

Hunt Roster Issue - September 28

Horse Of A Lifetime: Leica

September 28, 2007 Issue



Leica may just be Julie McKee's horse of a lifetime, but she's also the most exacerbating, frustrating horse she's ever dealt with.

But McKee has persevered, and after 20 years together she and Leica have hunted with 19 different hunts, shown in the amateur-owner hunters and jumpers and evented to the preliminary level.

In a fitting tribute to the mare's career, she and McKee placed third in the

MFHA Centennial Field Hunter Championship Finals in May.

At 24, Leica was the oldest horse in the field. But in true Leica style, their performance included a few antics. As McKee and Leica stood on the rolling green front lawn of the Westmoreland Davis mansion at Morven Park in Leesburg, Va., on a warm day in May, Leica put on a little sideshow.

"We'd been standing around for hours, and she was hot and sweaty," McKee recalled. "We're standing in the line-up, waiting to go in the ride-off. And she put her head down. I thought she was going to get a bite of grass and thought to myself, 'Poor thing, she's been standing out here forever.'

"But she rolled. She was saying, 'I'm sick of you being on my back—get off!' Then, she wouldn't get up. Everybody was worried because they thought she fell, because she was so sneaky about going down. She snuck her head down like she was going to graze or scratch her nose, and then kerplunk, she's rolling and scratching. Everyone was cracking up."

McKee got Leica back on her feet, regrouped, and proceeded to complete the course for third. "Things like that are pretty funny but frustrating. I can't tell you how many times she's bucked me off in the middle of the hunt field in front of everyone. She always waits until there's an audience," McKee said.

Over the years, McKee has been impressed by the fact that they've lived through

everything together.

“She’s an incredible jumper and an incredible mover,” said McKee. “She’s also incredibly smart, which is part of the problem. But I’m just as stubborn and hardheaded as she is. A lot of people say we’re two peas in a pod.”

There Was A Hole Somewhere

Now 24, Leica, a Hanoverian by Linberg, has mellowed somewhat, but there’s no doubt as to who rules the roost at McKee’s Foxview Farm in Grantville, Ga.

“She’s a prima donna. Everybody calls her the queen,” McKee said. “We’re not very formal around here, and we just open the gate and everybody walks to their stalls. She’ll stop and make sure everybody is behind her, and then she’ll come through the gate. If anyone tries to pass her, she kicks them. Whenever I have any sassy youngsters, I tell them it’s time to go out with the queen, and she’ll teach them some manners.”

The battle of wills between Leica and McKee began in 1987, when a friend talked McKee into taking a chance and buying a green 4-year-old mare. Imported as a 2-year-old from Germany, Leica had started a dressage career but quickly made her distaste for the little white ring known.

Their first encounter wasn’t promising, as McKee discovered a nasty little habit. “We knew she had a hole in her somewhere, but she passed the prepurchase with flying colors. But we soon discovered that her hole was rearing, the little darling,” she said.

“Not only did she rear, but she’d go up and stand there until you fell off. You could not flip her over backwards, she would just run backwards on her hind legs,” McKee added laughing.

McKee knew she had to get Leica going forward. “I went out in the pasture to try and teach her to gallop. She squatted, took off with all four feet in the air, and took off rodeo bucking across the field. And she came back and did it six more times,” she said.

“We decided to take her hunting, to teach her to go out in a group, thinking that might make her happy. But the field took off at a canter, and she broke into a trot, and then a very slow canter. And then the hilltoppers passed me. After that, I figured, ‘Well, there was no rearing or bucking, and I stayed on, so I guess I’ll just go in.’”

And so began Leica’s hunt career.

“It would take many months of hard work before Leica became trustworthy, but I had a great orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Tom Cadier,” McKee joked. “At the time, she was my only horse, so I just told myself, ‘Suck it up and go.’”

Once, while out hunting, McKee recalled the field jumped a coop and stopped. And since there was an audience, Leica made sure they had some entertainment.

“She jumped the coop and took off rodeo bucking. The field laughed and chanted

'Hang on Julie!' When Leica finally stopped, I had my arms and legs wrapped around her neck," said McKee. "If she'd picked her head up, I could have slid back into the saddle. But the little darling dropped her head and popped her withers, so I did a front flip onto the ground. There I was, flat on my back, looking her in the eye as the field cheered and called for Leica to take a bow."

McKee persevered. "She's the best mover and jumper I'll ever have," she said. "I knew that if I could just get through all the problems, I'd have a really special horse. If my body could withstand the punishment!"

After six years, Leica decided to settle down and play the part. But she never let McKee get bored.

"Every year she had a new trick. One season, her trick was creeping at checks. She'd stop and stand, but before you knew it, you were at the front of the line. The next year, it was snatching the reins out of your hands," she said.

She's A Machine

In 1992, McKee decided to try her hand in the jumper ring, and Leica proved up to the challenge. They competed in the 4' and 4'6" divisions and finished as the 4'6" champion of the Georgia Hunter Jumper Association.

McKee's friend, Kelley Duncan, shared riding duties that fall, after McKee had a hard fall in a jump-off, breaking her scapula.

Then, McKee decided to try eventing Leica. They worked their way up the levels and placed third with the Area III training level team at the 1994 *The Chronicle of the Horse*/USCTA Eastern Adult Team Championships in Tryon, N.C.

McKee recalled one fence in particular from that course.

"There was a bullfinch kind of fence with brush on it, and if you left from where you should leave, it was maximum height for training level," she said. "But if you got close to it, it was like 4'3", with a one-stride to a drop. I was petrified. I'd just moved up to training level. But she galloped through there, never missed a lick, and jumped great. She's a machine."

They moved up to preliminary in 1995, but then McKee "ran out of money," she said. She'd gone through a divorce in 1990, in which she almost lost Leica, and then in 1995 her job at a local bank was eliminated.

"I did everything I could just trying to keep her. The next year and a half were quite lean. Every penny was used to keep Leica in oats—there was no extra money for shows," she said.

But in 1996 things began to look up, as McKee found a job with Dr. and Mrs. Beegle in Newnan, Ga., who needed someone to run their barn and train them to hunt. She and Leica fit right in, and Leica taught Ann Beegle to hunt.

"We all received our colors with the Midland Foxhounds after 1 1/2 seasons of hunting

with them. Leica should have gotten hers too,” McKee said.

In 1998, McKee remarried, and Leica taught her new husband, Mark McKee, to hunt with Midland. The McKees started their own Foxview Farm in 2002, and Leica has continued to teach. Mark began eventing, and Leica carried him to a blue ribbon in his first beginner novice event.

“He was a nervous wreck, jumping up her neck and getting left behind, and you could just hear her saying, ‘Oh my God, would you just hang on?’ Finally, he figured, ‘I’ll just grab mane and drop the reins.’ And she said, ‘Thank you!’ and trucked around and won the event,” McKee said.

She Deserved The Recognition

While Leica’s quick thinking sometimes gets her into trouble, it also makes her a wonderful hunt horse.

“You never pick the reins up. She walks through every crossing and stops and waits on the backside for the person to come through behind her. She’ll walk, trot or canter any fence. People can run into her; she doesn’t care,” McKee said.

“One time, I was on the way to a coop, and I was trying to get her to the center of the jump, and I couldn’t see a distance. I couldn’t get her straight to the fence—she was going to the corner, which was strange,” McKee remembered. “But then, as we left the ground, this idiot passed me over the top of the coop. She knew they were coming, but I had no idea. She kept us safe.

“She’s led the field, she’s whipped-in with professionals and with me, she’s done everything but hunt the hounds. She’s taught numerous people, including my husband, how to jump and how to hunt. Norman Fine came down here to hunt and rode her one day and said, ‘This is such a joy.’ ”

Leica still hunts at least once a week with Bear Creek (Ga.), Shakerag (Ga.) and Midland (Ga.).

“She’s hunted with 19 hunts across the United States and Canada. She’s also been a performance trial judge’s horse. There’s not much in the jumping world that she hasn’t done,” McKee said.

In 2003 and 2004, Leica ably carried huntsman Marc Dradge’s daughters to their Pony Club D ratings. And in 2002, Mark rode her in the Callaway Gardens senior foxhunter point-to-point. She’s also been a calming and instructional influence to many a green horse in their first forays afield.

Leica qualified for the Centennial Finals by winning the Southern District competition, and McKee considers her top ribbon at the finals to be a fitting cap to her career.

“It was huge. I felt she deserved the recognition since she’s a fabulous hunt horse. She’s still hunting, mostly hilltopping, but I won’t be doing much more with her. She’s

semi-retired,” she said.

After two decades together, McKee has enormous appreciation for Leica. “She made me the best rider I’ll ever be. She won’t just give you anything, but if you ask and ask correctly, she’ll give you everything,” she said.

Leica Tidbits

- Leica is “one tough cookie,” said Julie McKee. “She’s 24 now, and she’s never been injected or been fed any supplements.”
- Leica has three foals on the ground. One, now 16, is competing at Intermediaire I dressage with owner Diane Thomas. The other two are 6 and 7 and learning the ropes of hunting with McKee.
- Leica is registered in the main studbook of the Hanoverian, Rheinlander and Holsteiner registries.

Molly Sorge

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