

CHARLOTTE DUJARDIN

The Girl on the
Dancing
Horse



*An outsider,
an unconventional horse,
and the incredible bond
that took them to the top*

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Meant to Be

MANY PEOPLE HAVE asked why I think Carl gave me the opportunity he did. He was a world-class trainer and rider, the person everyone looked up to, and he was literally inundated every day with people asking him for a job.

My natural balance and feel were, I think, something he felt he could work with, and from the start Carl said that I had a gift for teaching horses the collected movements. Our mentalities were similar, too: I'm self-motivated and wanted to ride everything, which was how Carl had been when he was starting out in his career. When I arrived, he was at a low point in his personal life and wondering about retiring, and I think my being so enthusiastic and driven to learn meant he appreciated having me around. And just being in the right place at the right time was part of it, as well – which, looking back, seems to have happened a lot in my life.

As a kid it had been horrible having to leave the house I'd loved and grown up in and move from place to place all the time. We'd never know where we were going next, and Mum and I would always be worrying if we could find good yards where we could afford to put the ponies. I wouldn't change it now, though, because if we hadn't moved around so much I would never have met Rory or Ian, and without Ian I wouldn't have met Judy and gone to her.

I'd worked and grafted my absolute hardest to be where I was, but it seems crazy to think now that I've never once in my life had a job interview. It's almost as though everything that's happened has happened for a reason – like stepping stones all the way along.

The chance to learn from Carl and benefit from his knowledge and experience was an amazing one for me, but he'd asked me to do a job and working for Carl meant you worked hard. Even harder, if it were possible, than in my previous job. At Judy's there had been ten or twelve horses to look after; at Carl's there were twenty odd. It was also a competition yard, not a livery yard, so the pace was flat out.

There were four of us including Lucy Cartwright, Carl's under-rider, and our day started with feeding and mucking out at 7 a.m. We'd still be mucking out when Carl and Spencer Wilton, Carl's partner and another professional dressage rider, arrived to start riding at 8.30 a.m. You had to stop, get their horses ready, then go back to the mucking out, but you also had to be ready to stop again the second they'd finished riding so you could wash off their horses. Once all the mucking out was done, the horses Carl and Spencer weren't riding had to be ridden, but you still had to make sure you were ready to tack up and untack if either of them needed you. The whole day it carried on like that – it was absolutely manic. I'd never worked like it in my life before.

As soon as the horses had all been ridden they had to be turned out, and that took ages because the fields were a long way from the yard. Then if one of them decided to go crazy and start galloping around, you'd have Carl shouting at you to go and get it back in and take one of the others out. Off you'd go, traipsing through the mud to catch it – which was hell because it was

winter – and of course they'd have found the muddiest part of the field to roll in and turned into an absolute hippo. So then you'd have to wash it off again, and your hands would freeze with all the cold water. I often get asked about my false nails but the real reason I started wearing them was because I was trying to disguise my old lady hands and arthritic knuckles, which I've got from years of working outside in the wet and cold.

We stopped for lunch for an hour between one and two, then the afternoon was all about yard duties and cleaning tack.

Tack cleaning was one of Spencer's things and he was very fussy about it: he said that if you didn't clean the bridle properly, including taking the bit off, the leather got stiff because there'd still be muck stuck in the loops. That's very true, but then you weren't allowed to put the bits back on the bridles until the moment they were needed. Why you couldn't was beyond me, because when Spenny or Carl suddenly announced they wanted their horse ready, there'd be a real panic: not only did you have to get it groomed and bandaged, you also had to fiddle around with putting the bit back on before you could tack up. It seemed completely impractical to me, but it was one of Spencer's rules so I wasn't going to question it.

There were moments sometimes when I just wanted to stand in the middle of that yard and scream, 'I've only got one pair of hands!' But then Carl would ask me to warm up one of his top horses and I'd be so excited I'd forget how exhausted I was.

The first time Carl put me on his Grand Prix horse Pro-Set, I was terrified. I was convinced I was going to ruin him because I didn't know what I was doing, especially when Carl announced he was going to teach me one-time changes.

With four-, three- and two- tempi changes, which were all I'd previously done, you've got time to think about your aids. With one-time changes, you can't wait for your horse to land before you ask it to change legs because, if you do, it's too late and you've missed the moment. As a rider that means you just have to keep moving your legs backwards and forwards in rhythm with your horse even though you're not sure what they're doing under you, which feels really bizarre.

The pressure I felt to get it right in front of Carl was incredible. I didn't want him to think I was useless, but a voice in my head was telling me over and over I couldn't do it. Sure enough, I kept getting it for a couple of strides and then losing it again.

It was so frustrating, but every other day Carl would put me back on Pro-Set and encourage me to have a go. I can't remember how many attempts it took me, but when I did eventually get it I was straight on the phone. 'Mum, you'll never guess what I've just done!'

The whole of those ten days I spent trying to absorb everything I could from watching Carl. If I had any spare time I'd go and listen to him teaching other riders and sit there trying to take in as much information as possible so I could put it into practice in my own riding. Every second I felt like I was totally living my dream, but I also knew it was a dream that was going to come to an end: as soon as Caroline came back from her holiday, Carl would be sending me home.

Actually, it was Spenny who I was expecting to send me off: he was generally the one responsible for keeping people in line. Carl has never enjoyed confrontation, and maybe that's partly why things happened like they did, because it got to day eleven, Caroline came back, and everything pretty much carried on as before. There was no letter, no sit-down formal meeting, no discussion

of pay – to this day Carl has never paid me a wage. It just slowly dawned on me that Dez and I were staying put. Since I'd been working for Carl, I'd been living with Lucy in Anne Seifert-Cohn's house. We had our own bedrooms and a bathroom, and in the evenings Lucy and I would go down to Anne's kitchen and cook dinner together. I'll never forget that house because it used to be absolutely freezing: when you've been working outside all day all you want is to come in to somewhere warm and Anne never put the heating on. After a bit Lucy and I decided we were going to get our own little electric heaters, which we hid under our beds during the day so Anne wouldn't see them. We'd get them out each evening and stick them on full blast, have a shower, then literally sit in front of them, holding our towels open to try and warm up. We knew we were being naughty and always worried in case Anne came in and wanted to know why it was so hot, so eventually we decided we'd just have to lie and say we'd had both of our hairdryers going. Seriously, I think it would have killed Anne if she'd known how much of her electricity we were actually burning.

Lucy was more experienced than I was, so if I didn't understand something I could ask her questions, but the two of us were friends as well as colleagues. When you work and live with someone it can be difficult, but it never felt like that with Lucy: we cooked together, ate together, shopped together, did practically everything together. We also used to go out drinking together in Cheltenham, but at the time Lucy liked a bit of a party whereas I was mostly just exhausted. After a day's work I'd get back to my room and want to do nothing except lie on my bed and chill out, whereas Lucy would go out every Wednesday and on Friday and Saturday too. I'd struggle to get through the day even if I'd had a

good night's sleep, but Lucy could go out and be bright as a button next morning. Sometimes it'd get to around midday and she'd suddenly go a bit green, but it never got in the way of her work, and if Carl or anyone else came over she'd be absolutely perfect again.

Because I was so close to my mum, I don't think Judy thought I'd last away from home. I always wanted to go back to visit at weekends and on my days off, but it was probably worse for Mum than it was for me: she's quite an emotional person, and there'd be tears rolling down her face when I left. What was nice for me was that if I was missing people at home or had had a bad day, I could always go and sit with Dez for comfort. It was so cool having him with me again instead of at a livery yard: in the mornings I could wake up and go and see him, or go and check on him in the evening and have night cuddles.

Being at Carl's was a bit like walking into a sweet shop for me: I'd never seen so many nice horses in one yard. As well as Pro-Set, there were Lecantos, TMovistar and Dolendo, who were all Grand Prix horses, then lots of other youngsters like Uthopia. There was also the horse that had wowed me so much at the National Championships: Valegro.

I'd seen him once more since that day, when I'd come up to Carl's with Mum and Dez for a lesson. Lucy was cantering him round the outdoor school, and they went down the long side in about four strides, Valegro's stride was so massive. At that point I already knew Lucy slightly from riding at the same shows, and so when she'd finished I went over and said, 'Does that feel as amazing as it looks?' She didn't need to think twice.

All of Carl's young horses were given fruit and vegetable stable names, and getting Blueberry – as Valegro was known – ready for Carl or Lucy to ride was all

part of a normal day. There was no question of me riding him as I was only a working pupil and the new girl, but I'd be getting him in and out from the field, tacking him up, brushing him, mucking him out and, the most important job of all if you were Blueberry, feeding him.

Food was always his top priority. From day one, unless you had treats for him, he wasn't interested. I swear it's why I get on so well with him: we can both be bribed by food. Blueberry would eat anything – sugar, carrots, apples, bananas, bread – and when you put him out in the field he was like a Hoover. He'd have a buck and a kick and then his head would be straight down and he'd eat and eat and eat and eat. If you saw him come up to draw breath, you were lucky.

If you didn't have anything for him, on the other hand, he could be a bit unsociable. Even having his rug put on, he'd put his ears back. I'd been used to Dez, who was a real people person: you'd be mucking Dez out and he'd be all over you, nuzzling your pockets to find out if you'd got any treats and banging the stable door to get you back if you walked away. For years I tried and tried to make Blueberry more cuddly and kissy like Dez, but he was just never that sort of horse. You'd give him a hug and he'd give you a 'Please don't do that' kind of look. He always knew what he wanted, Blueberry, and that was his own personal space. However, when I arrived at Carl's yard in January 2007, he himself was unwanted.

Blueberry's story had begun on 5 July 2002 when he was born on Burgh Haamstede, an island in the Netherlands. His breeders, Maartje and Joop Hanse, decided to call him 'Vainqueurfleur', which was a combination of his mother's name, Maifleur, and '*vainquer*', which is French for victor. Valegro's sire was the black

dressage stallion Negro, and it was from Negro that Valegro got his stockiness and short, strong legs.

Vainqueurfleur became Valegro when he was sold as a colt to Gertjan van Olst, Negro's owner. Gertjan's wife, Anne, was an international rider and sometimes trained with Carl, and while Carl was visiting Holland in 2005, Anne took him to see the KWPN stallion show and grading. One young horse particularly caught Carl's eye, and that turned out to be Valegro – even then, as Carl says, he had 'the head of a duchess and the bottom of a cook'. But although he obviously had massive power in his hindquarters, it seemed at the time that Valegro was never going to be big and special enough to keep as a stallion for breeding. He was gelded, and because he wasn't expensive, Carl decided to buy him.

Back in Gloucestershire, Carl sent Valegro to his friend Sandra Biddlecombe – the same Sandra Biddlecombe from whom Mum and I had bought René – to be broken. Sandra's farm is a short drive from Carl's, and she had Valegro with her until the summer before I came to the yard.

Valegro's career had got off to a winning start with the Four-Year-Old Championship, and he'd also won the 2006 Badminton Young Dressage Horse of the Future title, but nobody knew what would happen next. He was small and squat, just over sixteen hands, so for Carl – who is well over six foot – he was far from ideal. His canter was also so massive it hurt Carl's back, which was already bad, while his other paces were pretty normal: to begin with, it was only in canter that Blueberry looked like such an amazing horse.

Even before I arrived Carl had already tried to sell him twice, once to a friend, Suzanne Davies, and once back to the Van Olsts. Neither had worked out: Suzanne had got a tax bill she wasn't expecting and couldn't

afford to go through with the sale, and the Van Olsts told Carl he should really keep Blueberry as they thought he was going to turn out to be good.

Carl decided to take their advice for the time being, but because he found Blueberry uncomfortable to ride, he let Lucy have the ride on him. Lucy, is tiny though – only 5’2” – and Blueberry was starting to get too strong for her.

One day, a month or two after I arrived at Carl’s, Lucy and I were having a lesson with him. Blueberry was pulling Lucy around like a rag doll and as I’m taller than her at 5’ 6”, Carl told us to swap: Lucy got on the horse I was riding, and I got on Blueberry.

From that first moment I loved him, absolutely loved him. He was fiery, he was sensitive, he was expressive, he was powerful – everything I’d always wanted in a horse, he was. It felt like he was the missing piece I had been looking for. You know when you get on a horse whether you like it or you don’t, but Blueberry gave me a feeling I’d never experienced before: there was such a strong connection between us straight away. Even his shape was part of it. When you sit on Blueberry you really feel like you’re part of him because he’s so solid and built like a barrel – your legs wrap right the way round. You’ve got a good length of neck in front of you, but behind you you’ve got hind legs pounding like pistons, almost too much for the front end to cope with. The power was like nothing I’d ever felt in my life: when I asked for canter it felt as if we were going to take off. Some horses canter and just cover the ground, but with Blueberry you were actually leaving the floor, the moment of suspension was so long. The only thing I can compare it to is a rollercoaster: it gave me that same thrill in the pit of my stomach, the buzz of going so fast it was almost like losing control.

Even then, I could feel how much I could achieve with him: this was my perfect dance partner. But when I first started riding Valegro the real problem wasn't so much his lack of size or his unruliness as his head shaking, and it was so serious that Carl was beginning to think he might not even have a career.

Nobody really knows what causes head shaking, or how to cure it. Carl had tried all sorts of medicines, had all sorts of specialists out and had even thought about having Blueberry operated on, but what it seemed to come down to was that he was so sensitive to everything. Nothing could touch Blueberry's skin: metal buckles would sometimes give him a rash so we'd have to make sure there was a cloth over them to protect him. In the summer he'd get hay fever and his eyes would start running; even extra-strong mints would make his nose run. He'd eat the mint, which he loved, but then he'd get stressed because his nose would run and tickle his face, and that would set his head shaking off. Flies had the same effect: if one even slightly touched his face or nose he'd strike out with his leg or shake his head violently.

I was always trying to pick up on every little thing that might trigger it, because you'd be with him and he'd be trying to bang his head or rub his face with his legs or drag his nose up the walls. It was so bad that Carl had even tried radionics, which is a form of complementary therapy. Horse people sometimes call radionics 'the black box', because you give a sample of your horse's hair to a radionics practitioner, who takes it away and puts in a black, box-like machine. The idea is that they then use 'radionic therapy' to perform a kind of energy healing – you never actually see them do it and your horse doesn't have to be present, you just pay your £20 a month and the problem is meant to get better.

Carl is not at all the sort of person who believes in that kind of thing and many people think it's a myth, but there did seem to be some change in Blueberry after we started him on it so Carl decided to keep it going. With time, we found out that putting Blueberry in a double bridle helped too. Normally, you put a double bridle on a horse when they're six, coming seven, because until then their teeth are changing; it's also important that you can still get them listening and responding in just a snaffle. Blueberry was five and a half, but the curb chain definitely seemed to make a difference: it lies on an acupuncture pressure point, and although straightforward acupuncture hadn't worked for Blueberry, with the curb chain on he did seem to be more relaxed. What's more, it gave me more control over him, which in turn made him less nervous – Blueberry was the kind of horse who, if he didn't feel like his rider was in charge, would start to worry.

Even with all his problems I could feel the talent in him, and Carl knew it was there too. But in 2007 he had other horses to concentrate on and it didn't seem like Blueberry was going to be the one for him. Spencer didn't get on with Blueberry either, and even though I had such a good connection with him, I felt I couldn't come out and say how special I thought he was – the only way I could persuade Carl he was worth keeping was for me to actually show it. Which is when fate stepped in again. In March, Carl was due to be away in Spain for three weeks competing on what's known as the 'Sunshine Tour'. It would be three weeks when I could focus on working with Blueberry and, I hoped, prove just how good he was.