

# Windfall

*Lives Up to  
His Name*

By Erica Larson

"It's ironic that a horse already named Windfall would be such a windfall for us and for U.S. eventing."

— Dr. Timothy Holekamp



Windfall and Darren compete in Malmo, Sweden in 2006 at the FEI World Cup of Eventing finals.

Photo by Dr. Timothy Holekamp

**I**t was nearly a decade ago that Dr. Timothy Holekamp, his wife Cheryl, and American eventer Darren Chiacchia first laid eyes on a stunning black Trakehner stallion by the name of Windfall. Since then, Windfall became an American eventing icon, Darren became one of the leading event riders in the nation and the Holekamps of Columbia, Missouri, have become some of the elite Trakehner breeders in the world. What began in the year 2000 is one of the most inspirational stories of success the eventing world has ever known.

## Destined for America

Windfall's career began in his native country of Germany. Under Ingrid Klimke, Olympic gold medalist and daughter of dressage legend Reiner Klimke, Windfall took not only the German eventing world but the entire German horse industry by storm.

"He was a quiet, normal horse," Ingrid says. "But he had an incredible quality in jumping and after two years of hard work, he decided to become a 'forward fighter' in cross-country."

Ingrid's hard work with Windfall paid off, as he quickly

became one of her top horses. "He was my reserve horse behind Sleep Late for the Olympic Games in Sydney," she says. "He had shown in Germany that he had the quality for an Olympic horse."

"He had been the German national 'darling' for several years at the CIC\*\* and CIC\*\*\* level for two years under Ingrid," Dr. Holekamp explains. "She won the German National Rider's Championships on him and racked up many wins and placings. In 1999 he was elected 'Horse of the Year'—out of all the disciplines—by the readers of *Reiter Revue*, the biggest horse magazine there."

Across the ocean in the United States, Dr. Holekamp had earlier formed a relationship with an up-and-coming rider named Darren Chiacchia. "We bought a three-year-old gelding from Darren's first sponsor, Harold Bixby, in 1984 and became friends with both of them," Dr. Holekamp explains. "In 1985, while visiting them in New York, I asked Darren what his life's goals were. He said that he intended to ride a Trakehner stallion in the Olympic Games and win a medal."

"I had seen enough to think that this incredibly single-minded young fellow just might do that, so we began an on and off financial sponsorship of him that got much more serious when we bought into Amethyst with him about six or seven years later."

Amethyst, a black Trakehner stallion, would prove to be the horse that began a business plan shared by the Holekamps and Darren, combining upper level eventing competition and breeding use. Although already older than most horses working their way up the levels, the stunning black stallion had a very successful run through the three-star level with Darren before eventually retiring to stud at the Holekamps' farm in Missouri.

"We needed to find a newer and better version of the black stallion," continues Dr. Holekamp, "one with a bit more Thoroughbred blood and preferably one with Habicht blood." Habicht was a Trakehner stallion that competed successfully for Germany in eventing in international competitions, as did his sire Burnus AA. Several Habicht sons were already producing successful event horses.

Since Darren was also in need of a new upper-level mount, Dr. Holekamp invited him on a four-day prospecting trip to Germany that he set up with the young German breeding expert, Dr. Maren Engelhardt. The two of them, along with Dr. Holekamp's wife Cheryl, flew over

in early November 2000. "With Maren's help, we went all over Germany and Poland," Darren says. "We had put in excess of 3,300 kilometers on the rental car in four days and nights and we'd about given up hope. At the very end of the trip, we found ourselves at Gestüt Hörstein looking at a two-year-old colt and we realized that the well-known Windfall, who had already done great things in Europe, was there at home."

Dr. Holekamp remembers that the topic of Windfall being available for sale did not come up until just as they were about to leave. After some negotiation, thanks to

their German translator, the manager of the farm agreed to show Windfall to the group from America, not really intending to consider them as potential buyers. "They brought the horse into the arena and turned him loose," Darren says. "We looked at each other and I think that's the moment we knew."

"They didn't want Darren to ride him," says Dr. Holekamp. "The horse was

out of training and the stud-manager did not then know who Darren was. It was about safety." Finally, they agreed to let Darren ride the horse.

"I had to trot the short side of the arena before I knew," says Darren. "But it was practically instantaneous. From there, as they say, the rest is history."

## Welcome To America

The details of the sale to Dr. Holekamp were carefully negotiated between him and Windfall's owners and before long, the new black stallion arrived in the United States. Although they now had the 'German darling,' Darren and the Holekamps faced the challenge of returning Windfall to the level at which they knew he could compete.

"Windfall came to us unriden for more than six months and trained by a rider with a different style," Dr. Holekamp says. "Darren had experience riding several Trakehner stallions at this point but this one had more racehorse in him and more stallion type than any previous mount. That meant that to even imagine that he could jump on and take on the U.S. field of great event horses and riders of that era—the best in history—in a few months at the Advanced level was a fatuous pipe dream. Realistically, it took a while."

Darren wholeheartedly agrees. "Stallions were made to think about self-preservation," he explains. "They're not going to like a little scrape on the knee here or a little



The young Windfall competes with Ingrid Klimke in Germany.  
Photo by M. Czerny

bump there. Windfall obviously preferred more of a show jumping style on cross-country, never touching the rails. It took us a while to get to that level and it took him a while to gain confidence in me. We had spotty success in the beginning but it quickly grew into a phenomenal partnership."

As an added speed bump, the American public initially had mixed reviews about the athletic black stallion. "I think that the spectators were immediately stunned by his presence," Dr. Holekamp says. "He is charismatic; that is the word for him. But he is also given to head-tossing at a full gallop, which appears to be disobedience but is actually just more stallion behavior. He tended to frighten spectators at cross-country almost as much as he thrilled them in dressage and show jumping."

"One thing that most people did not understand then and perhaps now is the delicate balance between control and speed in a virile equine stallion, such as this one," he continues. "At most horse trials, Windfall was being schooled at high speed, not toward going faster but toward optimal control by the rider. That must be there to win. Sometimes he would win the dressage and have enough time penalties on cross-country to place, but not win overall. People tended to say he was a 'typical Warmblood,' not fast enough to do the sport at the upper levels. We knew for sure that was wrong and Darren saved the speed for when it counted."

## An American Icon

With the Holekamps' continued support and Darren's training, Windfall settled into his new job and lifestyle. He began to have greater competition success which earned him a following from the eventing community. In 2001 and 2002, Windfall started to win through the Advanced level. The turning point in Windfall's career came in 2003 during the Pan-American Games, held in Elkton, Maryland at the Fair Hill International CCI\*\*\*.

"He won the individual gold medal of the Pan-American Games, despite the fact that he was competing as an individual; he wasn't selected to be a part of the U.S. Team," explains Dr. Holekamp. "This was a truly vindicating moment and resulted in hours of celebration in the stall tents with Captain Mark Phillips and others who were helping Darren and Windfall reach that goal."

With the Athens Olympics just months away, Team Windfall headed to the Rolex Kentucky CCI\*\*\*\* in April 2004 with their sights set on victory. But this event would present a new challenge to everyone competing: the short-format three-day event.

The absence of phases A, B and C of cross-country day left many riders and trainers scratching their heads. Roads and Tracks (Phases A and C) and the Steeplechase

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(Phase B) had been in place since eventing began. Now, with land at a premium and other issues of horses' career longevity, the Olympic Committee and the FEI made the decision to run only the phase D (cross-country) in international competition from the Athens Olympics forward. Many eventers were upset about this decision, but Darren embraced the changes in the sport and managed to come away a winner from the first short-format event in the Rolex's history.

"I feel as though Windfall was slightly jilted, as that was the first running of a CCI\*\*\*\*, in the world, in the short format," Darren says. "You couldn't help but feel that there was an attitude of, 'well, that wasn't a real four-star,' yet looking back, that was quite a feat. We, the riders and the trainers, hadn't quite figured out how to ride the short format course. Many people were saying that they were hitting a wall at eight minutes. I went around on my first horse, who had never been tired a day in his life, and right around eight minutes, he went 'umm... I think I'm tired...' I had to nurse him around the rest of the course."

"An hour or two later, I took that experience and applied it to Windfall," Darren continues. "I gave him a short warm up and then I dismounted. My groom was looking at me like I had four heads and I said, 'You know what? We're just going to have our own 10-minute box (in



**Windfall and Darren place 12th individually at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.** Photo by Diana De Rosa



**Windfall and Darren at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.**

Photo by Ralph Kuhlmann

other words, a 10-minute break)' And we did! They said, 'Two minutes, one minute...! I swung up, we left the box and he was on fire. I think that he either made the time or missed it by a second. He did an amazing thing. And most importantly, he had lots of fire the next day to go out and jump clear and then win the whole event. So that was really a life moment for us both."

Dr. Holekamp was also thrilled with Darren and Windfall's performance in the CCI\*\*\*\*. But dreams of the Olympics were still dancing around in his head. "Winning the first modern CCI\*\*\*\* at Rolex was definitely a very big moment but the thing most gratifying to me was when U.S. Team and Selection Committee vet Dr. Catherine Kohn, who is a self-admitted Thoroughbred fan and Warmblood-doubter, came up to me to report that of all those who essentially made the time on cross-country, the fastest to recover normal vital signs was Windfall. That was the moment when I knew that, barring an accident, it was going to happen."

### **Olympic Dream Come True**

Sure enough, Darren and Windfall made the 2004 Olympic team. By now, Windfall had become an American eventing icon and had legions of fans from coast to coast. All of them were looking to Darren and Windfall, along with the rest of the U.S. eventing team, to bring home an Olympic medal.

"The Olympics produced some of the most happy, sad and scary moments of my life," says Dr. Holekamp. "Cheryl and I, along with the kids, followed the team over to training camp in England at the farm of our coach, stayed in a three hundred-year-old farmhouse in a tiny village and attended the Team gallop and the horse trials at Gatcombe Park. Then came the long flight to Athens and adjusting to the unusual climate and footing there became the focus."

After the opening celebrations, Darren and Windfall got down to business. This was Darren's first trip to the Olympic Games, and he had to give himself a few reminders to stay focused on the task at hand. "People don't realize... just jumping a cross-rail is unbelievable pressure at the Olympic Games," he muses. "You're adding so many more things to the whole feel. I had to constantly tell myself, 'It's just another day at the office.' I remember, as the judge rang the bell and I cantered down the centerline, there were our names along with 'Athens Olympic Games.' The hair literally stood up on the back of my neck and I said to myself, 'Calm down and ride the damn test!' Even though I've been a fan of the Olympic Games for my entire life, I watch them now with a whole different appreciation."

Darren was able to focus the stallion on his test and they performed a flashy and expressive dressage test,

despite the high winds that ripped through the stadium. "Cross-country was foot perfect and Windfall was one of 15 out of 75 to make the time," says Dr. Holekamp proudly. "But that night there was big trouble."

Windfall had twisted an ankle while running cross-country, and he very nearly didn't pass the vet inspection the next morning. Fortunately, after two tries, the veterinary panel found him sound enough to compete and allowed him to continue to the last phase. During warm-up for show jumping, Windfall was slow to warm up and more than a little stiff. But after careful consideration, Team Windfall decided to give it a go. Team efforts sometimes require special risk-taking by individuals.

"That was the moment when I learned about the relationship between great military horses and great three-day horses," Dr. Holekamp explains. "That night the scene in the stadium jumping at Athens had all the same elements as a battleground: far from home, frightening noises, thousands of roaring humans, many strange horses and bright lights. As Windfall walked up that hill for his turn in the lights, he changed. With nearly every step he climbed he became sounder, less nervous, more erect in posture, more alert. When he jumped his course he was as sound in appearance as any other competitor, which anyone watching the video can attest. Without his effort, the U.S. would not have a medal. With it, they did. Some things about a horse cannot be known except during almost unbearable adversity. In today's horse world there are few moments like that, but when they come we learn so much about character in a horse."

Windfall jumped two brilliant rounds to clinch a bronze medal for the United States team and twelfth place individually for himself in one of the most competitive Olympic Games in recent history, the highest placing of a stallion in modern times.

It was at these games that German rider Ingrid Klimke was able to see her Windfall again for the first time since he'd left Germany. "After he left Germany, I next saw him in Athens, four years later," she recalls. "It was quite an emotional moment."

After the Olympics, the Holekamps originally planned to retire Windfall to stud. But his young age of only twelve and success at the Games led the U.S. Team officials to request that Windfall be kept in work for possible duty at the 2006 World Equestrian Games and the 2008 Hong Kong Olympics. Unfortunately, extenuating circumstances kept the stallion from competing in both competitions.

## The Unexpected

On March 15, 2008, Team Windfall's world was turned upside down. Darren was involved in the worst riding



accident of his career aboard another Trakehner prospect, which resulted in him being airlifted to a hospital near the competition grounds. Darren's injuries were life threatening. He suffered a severe brain injury, contusion damage to both lungs, a partially collapsed lung and multiple rib fractures. He remained in a coma for 42 days after his accident, then awoke fully and began a fast recovery through maximum efforts in rehabilitation.

"Windfall is a very valuable breeding animal and may well sire some of the horses that will be on the U.S. Team ten or fifteen years from now," Dr. Holekamp explains. "Risking incapacitation or worse in competition made no sense after Darren's fall." Plans for competing Windfall were on hold.

Three months after the fall, Darren set the ultimate goal of getting back in the saddle and competing at the level he was riding at before his accident. Finally, that dream came true for him when he climbed back aboard Windfall and placed second at the Stuart Horse Trials in the Open Intermediate division. His first win at the Advanced level after his accident came within a year. His mount for that victory was the great Windfall. "My relationship with Windfall was stronger than ever. If it wasn't apparent before, it sure was after my injuries," Darren says. "Dr. Holekamp was one of the few who had complete confidence in me and thanks to him Windfall returned to competition with me. To win again at Advanced with Windfall wasn't so much about winning. It was getting back to where I was before."

"Darren wished to return to riding fairly quickly, which was fully approved by his physicians, and he wanted a horse he totally trusted to carry him in his recuperation period. After all he had done for us and for Windfall, there was no question about whether he deserved that consideration from me, so that is what happened. Finally, in May of 2009, nearly a year after Darren recovered enough to get back in a saddle, Windfall retired—sound, healthy and with the same joyful spirit he had when we met him."

## Dual Careers

One of Windfall's unique characteristics is that he's been able to maintain his position at the top of American eventing while also carrying on a successful stud career. Both Darren and Dr. Holekamp agree that while competing a breeding stallion isn't for everyone, Windfall excelled at the task. "Windfall has literally been collected in the morning and competed in a dressage test that afternoon," says Darren. "We've made it very clear in his life when is breeding time and when is work time. We never confuse it, so he never confuses it. He's so smart."

"In 2004, the year he won the Rolex and went to the Games, he also bred thirty mares, all by transported cooled semen of course," Dr. Holekamp adds. "Darren has said repeatedly that this did not at any time distract him from training or performing, through the many years we had him on double-duty. It is still true today."

During his competition career, Windfall sired dozens of highly successful offspring. Windfall's progeny include four National Young Event Horse Champions and Reserve Champions in the United States and Canada, as well as upper-level event prospects that are still being developed.

"I've been in it long enough that I'm now riding Windfall's children in competition," Darren says with a smile. "Winning the 2007 Five Year Old Young Event Horse Championship on [Windfall's son] Hanno was huge because that's really what a stallion is all about: his progeny."

Two other Windfall sons that Dr. Holekamp bred, Asterion and Project Runway, have both won multiple national Young Event Horse titles under their teen-aged owner/riders.

## What's Next?

Now that Windfall has retired from eventing and has taken up residence at the Holekamps' New Spring Farm, he has a new life ahead of him, though of course he will focus on producing more top quality foals. Dr. Holekamp's wife

Cheryl has taken over the duties of exercising the flashy stallion and she's confirmed that he has a natural aptitude for dressage.

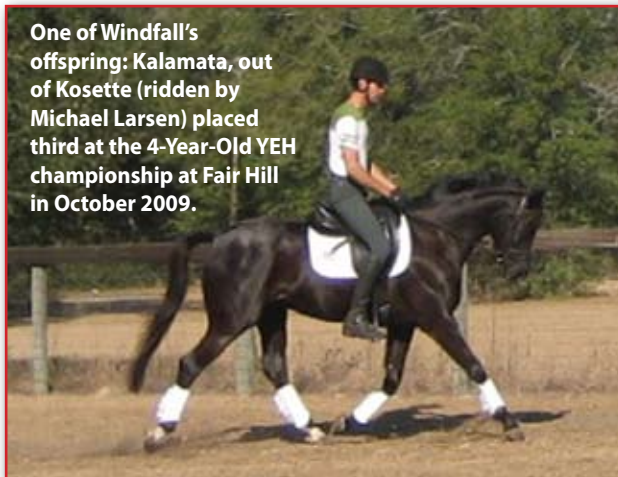
"There's no real telling where things will go next," Dr. Holekamp admits. "He is going to be 18 years old in April and has earned whatever rest he wants and needs. We still jump him a bit, for his own pleasure actually, but he is working fairly hard in dressage under Cheryl and with the help of Pierre St. Jacques. The idea is to give this highly talented all-around horse a chance to see how far he can go in dressage. Horses trained in upper level eventing very rarely go on in FEI dressage but this one just might make it to Grand Prix."

"Robert Dover has coached and ridden him numerous times and he says it is definitely possible," the doctor continues. "We will see. Cheryl is experienced training to Grand Prix and Windfall is an incredible learning-machine when it comes to daily lesson work. They are making pretty amazing progress, especially when you consider how old this dog is, and how few dogs can ever do these tricks. Right now today he is ready to show at Prix St. Georges but there appears to be much more inside there. It's just a matter of time and soundness, we think."

"He doesn't do any silly stuff really," recounts Dr. Holekamp. "He is a typical noble horse. He's very much aware of his specialness, of his duties as a stallion and of his relationship of mutual respect with humans. Really, he is kind of an aloof horse, a noble tough-guy warrior without ugly misbehaviors. His aisle manners are impeccable. Little children have been put on his back and walked around for photos. He has traveled a million miles and goes in a trailer without trouble, even with mares. He is a real show horse and no horse is better at it than he. I think that there really is a relationship between this group of traits and top-performing military riding horses of the old days."

Whether or not Windfall ever makes it into the competitive FEI dressage arena won't really matter since he will always be the American eventing stallion. He's won the hearts of millions leaving his owner and rider with very special memories about this once-in-a-lifetime horse. Not every horse can live up to his name. Windfall, however, did just that. **WT**

One of Windfall's offspring: Kalamata, out of Kosette (ridden by Michael Larsen) placed third at the 4-Year-Old YEH championship at Fair Hill in October 2009.



Cheryl Holekamp schools Windfall this past winter in Ocala, Florida.