

## SPORTS

# Kyra Downton: artist in wood and on horseback

BY MARION SOFTKY

From Vladivostok to Atherton, from starvation during the Russian Revolution to winning the Gold Medal in dressage at the Pan American Games, Kyra Downton has led a life of drama.

Now nearly 80, Mrs. Downton still rides every day. She is beginning to take her new young thoroughbred, Zeus, along the seven-year path to Grand Prix dressage and hopes to buy another, more highly trained horse.

"I have to ride; I rode all my life," she says in an interview in her Woodside home. "I just go crazy when I'm not riding."

For Mrs. Downton—widely known as the grand old lady of dressage—the graceful dancing movements executed by horse and rider are an art. "It's really ballet on horseback," she says. Certainly those who have seen her ride discern new meaning to the ancient concept of centaur—half human, half horse.

She tells one of her favorite compliments. A small girl came up to her after she gave an exhibition of dressage at a charity horse show, crying, "Mrs. Downton, Mrs. Downton, I have never seen anything so beautiful."

Mrs. Downton enjoys teaching dressage and—when she had trained horses—often gave exhibitions for charity. She is currently a sponsor of the San Francisco Grandprix horse show this weekend.

Mrs. Downton's home shows another side of this woman who is an artist on horseback. Inside and out are dramatic, free-flowing sculptures of horses, nudes, birds and seals. Most striking are the horses carved out of redwood driftwood gathered by her husband, the late Frank Downton, from Northern California beaches. Gnarled roots appear as stallion heads at fierce angles; a mare gently nudges her foal, the grain of the wood emphasizing their soft curves; racing horse heads leap streamlined out of a stump.

## GROWING UP IN RUSSIA AND CHINA

Kyra Downton describes her first experience on a horse. The place: Vladivostok. The time: before World War I.

"Picture a little three-year-old girl in a white party dress placed on a big white horse by some Russian Cavalry officers. Then visualize a fast gallop along a narrow, mountainous road with soldiers dashing madly after the runaway. That is my first recollection of riding."

Was she scared? "I remember screaming, so I must have been scared," she answers with a throaty laugh.

One Easter her father told Kyra and her brother he had two rabbits for them in the stables. They ran out and found two donkeys. "We said, 'Oh, big rabbits!'" she says dramatically. Later, as they rode their donkeys over the mountains of eastern Russia, she remembers the devious beasts were very skillful at dumping them. "We spent

**MARIE AND FOALS** are among the carvings of horses that surround Kyra Downton in her Woodside home. In the "agony of defeat" after failing at the Olympic Games in 1968, Mrs. Downton threw herself into sculpture. An artist in wood as on horseback, she says she doesn't plan her sculptures, they "just happen" as she follows the grain of redwood driftwood.



more time running after the donkeys than riding them," she comments.

Then came World War I and then the Revolution. Her father, a cavalry lieutenant who had been badly wounded in the Russo-Japanese War, was in charge of the base in Vladivostok. Fortunately for him, he was a kind man and popular with his men, or, Mrs. Downton believes, he would have been shot instead of just stripped of his rank and put under house arrest.

What does she remember of the Revolution?

"Starving," she replies promptly. "For three years we had no butter, no milk, no salt, no sugar. My mother used to boil some kind of seeds—yellow and tiny—in a big pot until it was solid and cut it like bread."

About the time the Bolsheviks were brainwashing her into giving up God and refusing to go to church, her father sent Kyra and her mother to Shanghai where she was put in a convent. She recounts, "I wouldn't go to church so they sent me to a convent, and right away I was impressed with the nuns and decided to become a nun."

Kyra and her mother arrived in Shanghai with just 10 rubles—worth about 20 cents in American dollars—so Kyra had to work for her keep. She became a "jack-of-all trades," she recalls. She would clean and organize closets and cupboards; she would wash and tidy up the newborn baby girls that a fat Chinese servant with tiny feet would gather every morning from the dump; and she would paint.

"I had to get interested in art," she says. When bishops and other dignitaries visited, Kyra would be assigned to copy little pictures of Jesus or little lambs for them. "Copying pictures is the worst thing you can do," she comments tartly.

Later she variously earned her living designing Venetian lace, teaching French, being a censor, and painting pillows at night. "I painted movie stars on cushions," she says, "Janet Gaynor, Irene Dunn, Mary Pickford, all the old ones—no men, only women."

Still later she found friends with horses and began riding again. She also began making money betting on races, gambling on the stock exchange, and buying old houses, redecorating them and selling them for a big profit.

"Then the Japanese came and put me in a concentration camp. That's another two years of starvation."

After the war she met a tall young officer from Minnesota, married him and came to California.

## ATHERTON: TRIUMPH AND DEFEAT

Franklyn and Kyra Downton moved to five acres on Atherton Avenue in 1946 and started building their own house. They lived there until Mr. Downton died two years ago, and Mrs. Downton moved to Woodside where she lives with her granddaughter, Laurie Rice.

During these years horses have remained tremendously important in Mrs. Downton's life. First it was riding, training, hunting, jumping and showing. The

Downtons were among the founders of the Los Altos Hunt, and she later became whipper-in.

Mrs. Downton remembers the first hunts—before they had hounds—when they chased rabbits with a couple of beagles. She thought it very tame compared to the paper chase hunts she had enjoyed in China. "They were like a steeplechase. You really flew," she says.

Dressage entered her life after a show in Pebble Beach. She won the jumping championship and was told she would have won the three-day championship if she had entered the dressage. "I always have to have a goal," she says, "and I thought dressage would be the thing to do."

She started what turned into years of hard work. She read books, bought horses, hired trainers. Above all she drilled endlessly in the exacting techniques that make the horse and rider seem as one. And she entered shows, first in this country, later in Europe, which still has the strongest dressage tradition in the world.

There she bought Kadett, the horse that carried her to triumph at the Pan American games in Winnipeg in 1967 and disaster at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968. She is still proud of training Kadett to do two of the most difficult maneuvers in dressage—which his German trainers had not been able to teach him. These were the *piaffe*, a graceful trotting in place; and *passage*, a lovely high trot with a hesitation at the peak of each step.

Mrs. Downton attributes her failure at the Olympics to a training regime so intense that it made both her and the horse tense and spoiled the perfect understanding between them. She came in 21st place.

"It was heartbreak," she says. In "the agony of defeat," she turned to another form of artistic expression—sculpture. She got out a chainsaw and began to attack redwood and make it grow into the expressive forms that surround her today. "It's terribly dirty work," she comments. "Your eyes burn; your nose bleeds; you have to have a mask."

How does she get the vivid forms that dominate her home? Does she plan them ahead of time? No, she says, "It just happens. It is a very strange sensation when things go right, almost as if something controls you."

Since Kadett, she has had several more horses but never made it to the Olympic team again. Her most recent horse, Myeen, she was training up to grand prix level, when he became sick and she gave him away a couple of years ago.

People who viewed her superb demonstrations and shows on Myeen could never have guessed she got him cheap as an unsuccessful, underfed racehorse in Mexico—all skin and bones. "He was petrified of people," she recalls, "The first time I tried to mount him, he fell backwards."

What is the secret of teaching a horse to do these intricate and beautiful maneuvers? Seated on her "pretty youngster" in front of the mirror at the end of her dressage ring, Mrs. Downton replies, "Don't pull on the mouth and then drive with your seat bones."

## Grand prix equestrian festival opens in San Francisco Thursday

San Francisco will be horse lovers' Mecca for the next two weekends.

From Thursday, Sept. 4 through Saturday, Sept. 6 the third annual San Francisco Grandprix will show visitors spectacular riding, jumping, and an Olympic dressage exhibition of musical equiballet at Golden Gate Fields. Seven major cups will be awarded, and there will be a special event for handicapped riders. An open show-jumping competition will culminate Saturday afternoon in the \$25,000 Grand Prix Show Jumping Day, heralded by the San Francisco Boys Chorus.

The following weekend on Saturday, Sept. 13 the BMW Polo Classic will highlight major polo stars from around the world.

Beneficiaries of the two shows will be the United States Equestrian Team, the James Brady Riding Program for the handicapped, the Student League of San Francisco, and the Friends of Recreation and Parks.

General admission is \$10 per day or three days for \$25. Students and seniors are \$6 and children under five are free. Seats and tables in VIP tents and reserved seats in bleachers are available at special rates. For tickets and information call 563-5650 or BASS.