

One in a Million

Django of Cacharel

TEXT: GEORGIA HAWKINS





When the majestic Django of Cacharel made a guest appearance for his sponsor Kelato at EquiFest recently, it was clear his retirement some six months beforehand had taken none of the shine off his celebrity status. The Friesian Grand Prix dressage stallion, now seventeen, happily munched on hay, while lapping up the attention of a crowd of fans who queued to take photos, ruffle his trademark unruly forelock and fuss over him with offerings of carrots and liquorice.

This page: At the Sydney CDI, 2011. Opposite: Image Stephen Mowbray.

For Django's rider Jeremy Janjic it was an all too familiar scenario. They may well have been the ultimate picture of an equal and harmonious partnership in the dressage arena, but Django's knack of completely stealing the limelight out in public is something the Hunter Valley dressage rider became well used to over more than a decade on the scene.

"It's actually for me what has always been the greatest thing about the journey I went on with Django. Everywhere we went, he had the ability to leave people smiling. He has such a big personality and people always remembered him."

Somewhat ironically, the Friesian's start in life back in 2001 was far less illustrious. Rejected at birth, he was bottle fed

around the clock by his breeders, Carl and Anne Mitchell of Cacharel Friesians in Queensland. His earliest paddock mate-come-babysitter was a young camel by the name of Sam.

Django's dam was the imported Friesian Renske fan'e Olde Hoek, who had caught the eye of Lynn and Dick Jenkin at the first Australian Friesian Keuring in Tamworth some months beforehand. When they heard her colt was for sale they didn't hesitate and their obsession with owning a Renske Friesian foal materialised in the form of a fuzzy little weanling who wasn't quite sure whether he was a horse or a camel!

"He was just a vision of loveliness!" admits Lynn. "And I never set out to be the owner of a Grand Prix dressage horse."



Jeremy and Django at Equitana 2014. Opposite: Image Stephen Mowbray.

I've just always loved Friesians, their luxuriousness, their temperament and trainability. They are intelligent and they just want to please you."

Jeremy entered the picture when Django was just four months old, his first encounter setting the scene for a journey that could have come straight from a movie script! "Django was on his way to Lynn and Dick's property in Dungog but the truck stopped at our place first to deliver me a horse. The driver unloaded the cutest foal you've ever seen and asked me to hold him. I guess you could say that Django had me from that point. I called Lynn afterwards and she coincidentally had been planning to speak to me about breaking in another horse for her. It just went from there."

It was three years later that the colt would arrive back at Jeremy's to be broken in, turned out and then brought back in for training. The plan wasn't necessarily for Jeremy to campaign him; after all, his reputation at that point was built on breaking in horses, not riding dressage. "I'd only ridden my first Novice test about a month before, and I remember being horrified when I realised just before we were supposed to go in that it included sitting trot which I'd never even done before."

A few low-key outings later, though, and Lynn says it was

clear there was a connection. "They just clicked and we really were all about enjoying the journey rather than aiming for a particular goal, so we just went with it."

As for Jeremy, he was already well and truly hooked. The horse he describes as a 'one in a million' would give him 110 percent every day. "That was the beauty of it. We had no program set out. I'd just hop on each day and we'd do it together. He was my first serious competition horse and as we went up the grades, we were learning together."

While the pair were turning heads and accumulating admirers everywhere they went, Jeremy says not everyone was a fan. "Oh, I was told so many times to sell him and get a proper dressage horse, that he was just a novelty. I remember an advanced test where I got 73% from the international judge Stephen Clarke but a 56% and a 59% from the Australian judges. Stephen came up later and urged me to keep going. He said Django was talented but that Friesians hadn't made their mark on Australian dressage yet the way they had in Europe."

Encouragement also came from closer to home. Heath Ryan, whom Jeremy counts as a great mate as well as a coach, could see that Django had the makings of a Grand Prix horse and was a supportive mentor. Indeed, Django's potential as a high-level

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dressage horse came with as many benefits as challenges. His temperament and trainability was second to none. The power and expression in his movement were breathtaking. Flying changes, on the other hand, were an issue for a long time, although considering the pair were both learning together, Jeremy admits he’s not sure whether the problem was his or Django’s! And, like all Friesians, the stallion struggled with stamina.

“This mostly was a problem at Grand Prix level. People used to talk about our lack of warm up but literally I couldn’t do any more. We’d walk for 25 minutes, I’d have one crack at a change, one crack at a pirouette, a bit of piaffe, a tiny bit of passage and then we’d go straight in. He was so honest and willing but the work just sucked the energy out of him and at that level I needed him to be carrying himself.”

When they reached Grand Prix in late 2011, Jeremy took the advice of another judge, accepting that it was time to ‘refine the picture’. Up until then Django had been competed in all his Friesian glory, but having more than achieved Lynn and Dick’s dream to prove the breed’s value for dressage, feathers were trimmed, the forelock plaited and the tail pulled so the judges could truly appreciate the stallion’s ability in movements such as the passage as well as the squareness of his halt.

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“Ah, Equitana. I think I started crying the week before when I was cleaning his gear. I knew it would be bad, but that moment in the arena when we’d taken the saddle off, they began playing his music and he started to passage as I was leading him out. The crowd went crazy.”

It was classic Django the showman! With his own Facebook page, an enormous fan base, roles in movies, music videos and commercials, Django of Cacharel has well and truly captured the imagination and stolen the hearts of horse lovers near and far. Jeremy laughs remembering Django’s ability to spot a camera, stop and pose. He’d stand willingly for hours while crowds lined up for photos at events and especially delighted in the attention of children. “We used to have a little girl living next door who’d run down to the paddock if she saw me riding Django. I’d put her in front of the saddle on his neck and she’d call out what she wanted us to do: extended canter, passage, pirouette. We’d do it all and Django was a different horse with her on board, so gentle.”

There are none of those fancy movements these days, but Jeremy is still riding Django most days. There are no regrets, either, about retiring Django or plans for a comeback. “He gave me everything. He never let me down and I would never forgive

myself if we kept going and he broke down. He’s my best mate, always the first to the gate each morning and I love that he still wants to be ridden. Often we’ll just wander around the farm, saying hi to the mares and his foals.”

As for progeny, there are purebreds plus he’s crossed over a range of breeds including Warmbloods, Thoroughbreds, Arabs and a Saddlebred. One is in France and another is at Prix St George level with Abigail Croyston training with Heath Ryan. Jeremy also has two youngsters plus a mare at Novice level. “She’s by Django out of a Jive Magic mare, and she’s just like Django, but with a bit more energy. She’s great and getting stronger all the time. My goal now is to get back to Grand Prix but I can’t be in a hurry. It just doesn’t work that way.”

Whether there could ever be another Django, well, Jeremy would like to think so but is under no illusions that their partnership and the journey they went on were any less than a gift. “What he taught me is that anything is possible. I was a horse breaker. He wasn’t an expensive, well-bred dressage Warmblood and yet we got to Grand Prix and we had a blast doing it. By far, though, the best thing about Django was the way he made people feel. He brought happiness to everyone who saw him and I just loved that.” Δ