



AN ODE to the

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Equine Athlete

Like many of my fellow horse girls, I fancy myself something of an athlete (after all, #itsasport). Growing up, I played basketball and volleyball, though in hindsight, that might have been more on account of my small-town upbringing (read: not enough players to fill a team and not much else to do) rather than any profound physical prowess. These days, I owe much of my athletic success to my dressage dance partner, Ethel, my 13-year-old warmblood mare.

Ethel is 16.2 hands of bay, take-no-bullshit glory. Her pedigree is impressive: she's the granddaughter of Olympic stallion Idocus and top international sire Diamond Hit. The ultimate mare-ish mare, she's what dressage judges like to call "expressive." She makes all her opinions known (and there are many) with dramatic acts of athleticism: from greeting other horses over the fence with a little levade to evading hard work under saddle with some airs above the ground, just because she can. Ethel's over-the-top personality and presence have earned her a loyal fan club at local shows. And honestly, it's hard not to swoon over her, even when she's being dramatic. As we work our way up to Grand Prix—finessing movements like piaffe, passage and one-tempis—I'm amazed by her on the daily. Sure, I'm along for the ride, but it's clear who the true athlete is.

I, on the other hand, am pretty average height, weight and build. But that's the beauty of horses: they make even the most average-seeming humans above average. Take, for

example, longtime German dressage queen Isabell Werth. By all accounts, she's fairly unassuming at 5'7" and 53 years of age. But in partnership with top mounts like Weihegold and her beloved Bella Rose (again, a mare who gives her everything), she's earned her rightful spot as the winningest Olympic equestrian of all time.

But horses don't need to compete on an international stage to be awe-inducing. We marvel at their magnificence from the moment they're born, springing to their legs within hours of birth. We witness their power as they run, buck and play out in the pasture (while we simultaneously pray they don't hurt themselves). And we feel that singular sensation anytime we're astride an equine partner: horses give us wings. Humans' fascination with these noble beasts is as old as time; even non-equestrians can't help but admire them. After all, what's more mesmerizing than a 1,200-pound flight animal who's willing to jump oxers, run barrels, piaffe on the spot and carry us along for the ride? Beyond modern-day disciplines, they've helped us discover new lands, win battles, escape oppression, plow fields, feed our families and so much more. Simply put, horses allow us to accomplish feats we'd never be able to achieve on our own.

Horses' incredible ability to make us greater than ourselves is also why we treat them like royalty. They give us their athleticism, so we give them our everything—every spare minute, dollar and ounce of energy. We dedicate our lives to them. We arrange our schedules around them, missing out on the many occurrences of everyday life. We adorn our homes with excessive amounts of memorabilia about them (much to the chagrin of our horse husbands and housemates). We flood our social media feeds with sappy memes about them that tug at the heartstrings or poke fun at our chosen way of life.

So to all the horses we've loved—from the ones who taught us the ways of the saddle to the ones who taught us the ways of the world—we say thank you. You let us, if only for a moment, escape our ordinary lives and experience the extraordinary. To Ethel—who is the reason I can claim to be a USDF silver medalist, a dressage rider and indeed an athlete—thank you.