



## **Dreams Are Coming True For Luis Denizard**

by Elisabeth Prouty-Gilbride

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*After putting the Pan Am Games on his résumé, this rider is on a roll.*

Luis Denizard isn't afraid to dream big or risk everything to pursue his goals.

Dressage was never an easy choice for this Puerto Rican rider, born in the Bronx, N.Y., but he steadily worked his way up the levels until he represented his nation in international competition, and he's not finished yet.

As a child, Denizard only dreamed of riding horses because he lived in a city. But when he was 12, his family moved to Jamaica Plain, Mass., and their new home was located across the street from Arby's Stables, a popular barn in the area. "I was always fascinated with horses. It was a bizarre coincidence that within Boston I moved to an area where there was a horse stable across the street, so the opportunity came around," he said. "I was enticed to pick up a broom, and they let me ride a horse, and that was the beginning of it."

He began by riding for pleasure and going for an occasional trail ride. When a trainer moved into the barn, Denizard started riding in the hunt seat program. He continued with hunt seat until he enrolled at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

"I went to the University of Massachusetts to be a veterinarian. I realized how difficult that was to accomplish, and I realized there was an equine studies specialty, so I switched over to that," said Denizard.

At UMass, he discovered dressage and eventing and fell in love with both disciplines.

"As with most young people I wanted to jump higher and go faster," he admitted. "We did dressage in the flat portion of the lessons. You always thought of it as, 'Let's hurry up and get this over so we can jump.' But then I was given a special project horse—a horse that no one else seemed to get along with—by Sandy Osborn. She said he needed someone to take him on, ride him, understand him and get him going.

"I started riding the horse, and we hit it off quite well," Denizard continued. "Sandy would check in on us and give us a lesson to make sure we were on the right track. That was the first horse I was able to get through on the bit. Sandy asked, 'How does that feel?' I was at a complete loss for words. That started the process of me switching over to dressage."

The excellent instruction from teachers like Osborn, Ruth Sarkunas and Gerd Reuter only spurred Denizard to learn more.

"I realized that in order to get a good job straight out of college, I had to get some good names behind me, so I went on to apprentice in Germany," said Denizard. He spent six months in Germany working for Reuter.

"I got to see so many riders ride that it really helped me in developing my eye," he said. "It also gave me time in the saddle, where, up until that point, not too many places gave me time to be in the saddle learning."

### **Making A Living**

After returning from his internship, Denizard earned his bachelor's degree in 1990 and went on to work at Huntington Farm in Vermont for a brief period of time before moving to Michigan, where he worked at Black Forest Hall in Harbor Springs.

There he began teaching international dressage rider Courtney King-Dye, who was only 12 at the time.

"Lou was an extremely important role model for me growing up, possibly the most important one for me," said King-Dye. "I felt very alone in my pursuit of riding, and Lou was a constant source of support. He was the best role model a young person could have, an extremely hard worker, disciplined, dignified, with great ethics with people and the horses.

"He was a firm trainer in a way that showed he cared and was invested in you," she added. "Despite being extremely serious about the horses and his job, he was always fun and had a great sense of humor. He took me under his wing and gave me a fantastic start both in the basics of dressage and in being a good honest ethical human being."

The life of a horse professional is never easy, and Denizard continued to look for jobs that would grow his reputation and allow him to ride more. He went from Black Forest Hall to the Culver Academy in Indiana where he was in charge of herd management.

Then he moved back to New England to take the position as Director of Riding at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, R.I. Denizard taught the equine studies program and coached the riding teams.

"I'd pretty much gone the academic route to make sure my family had food on the table," said Denizard. "My daughter, Raquel, was a baby. I was trying to make our lives as comfortable as possible. I stayed in the academic world because there was security there and salary."

But he still wanted more, so after five years at Johnson & Wales, Denizard decided to branch away from teaching at other stables and focus more on riding and competing.

"I saw that I was giving so much to the kids, and I loved that, but my riding was suffering," he said. "As their educations developed, my education had stopped. I spent long days teaching and coaching teams. I decided it was time to be selfish and take care of me."

Denizard founded Delante Stables in 1998. He started small, training only four horses, two of which were his own.

"I knew this was what I wanted to do," he said. "I knew that no matter what the hardships were, that I was going to give it my best, and I've had no regrets. There are still occasional issues, but in the end I'm doing what I love."

Denizard slowly built his client base through hard work and word-of-mouth.

"Lou Denizard is the consummate professional. He remains calm, cool and collected in most situations and keeps the rider that way too," said student Celeste Ryfa. "There isn't any pressure to compete but only to do your very best. If you do want to compete, he's right there getting you ready.

"I wish I had found Lou sooner," she continued. "He got my horse and I to third level, a feat I didn't think possible. Lou has made a tremendous difference in both of us, all for the best. He helped us to become a real partnership and brought the fun back into riding for me. He is one of the truest horsemen I know, humble, hard working, fair and honest as the day is long."

In addition to maintaining a large base of clients, Denizard continued to educate himself. He earned the Tri-State Horsemen's Association Trainer of the Year award in 1999 and 2000 and was awarded the 2002 Major Anders Lindgren Scholarship Award. He also received a scholarship from the New England Dressage Association in 2004 so he could travel to the Netherlands and train with professionals like Henk and Wilma van Bergen, Robert Zandvoort, Suzy Dunkley-Zandvoort and David Hunt.

### **Into The International Spotlight**

It wasn't until 2007 that all his hard work really started to pay off. Denizard earned a spot as an individual at the Pan American Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, aboard Nalando.

Denizard found the Dutch Warmblood (Caritas—Halanta) in the Netherlands for Donna and Lee Dunbar in 2005 as a 10-year-old. A year later Nalando and Denizard won the U.S. Dressage Federation Region 8 Intermediaire I Championship.

Denizard qualified Nalando for the Pan Am Games while competing in Florida. To qualify, the pair had to fulfill Fédération Equestre Internationale requirements, which meant earning at least two scores of 64 percent in a CDI and receiving these scores from at least one O-rated judge. Denizard didn't earn a medal in the Pan Am Games, but he did finish in 17th place in the Intermediaire I.

"The Pan Am Games were a wonderful experience," said Denizard. "In the beginning you don't know what you're up against as far as traveling, and it's almost like being completely out of control of your own life and your horse's life for the time it takes to get there. Then suddenly you're reunited, and you have this amazing experience being amongst peers and other trainers from all over the world. There's a bonding that basically occurs. You become friends for life."

The Pan Am Games gave Denizard a taste of international competition and made him eager to try for his next goal: the 2008 Olympic Games.

But Nalando contracted pneumonia upon returning from Brazil and needed time off to recuperate. That's when Denizard's sterling reputation and warm personality gave him just the leg-up he needed. Paige Finnegan offered him her Grand Prix horse Karola 1, a 13-year-old Holsteiner mare (Leandro—Faszination).

"It most certainly wasn't a decision I made off the cuff," said Finnegan. "Contracts and legalities pushed aside, I couldn't help but view this situation as a tremendous opportunity for all involved. Puerto Rico has yet to compete in the dressage arena at the Olympics. In my opinion, Karola 1 has what it takes mentally and physically to go forward in this pursuit. And of course, Lou as well."

"When I heard that Paige was giving him this opportunity, my eyes immediately welled up with tears," said King-Dye. "I always felt that Lou was one of those people who shows how this horse industry is so tough. So much depends on the luck of finding the right situation at the right time. He has always had a ton of talent, works his tail off, treats people and horses well. He has all the components that should have brought him to the top long ago, but he never got the opportunity because he never had a chance with a good enough horse that stayed sound and healthy."

Denizard, 42, knew it would be tough to gain his qualifications for the Olympics aboard Karola, since he only started riding her in January of 2008. Unfortunately, he didn't end up receiving the certificate of eligibility that he needed.

"[Trying to qualify for the Olympics] was a big mountain to take on," he said. "Most of the international judges didn't know who I was. It was my first year of Grand Prix, and on top of that I had the ambition of trying to make the Olympics. I learned a lot. I learned to not take the results personally, just keep going and develop from there."

And while Denizard had to give Karola back to Finnegan, the education he received from riding her gave him the skills he needed to move Nalando to the next level.

"People talk a lot about the transition from the small tour to Grand Prix, the collection changes. I got to experience what that really means, the amount of go and come back and the adjustability a horse needs at the Grand Prix in order to fit in all those exercises. I'm spending the time bringing Nalando along now, and I will hopefully present him at Grand Prix over the winter," he said.

To make that goal happen more quickly, Denizard relocated from Rhode Island to Florida in October.

"I think the cold was starting to get to me," he admitted. "My loyal folks back in New England want me to come back and do clinics, so I will keep in touch with them. But I'm basically starting over looking for new clients and horses to ride."

## **Making Time To Give Back**

Luis Denizard wouldn't have become an international level dressage rider without a lot of help along the way, and as his career took off, he found himself looking for a way to give back to the equestrian community.

Then he learned about Horses For Heroes, a program organized by the North American Riding For The Handicapped Association that helps wounded veterans through equine assisted activities and therapies.

“I believe horses saved me from inner city life and gave me a way out that I appreciate,” said Denizard. “I know what horses did for me, and I love the idea of what they can do for these poor soldiers who came back with devastating injuries and post-traumatic stress syndrome.”

The patriotism of Horses For Heroes particularly appealed to Denizard.

“Everybody has started to think of me as a foreign rider,” he said. “Puerto Rico has Olympic sovereignty, but it’s a commonwealth of the United States, and the one thing I always will be is American. We send our Puerto Rican soldiers as much as our American soldiers to go and defend our theories and our ideas in wars.”

Denizard decided to organize a silent auction at the Northeast Regional Adult Amateur Dressage Championships in Mystic, Conn., Oct. 18-19, to raise money for Horses For Heroes. He asked friends and family to donate anything that might raise money including lessons from Courtney King-Dye and other New England trainers, horse transport from Phil Silva at Ten Broeck Farm, a \$500 trailer service from Yered Trailers and much more. The auction raised \$3,000 for the Horses For Heroes program.

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