

Adventure to Arkansas

and the partnership gained when a dressage duo hit the trail

Late September 2011, Zoren, my Friesian Heritage Horse-Friesian Cross, and I were asked to accompany Trudy Midas (owner/creator of Espana SILK All Natural Grooming Products) and her Friesian mare Isabelle, on a road trip to Arkansas to

introduce Espana SILK and participate in an ACTHA ride. At that point, I had no idea what ACTHA was, or what was involved in loading up our horses and heading to the Ozarks. Fortunately, I didn't have much

time to analyze as we were supposed to be on the road that Friday for the ACTHA ride Saturday and Sunday. In some brief research via Google, I found out that ACTHA stands for American Competitive Trail Horse Association (find them at actha.us). Just coming off the 2011 Dressage Show Season, I figured this would be a good opportunity to give Zoren a little break from the show ring and do something "off the cuff." I didn't realize how "off the cuff" it was going to be; it's best not

to know in some circumstances. This truly was an experience that pushed ALL of my comfort level buttons - but in the end, it was an amazing partnership-building experience with my best four-legged friend.

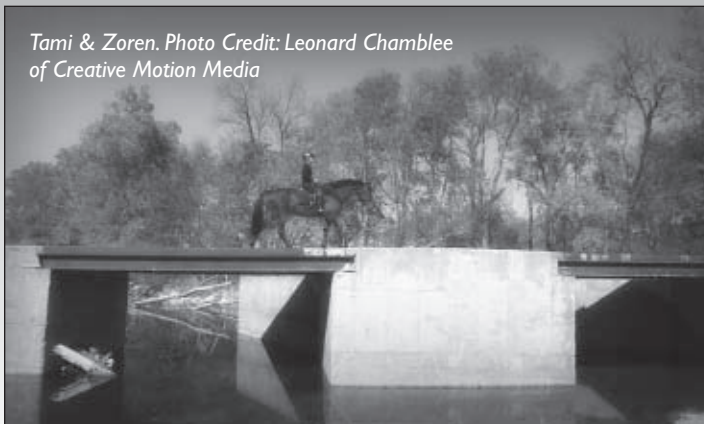
I had Zoren loaded and we departed our barn at 5:30am Friday morning, heading for Stacy, MN, to pick up Trudy and Isabelle. Once on the road, it was a 15+ hour haul with 4 gas stops to let the horses take a "moving" break. It was dark once we grew close to our destination, 10 miles from the OK border, and we quickly found out that our cell phones didn't work - and neither did the GPS! I had to back up and turn the trailer around in the pitch dark on small dirt roads three times - something that almost shattered me after driving 16 hours! We spoke with a woman in a nearby house who told us we were about 5 miles from our destination. Finally, we unloaded. I'm not sure that Zoren was aware of who or what he was at that point! We

by **Tami
Larke
Anderson**

*Tami & Zoren (left) and Trudy & Isabelle (right).
Photo Credit: Laurie Harris of Aponi Studios*



Tami & Zoren. Photo Credit: Leonard Chamblee of Creative Motion Media



were given a stall set up area in the old cow barn, which was about a 1/2 mile walk from our trailer. After getting the two horses settled, I was slightly comforted knowing that Zoren drank water and was nibbling nervously on hay. We headed for the bunk house to get ready for day one of the ACTHA ride – it was midnight at this point.

Saturday morning, we were among close to 40 riders, and I knew that I was never going to get the BOA boots on those big piaffing hooves - especially during the kick-off of the ride, where a paraglider was going back and forth in the field behind us, being pulled by a 4X4. I put full concentration into getting my Aussie tack on my big prancing horse, who was trailer tied. During this ACTHA ride (“Salem Witch Ride”) there were 6 obstacles over a 10 mile course, with judges placed at each of the stations. On this first day there was also a film crew taping for ACTHA. To start the ride, we all proceeded as a group down a steep hill and through a field of yearlings and cattle.

As we approached what I believed was our first obstacle, we strolled past a cow carcass on the trail (which I thought was a great obstacle). I was toward the back of the group, and seeing that we needed to cross a little stream I accepted the offer to go ahead of a few people – standing quietly in line was not on Zoren’s bucket list. Once we got to the other side, however, the concern became one of, “Where is Isabelle?”

We spotted our next obstacle through the row of trees. When I first saw The Bridge, I immediately thought of ways to bypass. I watched a few horses ahead of me side passing across the obstacle that was three horses wide, about 25 feet above the water, and LONG with NO SIDES! It was a concrete structure producing a hollow thud with every footfall. The anxiety building within was like no other I’d felt before; far more anxiety than going down any center line and halting at X! Seeing that there was probably no way around this second prize obstacle, I decided that I simply needed to get it over with, as I couldn’t bear standing and just watching. With the photography crew in the river below me and the judge at the start of the bridge, I moved ahead, wondering if a life vest might not be a good idea. I approached the ominous structure and announced my competition number. We were not able to see any of the

horses that had gone before us as there was a bend in the road following the bridge, so there was no “back to the herd” incentive. Never have I felt so alone with just my horse. It was at that point that I decided to put 100% of my being in my trusty steed, feeling that he also had a good sense of self preservation, and would take care of me in this situation. I dropped the reins and looked straight ahead, telling Zoren what a good boy he was and how brave he was being. Smack dab in the middle of the bridge was a water puddle; I quickly glanced down and decided not to make a big deal of it, and continued looking straight ahead. We walked a “straight as an arrow” line across the entire bridge! I can’t begin to explain the overflowing euphoria upon reaching the other side. I also can’t begin to explain the newfound and deep-rooted love I have for the partnership with my horse. I decided that the next four obstacles were going to be a cake walk, along with most anything else we’d encounter going forward!

We made it through the next four obstacles and were quite happy to be back at the ranch at the end of our ride. Later we saddled up again for a photo shoot in the river, which was a refreshing end to an “out of the realm” kind of day!

Sunday’s ride was one of much more confidence in Zoren. He decided that he needed to be leading the pack on this excursion. We had another great day, full of new terrain and new experiences - though none will ever surpass The Bridge.

Sunday evening, after all the other riders had gone, we were able to turn both horses out in a huge open acre area to just be horses. The conversations between the coyote packs traveling through the foot hills were quite unnerving! I continually checked on the horses and made sure to point out where their water and hay were located. They’d look at me as if to say, “We’re just fine, get some sleep!”

Sleep came at 3:00am, only to be up and packed for the trip home at 8:15am Monday morning. When Isabelle was dropped off at home, her departure from Zoren was heart-wrenching, AND had my trailer moving in a way it’s never moved before. We arrived back home at Jacquire Oaks, safe and sound, around 11:30pm. I headed straight to the indoor arena to let Zoren burn off a little pent up travel energy. After running a bit to stretch his legs, he returned to me and gave a big sigh to tell me that he felt better and was ready for his stall.

This was an amazing experience for both of us, and one that I will not soon forget! It was an amazing opportunity, and tested both of us in a way that bonded and grew our partnership beyond the dressage ring.

