspondent who has visited hundreds of farms, stables and equestrian clubs of many stripes on four



*Steffen getting a hug from his mother at the 2006 World Equestrian Games. She lives in Germany.*

continents, the seemingly trite and overused phrase, “happy horse” seems to be a fact in the Peters’ barn, but the horses are also alert even though several residents are retired, such as the likes of *Grandeur* and *Akeena*. Peters loves having his old partners around, and sometimes will work *Grandeur* and *Akeena* at the same time in the bull pen because they like being together.

“I’ve always been interested in the mental soundness of my horses,” Peters said. “Physical soundness is obviously important, but mental soundness at least as much. I always allow the horses to tell me when they’re ready for the next level, allow them to tell me when they’re not ready for the next level. I’ve always been very, very sensitive to that.”

And that’s the situation with *Floriano* who’s been enjoying a break after what Peters describes as his “phenomenal” 2006.

“If he’s not up that standard in 2007 then I don’t want to show him again. If he wants to do it that’s a different story. He doesn’t have to do it. But that decision hasn’t been made.

## THE PINK HOOF PICK RULE

Now, Peters knows that he’s under a microscope with *Ravel*, the *Cantango* offspring he spent many months scouring Europe for. After all, the horse has never shown Grand Prix.

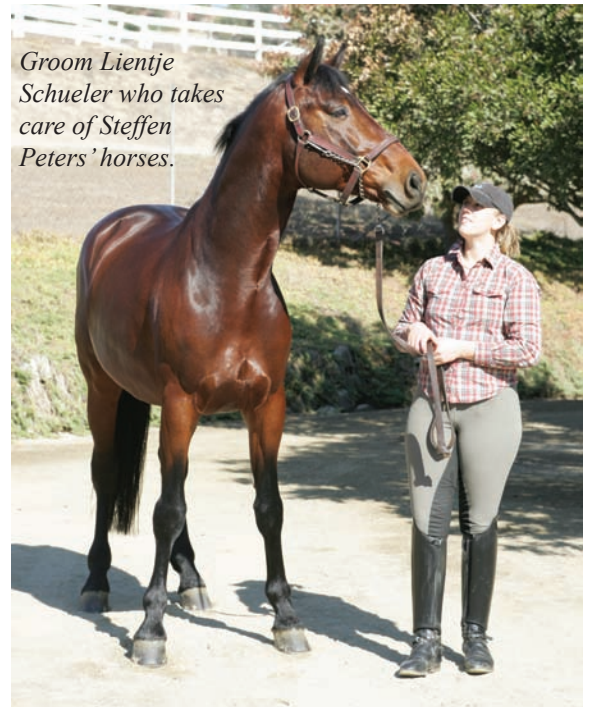
*Ravel* “looks very promising” and the two will start in the Grand Prix at smaller shows with a CDI at Del Mar in November as a possible first Olympic qualifying class they’ll attempt. But only if he feels confident that going off the farm the pair meet Peters’ yardstick of attaining a score of 70 percent.



*Retirement Row*



*Ravel*



*Groom Lientje Schueller who takes care of Steffen Peters' horses.*

*Tears of joy! Shannon and Steffen Peters after the Grand Prix Special at the 2006 World Equestrian Games.*



Photo: © 2006 Ilse Schwarz-HORSESPORT USA

That's an example of how much we like to keep sponsors involved. I don't remember a single week, even if the sponsor is out of the country, that I don't send an email at the least. It's constant communication and updates.

"You also need to give the owners confidence that the animals are being treated fair, that there are breaks in between, that they're not overworked. We've been very, very lucky that we've had many years of very talented horses. All those things combined give the sponsor's trust that they can leave their very high profile horses with us."

And how is it to spend so much time with Shannon, at work at home? "Working together with Shannon is a blast. She is extremely supportive, a hell of a coach. I enjoy every day working with her. When we compete it's very competitive in the show arena, but when the show is over it's a very harmonious relationship. "A lot of fun. I'm a very lucky guy." ■

"When you have three exceptional gaits with a great work ethic and on top of that a very beautiful horse to look at, it makes me think that this horse could be a Team horse."

Peters' success in attracting and holding sponsors is legendary, but he says he learned how from his father who taught him to show "a ton of respect for your customers, your sponsors. Every conflict you resolve through communications, because conflicts are a part of life. Probably overall, lots of patience."

If one looks at the way he has operated his business, he said, "I'm very lucky to have delivered the results."

"The horses perform, the horses have worked out that I have recommended for purchase. That is a reputation you develop."

"I tell everyone that when a customer comes here if they want us to use a pink hoof pick we're going to use a pink hoof pick. And we're going to report afterwards that we used the pink hoof pick."



*"Buddy" and friend.*

