

# Playing The Long Game Pays Off For Kristina Harrison-Antell

By **VIRGINIA DAFFRON**

As Kristina Harrison-Antell, who was part of the gold-medal-winning 2003 Pan American Games U.S. team in the Dominican Republic, progressed in her dressage career, she had an epiphany.

“I realized if I wanted to get anywhere, I needed to put together a string,” she said. That strategy—15 years and countless predawn rides in the making—recently culminated in Harrison-Antell’s CDI Grand Prix victories riding her own Finley, who was imported in 2013 as a just-started 3-year-old.

The Los Angeles-based trainer notched victories in both the Grand Prix freestyle (72.18%) and the Grand Prix (67.48%) at the Del Mar CDI3\*, held April 19-20 in Del Mar, California. Her freestyle win with Finley, a 15-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding (Don Jovi—Vashera Van’t Trinchelhof, Rubels), earned 69 points toward the U.S. Open of Dressage Final, to be held in November in Thermal, California.

Explaining her approach, Harrison-Antell, 53, said, “It’s a numbers game. The idea was to get young ones and train them up and stagger the ages just enough.”

Harrison-Antell now has seven horses in her personal string. She expressed gratitude for several syndicate partners whose support has made the strategy possible, as well as The Dressage Foundation, which has awarded Harrison-Antell two \$25,000 training grants.

“Having a variety of horses at different levels made it so that I could really do right by the horses,” said Harrison-Antell.

Not feeling pressure to stick with a rigid schedule has been key in her journey with Finley, whose big heart and talent came packaged with a terror of other horses, even as a youngster.


“His fearfulness around other horses was huge,” said Harrison-Antell. “It wasn’t a small problem. It was very complicated. I worked with quite a few different professionals that helped me with it.”

While Finley has learned to feel comfortable in his home environment, around the other horses in Harrison-Antell’s string and in his home stable during stints in Wellington, Florida, the warm-up arena remains his biggest challenge.


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"It's always going to be a problem that I manage," she said.

She takes care to avoid letting Finley feel trapped on the rail by another horse passing to the inside. "I've learned I don't have to school everything in my warm-up," she said. "I know what I need to do, and I just try not to put him in any situation where he might lose confidence. It's not worth it."

Another thing that helps is an extra pair of hands. "For all the standing around or going up to the ring, I make sure he has a bodyguard. He'll walk right past another horse if there's a human in between," she explained. "If not, he'll walk past them, but he's nervous."

These days, Finley's bodyguard is often Harrison-Antell's husband of 15 years, Gordon Antell, a film editor. He would love to learn to ride, but Harrison-Antell said, "I don't have anything quiet enough to put him on. He's great at cleaning stalls, doing water buckets and feeding supplements. I always think, 'God, how did I get so lucky?'"

Away from other horses, Finley is surprisingly steady. He's not spooky, Harrison-Antell said, and he enjoys hacking on the bridle path around the property of his home base, The Paddock Riding Club in Los Angeles, and checking out the jumping arenas. On days when she's not having a remote lesson with coach Charlotte Bredahl, Finley is often one of Harrison-Antell's first rides in the early morning before the sun is up, and she said he seems to enjoy the quiet time together with his longtime owner and rider.

For almost two years, Harrison-Antell has worked with Olympic medalist Bredahl, the former youth and development coach for the U.S. Equestrian Federation. Since last year, Bredahl has focused on working solely with her personal coaching clients, a decision which she said had given her "a little bit more time" and the chance to form deeper, ongoing relationships "based on mutual trust and respect" with clients and their horses.

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"I always thought that he was a very talented horse, and I think that more now than ever," said Bredahl of Finley. "The only thing that keeps him from or has kept him from being even better is that he is a bit confused, or what I call quirky." She noted that Harrison-Antell has "tried everything to get him over that."

Finley's highlights, Bredahl said, include his pirouettes, passage, extended trot and flying changes.

"I'm very proud to say that the connection is really nice—99% of the time the connection is good—his neck is nice, his frame is nice, and his mouth is quiet and all of those things that are really important, now more than ever," she said.

Bredahl attributes those strengths to Harrison-Antell's correct riding and training, as well as Finley's conformation. "The neck is set on right and all that," Bredahl said, "but the riding is the most critical part, that [Harrison-Antell is] always riding back to front. So he stays in a lovely self-carriage."

During the time Bredahl has been working with the pair, she believes their greatest gains have been in consistency, noting that Harrison-Antell has trained a number of horses to the Grand Prix.

"It was all there, but I think now it's more consistently there, where he's almost



always in a nice frame and always going in a harmonious way—unless he’s afraid of another horse,” she said.

During the half of the year when Bredahl is based in Wellington, she coaches Harrison-Antell remotely two or three times a week and oversees competition warm-ups the same way. And when Bredahl is back on her longtime home turf in California, the pair work together in person.

Outside of training and showing, Finley is Harrison-Antell’s loyal companion. “He’s super affectionate, and when I go in his stall, he’s all over me, checking everything,” she said. “He’s very interactive.”

Finley has a unique way of enjoying his favorite treat. “He holds the sugar cube in his mouth and takes a sip of water. He swishes it around for a few minutes until it’s completely dissolved,” Harrison-Antell said.

While Harrison-Antell said she’s “not real good at selling my horses,” some of them do move on to other riders as a means of financing her future string. Finley, however, is different.

“I’ll never sell Finley; I’ll retire Finley,” she said, explaining that his quirks made him an iffy sales prospect as a younger horse—and now she’s very glad that it’s worked out that

way. “I always knew he had it in him, and I just have always believed in him.”

Looking to the future, Harrison-Antell mentioned the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, saying, “Who doesn’t have their eyes on that?” as well as the FEI World Cup Final and 2026 FEI World Championships.

“There’s lots of stuff coming up, and all of us hope and dream. You never know what’s going to happen,” she said. “It’s horses, but it is nice to be able to dream and see what’s happening.”

For her part, Bredahl said that Harrison-Antell is “for sure, as good as any top rider” and Finley has the training and physical talent to win at the highest levels. “But is he going to put all of his heart into doing it? That’s the unknown.”

Harrison-Antell has a balanced perspective. “As I get older, I still have things I want to do absolutely, but I’m also OK with where I’m at, if that’s all there is. I just love to ride, and I just want to be better.

“Sometimes we have to come to terms with that, and I feel like I have, but as with Finley, I feel the best is yet to come,” she added. 🍀



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