

What It Takes To Be A Champion

A Conversation With Chester Weber

Chester Weber enjoyed a tremendously successful 2008 season. He won every selection trial and the USEF National Championship at home, as well as CAI-A Riesenbeck, the German International Driving Derby at Riesenbeck, and third place at Aachen (winning the dressage) abroad. He capped it all off with a silver medal winning performance at the World Championships at Beesd, Netherlands, in September.

I asked Chester what he would say was the secret of his success, and here is his answer.



I've driven the same six horses for the past two years, since the WEG in Aachen. Boy W, Grumus (aka Mecki), Jamaica, Para, Rolex W, and Senate. Those six have been part of the entire success.

Jamaica was my MVP at the WC [world championship], and he was great. We had a lot of discussion about him before Beesd. He is 17 years old and it takes him two weeks to recover from a show; using him once a month is difficult for him. We had broken the world record in dressage at Riesenbeck, where I showed Boy, so we thought about and talked about using him at Beesd. Then I said, you can't get much better than that; let's be conservative and use Jamaica. We did, and I guess it was a good decision because I broke my own record.

Jamaica was a bit crazy in his early teens, and there's a constant debate with the grooms about him. They say we should give him more energy in his food, his top line is a little thin, he's too quiet. And I say, please, let him be too quiet! He does seem to have matured; on the other hand, he was bucking and playing when we warmed up for the dressage prize giving.

Para came at the same time as Boy. I got him from Valere Standart, a very successful team and single horse driver from Belgium. Para was great in dressage but he had a difficult time in the marathon. I was concerned whether he'd have enough bottom to succeed; it wasn't there at first. But Para is a hard knocking horse. His original problem was in his movement, he wasn't strong enough physically. But he came into his strength. In the wheel he just improved as time when on, and I had him in the wheel at every show for the last year.

Rolex is for me is hands down the best horse in the sport now. There simply is no better. Dressage judges find themselves in a trance just staring at him for the entire test, and in the wheel in the marathon he can do the job on both sides without a question. We are always searching for a super dressage leader or a super marathon wheeler; he is both in a package that would make any horse person turn their head.

Mecki is the other dressage leader, and he also does the cones wheel job. I used Senate in Aachen instead of Para, and he was not fit enough to compete in Riesenbeck and I had a better feeling with Para, so he went to the WC. But you will see Senate again soon.

I drive and train the horses myself, with the assistance of Olof Larsson doing basic work at home; Taren Lester does some longeing and Malin Zimmerman rides them a bit. All horsemen and women that achieve greatness are ruthless when it comes to culling and selecting. I ask a hard question of horses, and what I ask is, are you good enough to win a medal with? We have to share that goal. I've been doing this for a long time, and I have a pretty good idea now. Character is really important; problems there always seem

to let you down, and always at the wrong time. You can develop character in a horse, but if he has a bad character you can't improve him.

This is a team sport, and Team Weber did some interesting things this summer. Olof has been a big part of the team for nearly ten years. Taren is good, too. I try to be as correct as I can with the team; that's important. There's mutual respect there. And I can't forget my biggest secret, my wife, My Elisabeth Weber, the best sounding board a driver could have.

Michael [Freund] and I sat down after being 3rd at Aachen, and we talked about how to get better. For some, the answer is often a different horse. But we didn't have horse problems; and I had some good horses at home, too, good depth. So what's going to get us to the place where we can really win? Michael does a great job training horses and gets the technical aspects flawlessly.

Tucker [Johnson] and I are as good drivers as anyone in the world; we're not getting beaten on driving ability. Sometimes it's experience, the mental aspect of the sport, how to be strategic, etc.

I started working with **Eva Pfaff**, a German woman who was a professional tennis player for about ten years. Eva facilitated conversations between Michael and me, helped him answer questions that were a little deep, and that was part of the reason for the season's success. Eva never came to a horse show with me, she simply understands sports. Tennis is a hobby, so she worked with me on the tennis court. It was extremely helpful.

There is no doubt in my mind that the team of people around me is the best in the world. They all have their strengths, and it is the synergy where the results come from. We will out organize anyone on any day. Just try to beat us!

I was at a USEF convention and went to the exercise room early in the morning, and there was Scott Monroe already at work. It started me thinking that in order to be great at this sport, one needs to be physically fit. A WC is so long. I pedaled my bike so many times around that marathon, biked the whole E Section. You have to turn over every stone, every rock, you have to be diligent, go over and over and over the course. I am more fit now than I've ever been in my life. I ran 10K once a week while in Europe. It's good for your mind as well as your body, and you have the ability to keep your concentration when you're physically fit.

Championships especially are physically and mentally exhausting. You need to be at your physical best on Saturday, and both physically and mentally prepared on Sunday. I get away from my horses before a big show. I drive in the forest on Friday morning and Sunday evening, but I go away physically and mentally for the weekend, take a break. Moreover, no alcohol for me three weeks before a show. Charge your batteries before you compete at the top. If your tank is empty you will get beat!

Thoughtful, committed, organized, diligent, focused: Chester seems to have it figured out. His goal now is individual and team gold at the WEG 2010. We'll all be cheering for him!

*Heather R. Walker
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