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A Winning Combination - Prince Panache and New Bolton Center

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A Winning Combination: Prince Panache and New Bolton Center

By Jane Simone

Three day eventing is a tough sport. It's the equine equivalent of the "Iron Man" competition. The sport grew out of military training, when it was vital for cavalry horses to be fit, nimble and utterly responsive to their riders' commands. Three day eventing combines the most demanding of equestrian disciplines: dressage, show-jumping and cross-country riding.

At the highest level of the sport, a very fit horse must demonstrate on Day One complete obedience while executing a variety of pre-determined movements in the dressage arena. He must then be fit enough to undertake the endurance phase of the competition on Day Two, which requires that he go at a measured pace for several miles before and after galloping a steeplechase course. This is followed immediately by a veterinary check to ensure that he is still capable of the biggest challenge — several miles of galloping over rolling terrain along a course interspersed with as many as 28-30 fixed fences, some of which will have more than one jumping effort involved. Once through this — the cross-country phase — the horse rests overnight and is presented on Day Three for a veterinary check. If he passes that, he will go on to jump a show-jumping course over brightly-colored poles and fences in front of a cheering crowd that will test his athleticism, his fitness and his calmness of mind.

Of the thousands of horses that compete regularly in weekend horse trials, point-to-point races, and other equine competitions, only a very few reach the glamorous heights dreamed of by every serious rider. One of those horses is a 16.2 hands bay gelding, owned by Mrs. Jaqueline Mars and trained and ridden by one of the world's best-known eventers, Karen O'Connor. His name is Prince Panache (known in the stable as Nash), and not only has he become one of the best-known stars in Olympic and international three-day eventing, he is a "graduate" of New Bolton Center — a horse who might not have risen to stardom without the help of **Dr. Virginia Reef** and her outstanding team of professionals in the Sports Medicine Section.

Karen O'Connor told *Bellwether* Nash's story, shortly after she rode him to victory at the MBNA Fox Hall 3-Day Event in Georgia in May. Karen found Nash in England in 1993 and liked him immediately because of his

great, athletic jump. Apart from that, however, he was not very impressive in his movement — Karen refers to him having a "mincy little trot," but she felt instinctively that he had great potential. Unfortunately, the relationship got off to a rocky start. Nash injured a foot before the purchase was finalized and it was serious enough to keep him laid up for about three weeks. In spite of this, Jackie Mars, trusting in Karen's judgment, agreed to the purchase, and in the fall of 1993 Karen brought the horse back to the United States and placed a very respectable 6th in the Fair Hill International 3-Day event in Maryland.

It was not until an insurance medical examination in 1995 that veterinarians detected that Nash had a slight heart murmur. "It wasn't serious," said Karen, "so we just continued competing." The partnership showed great promise, with 8th place showings in the 1996 Rolex Kentucky 3* and Ireland's 1997 Punchestown 3*. In 1998 Nash placed 5th at the sport's premier event, England's world-

d'equipe) said I must have gone over the top with him because he was "kick along quiet," and that is NOT like Prince Panache." Karen completed her dressage test and went on to do show-jumping that afternoon, when Nash was still "pretty lazy." Karen says herself she did not know quite how to react. No-one listened to him with a stethoscope; as Karen said, "We just weren't thinking along those lines."

It wasn't until the next phase of the competition that the wake-up call came. "He was charging along absolutely great at the start of the four-minute steeplechase. Suddenly, he just seemed to want to slow down, which is very uncharacteristic of this horse. I felt something had gone seriously wrong, but I wanted to finish the steeplechase and then check him, but we literally finished by trotting over the finish line. I was very, very scared at this point, because I'd never before had the feeling that I was on a horse that didn't have any petrol left in his tank at all. It's funny — I just knew it wasn't a leg, but I also knew when I pulled him up



Karen O'Connor and Nash.

renowned Badminton 4*. Occasional injuries cut into his competition schedule, but by 1998 Nash had been successful enough to qualify for the World Equestrian Games in Rome.

It was there that Karen first noticed Nash might have a serious problem. "I was doing dressage and Nash was very, very lazy which struck me as odd because he is NOT a lazy horse. Captain Mark Phillips (USA team chef

that he was far from fit. I remember saying we had to get a vet, that I thought there was something wrong with Nash's heart." **Catherine Kohn, VMD**, and **Kent Allen, DVM**, team veterinarians, listened to Nash's heart and diagnosed him as being in atrial fibrillation.

Nash was immediately retired from the competition. Karen said, "I was devastated and really scared that he was going to drop dead

right there.” **Dr. Cathy Kohn, V⁷³** reassured her that the condition was not life threatening, but that Nash should have a complete cardiovascular work-up on his return to the USA. Before leaving Italy, however, Karen consulted with Cathy Kohn, Kent Allen and Brendan Furlong, top competition veterinarians. They unanimously recommended that Nash be taken to New Bolton Center and be seen, if possible, by Dr. Virginia Reef. Dr. Reef, they agreed, was unquestionably the finest equine cardiologist in the country, if not the world. As Karen remarked, “Thank goodness they didn’t tell me I had to take him to some place in California! At least I can get to New Bolton Center in about four hours, and I was grateful just for that.”

Karen brought Nash to New Bolton Center about six weeks after he had been initially diagnosed — basically when he was comfortable to ship home from a temporary stopover in England. Thus began a series of visits over a period of six months. “Dr. Reef,” said Karen, “was a delight to work with because she is clearly a good horseman as well as a great veterinarian. She understands horses from both the veterinary perspective and the horseman’s viewpoint and this is a comfort to a horseman like me, who is clued into their personalities. I felt very at ease with her. I just felt that everyone at New Bolton Center really cared about Nash and what they were doing. And you know, at that point he wasn’t the star that he is today. He was just a horse we thought a lot of, but I told Ginny that if we could get him through his heart condition he could be a real world-class horse as far as future competitions were concerned.”

Nash’s treatments and monitoring continued through the winter of 1998-1999, and in

the spring of 1999 Karen and Prince Panache qualified for the Rolex Kentucky 4* 3-Day Event, the only 4* level competition in the USA, and one of only 5 such competitions worldwide. It was only the second year for a 4* level competition to be run in the USA and very demanding, coming as it does at the beginning of the eventing season. Nash got star treatment from New Bolton Center. Dr. Reef

Steeplechase and Cross Country segment of the competition. It was a great team effort! Prince Panache placed first with an outstanding showing in all three disciplines of the event.

Since then, Prince Panache has never finished less than third in any top-level competition. Now 17, he is going into well-deserved semi-retirement, having won Rolex in 1999, and the Foxhall Farm 3* (Atlanta, Ga.) in 2001.

Nash also has to his credit a Team Bronze from the Sydney 2000 Olympics and a third place finish in the Rolex Kentucky 4* event in 2000.

Karen O’Connor is grateful for what Dr. Reef and New Bolton Center’s expertise has done for her and Prince Panache, a horse both she and owner Jackie Mars are deeply attached to. But she remembers her first exposure to New Bolton Center with gratitude, too. Then, as a very young rider with no money and a horse diagnosed with terminal cancer, she recalled how kindly the staff treated her, particularly when she denied them the use of her horse for teaching purposes. “It was too emotional for me,” she confided. “I just couldn’t handle it. But the doctor was so gentle with me and so understanding — my decision was totally fine with them. And I never felt as though they compromised that horse’s care because I was so young and scraping out a living. That first episode made me always want to go back to New Bolton, because of the care not just from the doctors but from the administration and everybody concerned.”

Prince Panache has earned his retirement and will be pursuing a less frantic schedule in

the coming years. He has represented the USA with great skill and courage and he has earned a well-deserved place among eventing’s best-known and best-loved equine athletes. That is due in no small measure to Dr. Virginia Reef and New Bolton Center.



Karen O’Connor on Prince Panache at the Sydney 2000 Olympics, during the Team 3 Day event, at the second water.

Photograph by Charles Mann, reprinted by permission.

wrote a letter explaining all aspects of Nash’s care and treatment. New Bolton Center technicians were on site with portable EKG machines, and with the help of Kent Allen DVM, Karen’s local veterinarian, Nash was monitored at each phase of the demanding Roads and Tracks,