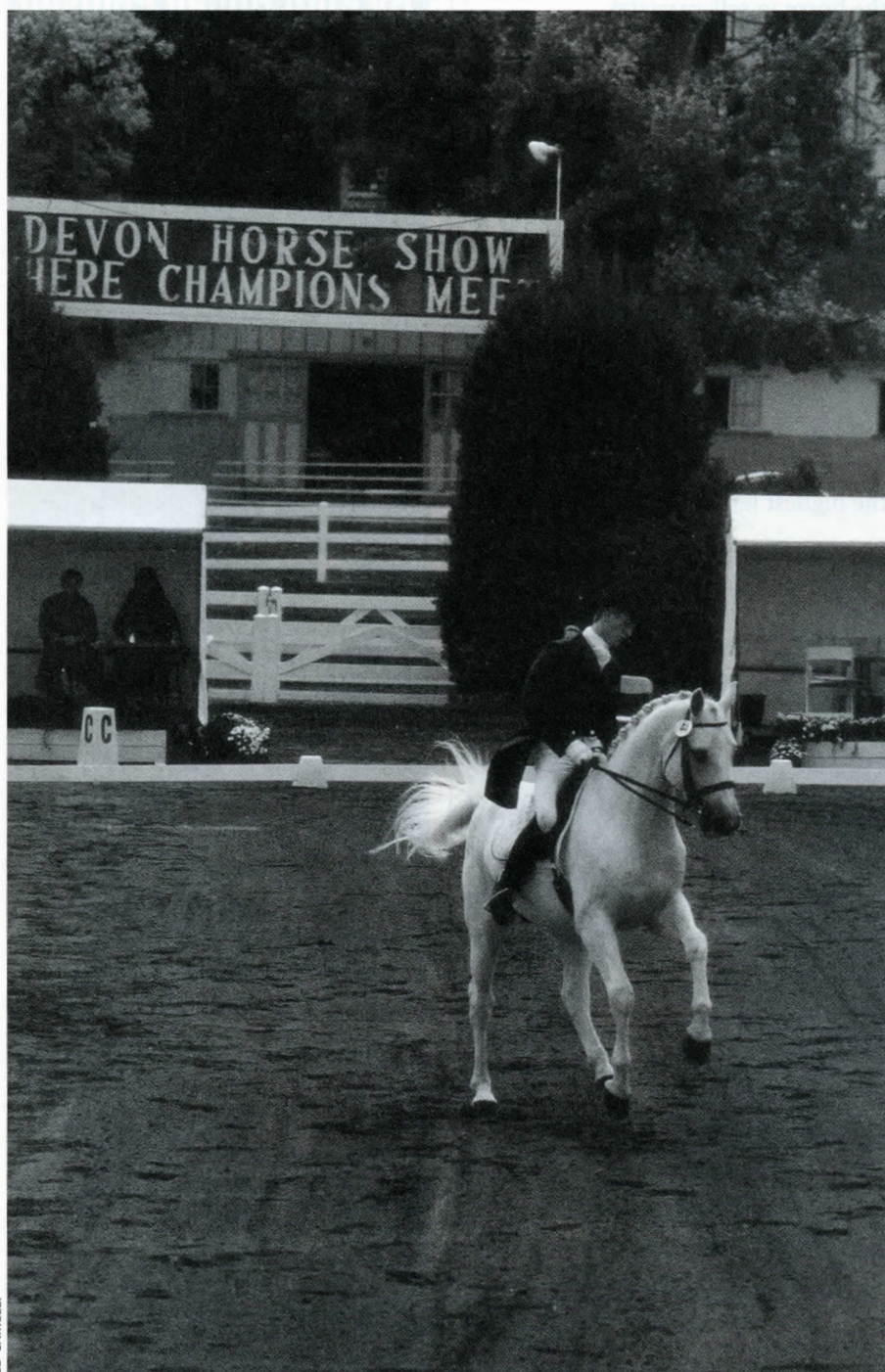


Dressage in the Delaware Valley

Behind the FEI-level glamour of Dressage at Devon is a GMO with its boots anchored firmly among the grass roots

BY D. J. CAREY



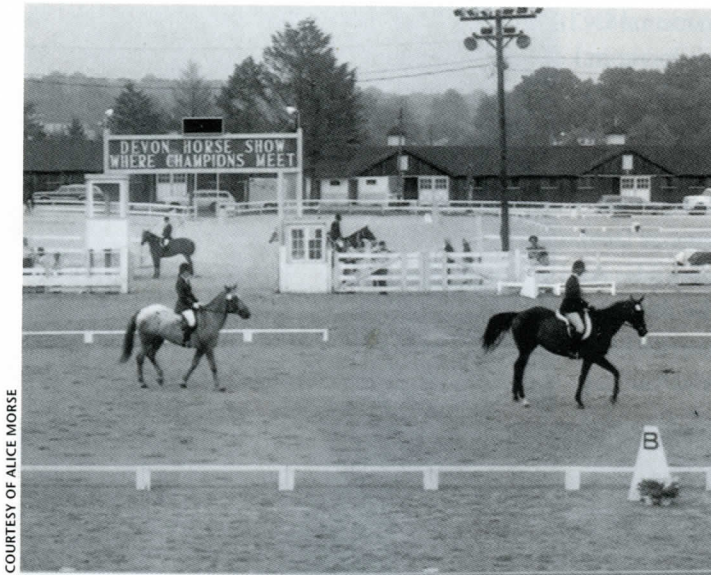
ED. CAMELLI

From grass roots to glamour: DVCTA's club show evolved into Dressage at Devon, arguably the country's most prestigious dressage extravaganza

THE SIX-DAY (THIS YEAR, SEPTEMBER 28 to October 3) dressage competition, breed show, trade fair, and all-around extravaganza that is Dressage at Devon (PA) is one of the country's premier dressage shows, ranked as a three-star CDI-W. Yet it's just one (albeit a major one) of the equestrian happenings made possible by the Delaware Valley Combined Training Association, or DVCTA.

A USDF charter group-member organization (GMO) that turns 40 next year, DVCTA draws its 300-plus members from New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware. It sponsors two other nationally recognized competitions, both in June: DVCTA Presents Dressage at Fair Hill, in Maryland; and the DVCTA Horse Trials, in Pennsylvania. From April through October, the club offers schooling shows nearly every month. It presents up to a half-dozen lectures and workshops a year, most free and open to the public. It has a scholarship program available to help fund any equine-related educational activity. And, says former president Alice Morse, any member who comes up with a new project that fits within DVCTA's mission of horse-related education can just "go to the board, say, 'I'd like to run it,' and the board usually says, 'Great! Go do it!'" (But, adds former treasurer Amy Lewis, "What you can't do is go to the board and say, 'I think *you* should do it!'")

As for where DVCTA got its start...



COURTESY OF ALICE MORSE

Riders at Dressage at Devon, circa 1975. The famed Dixon Oval is sans grandstands.



COURTESY OF ALICE MORSE

Barr Nunn's Council and former DVCTA president Alice Morse on course at Chesterland in 1977

Blame It on Pony Club

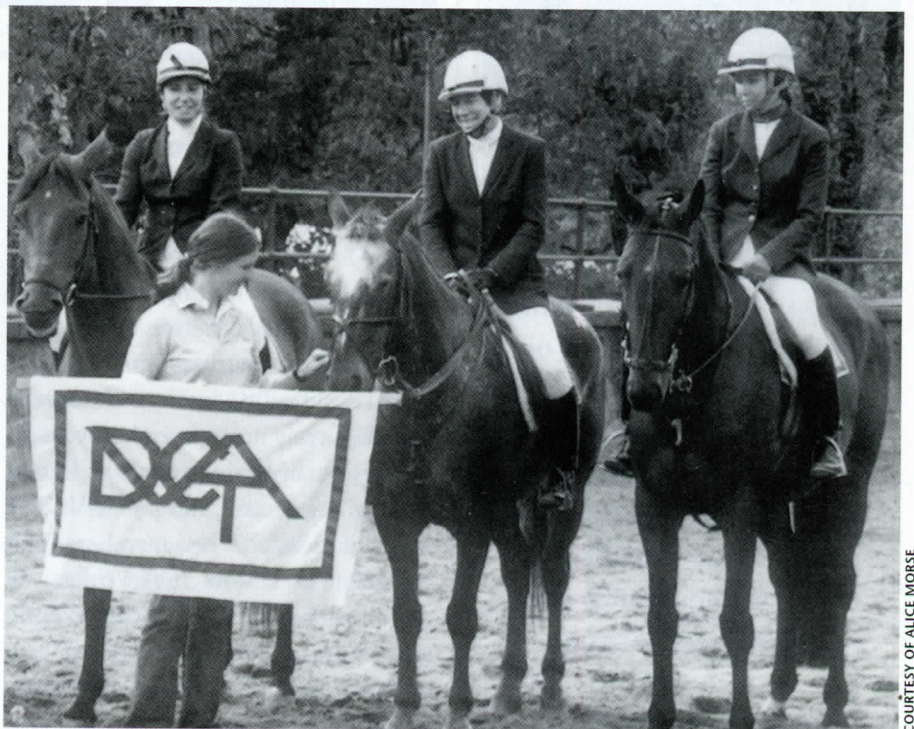
One day (as DVCTA board member and USDF "L" Education Program for Judge Training chair Marilyn Heath tells the near-legendary story), a group of Pony Club moms in Chester County, PA, was busy building a course or doing other Pony-Club-mom things. As they worked and chatted, a question arose: Why should the kids have all the fun? They decided, then and there, to start a "Pony Club for adults."

That was in 1965. DVCTA's "founding mothers"—among them Archie Leidy, Jeanne Braceland, Jill Willcox (whose farm hosted many of the club's early competitions, including the show that became Dressage at Devon when it moved to the Devon fairgrounds in 1975), and the late Sheila Wall Hundt—began reaching out to the wider horse community. They sponsored schooling shows and horse trials, one of which grew into the Chesterland Three-Day Event, held at legendary eventer Bruce Davidson Sr.'s Unionville, PA, farm. (As Morse notes, DVCTA may be "the only organization to have put on a CCI and a CDI within the same year; we were *very* busy in the fall back then!")

The club earned such regard that eventing great Denny Emerson wrote in 2000, "If there's one local association that I've always considered to be synonymous with top-level competition, it's the Delaware Valley Combined Training Association."

Staying Responsive

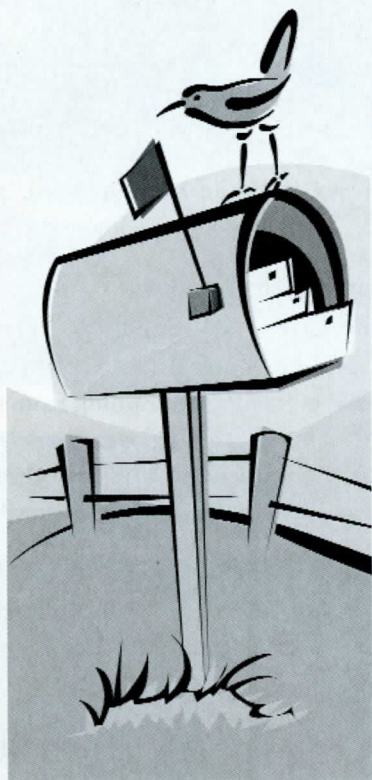
Amy Lewis says that DVCTA has "morphed" several times, with emphasis on combined training from the 1970s into the mid-'80s, then on dressage after the Chesterland event ended (succeeded by the non-DVCTA-affili-



COURTESY OF ALICE MORSE

The DVCTA novice-level eventing team at USET headquarters in Gladstone, NJ, in 1984. From left: Mary Ann Merle on Duke's Masquerade, banner holder Heather Riley, Amy Lewis on The Bigot, and Alice Morse on Sage Babu. Not pictured: Jill Murray on Saybrook's Legacy.

Renewal Notices are Coming!



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ated Fair Hill International CCI). “But we’ve got a strong interest in keeping the eventing going,” she adds.

Says Morse: “What we do fluctuates in terms of what people want. I don’t think there’s anything, with the exception of Dressage at Devon being at Devon, that’s inflexible. And that’s probably one of the reasons this organization has done well: that it’s happy to try something new.”

show moved from Pennsylvania’s Radnor Hunt Club to the Fair Hill grounds. This year, every class was full. Former DVCTA president Sandy Uhler predicts, “If Georgia could run a third arena, she could really go over the top.”

Fair Hill has another arena, with grandstand seating. But “during the Cecil County Fair, that’s where they have the Demolition Derby,” Uhler says. “So there are little metal scraps



Leaders-in-training: Future DVCTA president Georgia Palermo (left) and VP Carole Holliday bonded at DVCTA's inaugural Fair Hill show in 2002

As for the club’s signature offerings, Morse says, “They started small and grew and grew. The first Dressage at Devon I rode in was with my two event horses; I did a Training Level test on one and a Second Level test on the other. But as the competition got larger, it added the breeding divisions and started chewing away at the competitive divisions; Fourth Level is now the lowest it goes.” As a result, she says, DVCTA’s board decided, “If our members can’t do Devon as Training Level riders, we need to have something they *can* do that’s ours and that’s recognized.”

Enter the show that’s now Dressage at Fair Hill, chaired for the past several years by current DVCTA president Georgia Palermo. In 2002, the growing

all over that area; without a giant metal detector, we don’t dare use it!”

Challenges: Distance and Rivals

With local land values soaring, DVCTA’s eventers have lost some venues for their sport. But the access picture isn’t all bleak. Says Morse: “Compared with back in the beginning, we have a lot more indoor rings that we can use. Even with all of the building, there are many people who are very supportive of the horse industry.”

With members ranging from up near Pennsylvania’s Pocono Mountains to Maryland’s Eastern Shore, Lewis says, another challenge is where to meet. (Most club gatherings happen at the University of Pennsylvania’s New Bol-

ED CAMELI



ED CAMELLI

Loot: Carole Holliday arranges the goodies at the 2002 Dressage at Fair Hill awards table

ton Center large-animal facility in Kennett Square.)

Several other GMOs have sprung up on DVCTA's "turf" since its founding, competing for potential members. And there are "more schooling opportunities available, including a few farms that run open schooling-show series," says Lewis.

DVCTA has responded to this challenge, says Palermo. Riders in such shows "can get credit toward year-end awards; they just have to get the show manager or secretary to sign a form that we provide and send it in with their scores."

Keeping Volunteering Voluntary

As in any GMO, volunteers are the lifeblood of DVCTA. If not enough people volunteer, activities can't happen. So, Palermo says, some years ago DVCTA began requiring that members wanting to ride in its schooling shows

volunteer eight hours a season at one of those shows or other sponsored activities. The requirement "may not sound like a lot, but if you're busy and you've paid your membership fees, it doesn't feel like volunteering. So people bristled—and with other schooling shows in the area where they could go, just pay an entry fee, and ride, we were losing riders. Another pitfall: If I asked people to volunteer for Dressage at Fair Hill or Dressage at Devon, a lot of them would say, 'Well, I've already volunteered my eight hours.'" Effectively, the schooling shows were draining the volunteer pool.

Palermo's predecessor as president, Susan Nicholas, "was astute enough to realize that the policy had to be

changed. It wasn't easy, but she carefully and diplomatically got everybody on board. Now the schooling shows are successful, and the only volunteer requirement is that to qualify for year-end awards and the championship show, you must work at least eight hours. That seems to be working well."

GMO-Nurturing Ideas

Morse says that DVCTA is making volunteer recruitment easier by making responsibilities more manageable. "You may be lucky enough to have somebody who has nothing else to do and wants to do everything on a project. But at some point, that person won't be there any more. You have to figure a way to break down the job into chunks that people with jobs and families and a life can handle. And when someone new takes the job on, you need to put a safety net under her: to make sure the person who did it before has written down what it involves

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and, if at all possible, is available to answer questions.”

A corollary: “Even if your longtime core volunteers are still working, you need to reach out beyond them. Otherwise the newer people in your organization will feel, ‘Well, the old guard is doing it, and we’re not really needed or wanted.’” And don’t just put a help-wanted notice in your newsletter. “If you come to an individual who you feel can do a job, and explain to her what it is and why you think she can handle it, chances are better that she’ll say at least, ‘I can do some of that.’”

Thank volunteers—and not just verbally. Dressage at Fair Hill volunteers get passes to Dressage at Devon (and two, drawn by lot, get next year’s DVCTA dues paid). Horse Trials volunteers get free cross-country school-

ing. And Dressage at Devon volunteers get “lots of cool stuff.”

To keep leadership ideas fresh, DVCTA limits officers to three consecutive one-year terms. Says Palermo (who was recruited for president by Nicholas, and agreed provided that she could choose a vice president she knew and worked well with, Carole Holliday), “The first year you are learning. The second year is when you’re most effective. The third year, you really know what you’re doing but you’re also looking for who will follow you—if, as Susan did, you care about what you’ve implemented.”


Visit www.dvcta.org to see the GMO’s latest good idea: the Team Up Corner, where members needing help at a show and members willing to volunteer that help (maybe it’s a show

they’ve always wanted to see!) can post dates and contact information. Competitors then make the linkup and arrange details directly.

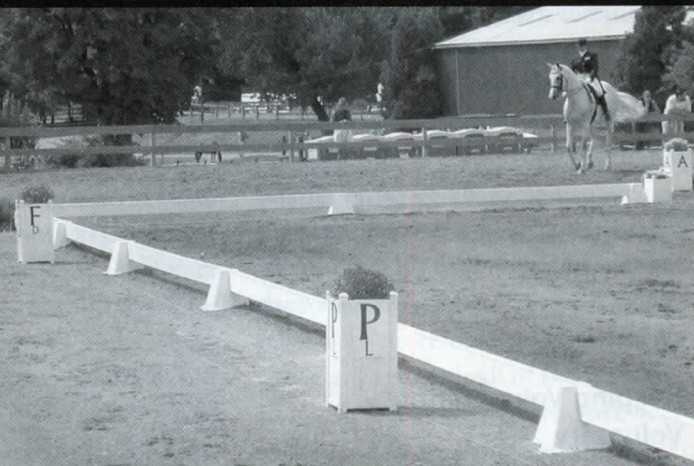
Concept originator Deb Tsang and new-to-dressage-showing volunteer Lori DiSanti connected for this past June’s Dressage at Fair Hill. Tsang says DiSanti “did a great job keeping me organized.” DiSanti marveled at what she’d learned: “There were little things that make such sense to me that Deb does and that just never really occurred to me before.”

Help for the rider, learning for the helper, companionship, mutual appreciation—what a win/win! ▲


Freelance writer D.J. Carey contributed the Horse of the Year biographies to the 2003 yearbook issue of USDF Connection.



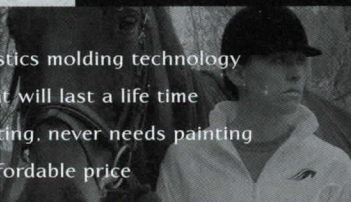
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