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Doug Leatherdale's Legacy Runs Deep And Wide

His imprint on the sport—and many other causes—goes far beyond the exceptional horses he leaves behind.

BY KARIN WINEGAR

They're known in Europe, Canada and the United States for their fine warmblood horses, yet Doug and Louise Leatherdale of Leatherdale Farms in Medina, Minn., are equally celebrated for their generosity to music, art, veterinary medicine, international relations, civic well being, human rights and higher education.

When Doug passed away last December, their young horses were on an unprecedented roll in U.S. regional and national dressage; their Germany-



based stallions had won elite status that established them at the top of their breeds, and their mature geldings and mares were ranked among the most successful in North American dressage.

What this former Fortune 500 CEO leaves, according to those who know Doug, isn't just what he and Louise and their team achieved, but how they attained it and the effect it will have on the sport.

"I had the pleasure of working with some of their young horses that competed last summer at the Markel/USEF Young Horse Dressage National Championships at Lamplight Farm in Illinois," said Christine Traurig, U.S. dressage young horse coach and a member of the U.S. dressage team at the Sydney Olympic Games.

"Doug and Louise have been unbelievable in their standard in the sport, their love for the horses, and their interest in the sport," said Traurig. "They are so loyal to their people and so devoted to their horses. They have always left the decision-making to their sponsored riders and are great supporters of their careers."

Doug's legacy was highly visible at the American Hanoverian Society's annual convention in January 2016. When the AHS recognized the top young Hanoverians in dressage, for the 4-, 5- and 6-year-old divisions, four of those six horses were Leatherdale homebreds. The USEF 4-year-old winner was Hannigan L, and Dublin L was tied for reserve. The FEI 6-year-old champion was Fighting Chance L, and reserve was Fleur de Lis L.

"Doug had a good knowledge of conformation, great pedigree knowledge, and was smart enough to surround himself with advisors who led to success," said AHS executive director Hugh Bellis-Jones. "We expect to see Leatherdale horses on the national and international stage for years."

Bellis-Jones added that the Leatherdales focused on quality rather than quantity. "In the 16 years

The late Doug Leatherdale and his wife Louise shared a passion for horses. With Doug's leadership skills and Louise's interest in breeding, they became a force in the world of North American sport horses. LAURIE SCHNEIDER PHOTO

Leatherdale Farms bred Hanoverian horses registered with AHS [1996 to 2012], they produced only 34 foals," he said. "The percentage of those horses known at the national level, however, is quite remarkable. The older horse most identified with the legacy is Devon L, a Grand Prix competitor born in 2000 at their farm and shown by Diane Creech in both Canada and the United States."

The Right Riders

Peak capability is the hallmark of the Leatherdale program in riders and trainers as well: Their team has included the best in the business including Guenter Seidel, Anne Kursinski, Helen Langehanenberg, Creech, Sue Blinks, Klaus Balkenhol, Jonny Hilberath and Lars Petersen.

High honors have followed the Leatherdales, including the title of Dressage Canada's Owner of the Year in 2006, Canadian team silver at the 2007 Pan American Games (with Creech and their Wiona), and first place at the 2013 \$20,000 Royal Invitational Dressage Cup at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto (with Creech and Devon L). Doug is also the first (and to date the only) non-German to be honored with the Golden Badge of the Hanoverian Verband, which he received in 2011—to their complete surprise—at the annual breeders' meeting in Verden, Germany.

"I believe the Leatherdale horses will continue to be successful in many countries," said Werner Schade, breeding and business manager of the Hanoverian Verband. "Louise and Doug have always placed great emphasis on supporting their horses' sportive career. For education and training, the horses were put in very good and experienced hands to offer the horses a maximum possible promotion to the top class."

One of several to watch, he added, is Diana C (Damsey—Belinda, Brentano II), currently being ridden by Creech.

"She is one of the best young dressage horses in North America. She has extraordinary potential," said Schade.

From Countryside To CEO

Doug was born in the Canadian prairie village of Morden, Manitoba, in 1936. He and his sister Sharon grew up on the family farm in the era before mechanization and preceding rural electricity.

He learned to read by lantern light, and at 5 he was launched into the third grade in the local one-room school. He rode bareback everywhere, drove draft horses and mules, played a mean game of baseball on teams composed of his many cousins, and showed his American Saddlebred mare.

At United College (now the University of Winnipeg) he also became active in Canadian politics. When he graduated in 1957, his first job was as securities analyst at Great-West Assurance. After a few years, his boss told him to choose between a burgeoning political career and a business career. By that time Doug had a wife and children to support, so he chose the latter.

A pension investment position with the Lutheran Church in America attracted him to Minneapolis in 1968. Four years later he joined The St. Paul Companies, an insurance firm predating the state itself, as vice president of an investment management division and shortly became chief investment officer.

Doug purchased a small farm in Medina, a horsey suburb west of Minneapolis, where he began building a band of Hanoverian mares. He fed horses before he commuted to work, mowed pastures on weekends, and did nightly stall checks.

Health management organizations were just appearing, and he

“We expect to see Leatherdale horses on the national and international stage for years.”

—HUGH BELLIS-JONES

After the loss of His Highness in 2007, the Leatherdales purchased Damsey, who was awarded the elite title FRH from the Hanoverian Verband and would sire some of their top horses, including Devon L.

KIKI BEELITZ PHOTO



was an early member of the board of Physicians Health Partners, which later became UnitedHealth Group.

He also became a supporter of the Minnesota Orchestra, advising the board on innovative financing for a new hall and later, as a board member and board president, he was key in hiring famed Finnish conductor Osmo Vänskä as music director.

Doug had been a divorced single parent of a daughter and a son for almost a decade when he married Louise Benson in 1988. She brought two teenage sons to the family. An early employee of PHP, Louise had been raised in a family that moved frequently, and the constants in her life were her talent for theater and music, teaching, and a love for animals.

Louise had no experience with horses when, on their third date, Doug took her to his farm to check on a pregnant mare. Louise was smitten and set about learning everything she could about the world of Hanoverians.

"I always felt that we were a partnership right from the beginning: corporately, horse-wise, children-wise," said Louise.

Doug rose to UnitedHealth COO the following year and then CEO in 1990.

His Highness

A dressage course in Verden in 1993 convinced the couple to switch their emphasis from jumpers to dressage. In addition to foaling and mare care, Louise became an expert at bloodlines as they added to the herd, including a number of Weltmeyer mares from Canadian, American and German farms.

Their first stallion was the champion of the 2002 licensing in Verden. They purchased His Highness (Hohenstein—Daireen, Donnerhall) for the record price of 515,000 euros and put him in training with Jens and Susanne Meyer of Hengststation Jens Meyer in Dorum, Germany.

"He was the best horse we had ever seen," said Doug.

"Highness" was champion at his stallion performance test in Prussendorf

Devon L and Diane Creech have competed with success at the Grand Prix level in CDIs in the United States and Canada. LISA SLADE PHOTO

in 2003 and champion 5-year-old stallion at the 2005 Danish licensing. Balkenhol asked to train the young stallion and toured Europe presenting training demonstrations. Highness competed twice in the prestigious Bundeschampionat.

"Highness was a very ambitious horse, very good in his character, very good in his basic gaits, and he was very, very handsome," said Balkenhol. "He had everything I was looking for in a sport horse, athleticism and really good character, and he gave these to his foals. Even though he was so very young, he had all the possibilities, the collection and piaffe and passage."

Highness died in 2007 after he fractured a leg in a freak accident at the stallion station. The Leatherdales and Meyers were devastated, but it didn't stop them from continuing their breeding operation.

They acquired select warmblood stallions such as Damsey (Dressage Royal—Ria Grande, Ritual), who reached the top 1 percent of German dressage sires with 159 points on his breeding evaluation.

In 2013 Damsey was awarded the elite title FRH from the Hanoverian Verband. The next month at Neumunster, noted Trakehner breeder Prince Donatus von Hessen bestowed the title of elite stallion on their stallion Herzensdieb (Tambour—Herzensfreude, Tivano).

"Doug and Louise are real horse-people," said Balkenhol. "Not only that, they are real horse lovers. In their choice of good horses and with the support of Jens and Susanne, they have built a collection of wonderful horses."

Wherever his interests led, Doug gravitated to leadership positions. As director of the AHS, he reshaped the organization to best business principles. In 2001, he became AHS president, a position he held until 2010, and in 2003, AHS became a full voting member of the World Breeding Federation for Sport Horses, the first American studbook to gain admittance.

Beyond Breeding

While deeply involved with horses, Doug also opened St. Paul offices in

18 countries from London to South Africa to Asia, revamping personnel policies to ban discrimination based on race, gender or sexual orientation. The company became one of the first to include a day care center, a feature of the new expanded headquarters in 1994.

"I had been a single parent for a long time and knew how difficult it is, especially for mothers," he said.

Doug also formed Capital City Partnership with corporate leaders from both Twin Cities to revive downtown St. Paul. He and St. Paul Mayor (and later Senator) Norm Coleman obtained an NHL franchise that brought the Minnesota Wild hockey team to the city.

Doug was the first person in his family to attend high school, and he was acutely aware of the benefits of education. He flew South African president Nelson Mandela to Minneapolis to star in fundraiser for African-American students. He and Louise endowed scholarships at the University of Winnipeg; one for students to study abroad and

“Doug and Louise are real horsepeople.”

—KLAUS BALKENHOL

another to ensure tuition for farm kids.

Former Vice President Walter Mondale, who served on the UnitedHealth Group board with Doug, described him as someone “who sees the larger picture” and “a visionary who sees tomorrow. He’s inspirational.”

That vision led Doug to consider the future of his alma mater. Along with other significant Canadians, he created the first foundation at the University of Winnipeg, modeled on the foundation he served at the University of Minnesota.

Jamshed Merchant, Canadian consul general in Minneapolis,

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described Doug: "His giving back to the community exemplifies Canadian traits...not being flashy or ostentatious but spending wisely and having compassion as well."

Doug never became an American citizen, so he was surprised but pleased to be asked to serve as honorary chair of the 2008 Republican National Convention held in St. Paul.

"It's about what's good for the city. I would do it for the Democrats, too, if they asked," he said.

Business travel and horses often intertwined for the couple: A St. Paul Companies subsidiary sponsored the British Olympic equestrian team, so Doug and Louise attended Olympics Games in Seoul (where they talked horses with Princess Anne), Barcelona, Sydney and Atlanta and the 2007 Pan Am Games in Rio de Janeiro (where they talked horses with Capt. Mark Phillips).



Doug and Louise Leatherdale's influence extended far beyond the world of sport horses, and some of their causes included the Minnesota Orchestra, the University of Winnipeg, the University of Minnesota Leatherdale Equine Center and many more.
NOAH WOLF PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

▶ **Pedigrees Of Leatherdale Horses Mentioned**

Damsey

(Dressage Royal—Ria Grande, Ritual)

Devon L

(De Niro—Wibranda, Wolkenstein II)

Diana C

(Damsey—Belinda, Brentano II)

Dublin L

(Damsey—Wibranda, Wolkenstein II)

Fighting Chance L

(First Dance—Helia, Hohenstein)

Fleur de Lis L

(First Dance—De la Rosa, De Niro)

Hannigan L

(Herzensdieb—Pia Colado, Pik L)

His Highness

(Hohenstein—Daireen, Donnerhall)

Fairbanks

(Flemming—Identify, Inselfürst)

First Dance

(Florestan I—Dorina, Donnerhall)

Hampton

(His Highness—SPS Red Chili, Rotspon)

Herzensdieb

(Tambour—Herzensfreude, Tivano)

Rafferty L

(Rob Roy—Escora, Escudo I)

Whenever he was home, Doug did nightly stall checks and mowed the pastures on one of his fleet of John Deeres, his pipe in his mouth and a tweed cap on his head.

The loss of one of their broodmares inspired Louise to take an active role in improving equine veterinary services at the University of Minnesota. First she ensured improvements in the recovery rooms at the old equine facility. And not long after that, the couple provided primary funding for the University of Minnesota Leatherdale Equine Center, which opened in 2007 in St. Paul and provides state-of-the-art care in a 60,000 square foot facility with comprehensive research, diagnosis and treatment.

"The legacy Doug and Louise have provided is not the building," said Dr. Stephanie Valberg, DVM, Ph.D., who served as UMEC director. "It is that they started this program that enables us to do what we do."

Getting things done, whether with horses or people, corporations or communities, seemed to fuel Doug.

So it was Doug who privately negotiated to bring Osmo Vänskä back to the Minnesota Orchestra after a lengthy musicians' strike. And he was key in handling the resolution of a stock backdating scandal brought on by a UnitedHealth Group board member.

"When something needed to be done and needed leadership, Doug would do it," said UnitedHealth Group chairman Rich Burke. "He did that for all those years, tactfully and kindly, with few words."

This did not go unnoticed. In the summer of 2015 Doug and Louise were attending a gathering at the Canadian consul's home where the Queen's representative, David Johnston, governor general of Canada, presented them with a medal for contributions to education, sport, corporate giving, community service and the arts in both countries and for horses for the Canadian and American Olympic teams. "I am just so thrilled," said Doug, who, as usual, had not expected the honor. "I don't even know anyone else who has gotten this."

That Leatherdale foresight continues to have positive consequences. Later that year, Doug and Louise contributed \$2 million to the International Polar Bear Research Centre in Winnipeg, which was renamed in their honor. They made additional gifts to expand buildings and

(From left) Doug and Louise Leatherdale's partnership with Susanne and Jens Meyer of Hengststation Jens Meyer in Germany helped them produce top horses as well as work with top riders. LAURIE SCHNEIDER PHOTO



initiatives at the University of Winnipeg and to showcase the Winnipeg Art Gallery's unique collection of Inuit art. And their gift of \$5 million ensures the future of the Minnesota Orchestra's tours, recordings and special programs.

In January 2016, not long after Doug passed away, Leatherdale Farms brought four stallions—Fairbanks, First Dance, Hampton and Herzensdieb—from Germany to stand at Bridlewood Farm in Union, Ky, a joint venture with owner Dr. Barbara Schmidt, AHS vice president, and her husband Fred Ablett.

"This is a tremendous opportunity for warmblood breeders in this country," said Bellis-Jones. "We are fortunate that they were able to arrange for exceptional stallions to be available to breeders in North America. All bring new bloodlines of top quality. It is terribly positive, exciting, and I expect many more accolades in the coming years for them and their offspring."

"My impression is Louise will carry on because she loves horses, and sport horses are such a big part of their lives," said Traurig, "and that is also what Doug would have wanted. The passion she has for the horses will in some ways keep Doug still by her side." ●



Dublin L, by Damsey, is an up-and-coming star currently competing in the FEI Young Horse classes with Mike Suchanek. JASMINE WALLACE PHOTO