

Ellen Ziemer Believes In Living A Full Life

This retired veterinarian hasn't lost her love of horses and breeding.

By **KIMBERLY LOUSHIN**

From a young age, Ellen Ziemer was enthralled by biology. While Punnett squares, the diagrams used to predict genotypes for specific traits, were just a standard part of grade school science classes for most of her classmates, Ziemer found genetics fascinating. So it's no surprise that breeding horses became a lifelong passion.

"I've always been fascinated with the curiosity of what you could produce, matching up the traits of the horses," she said, "and I've always loved young animals. Even before I knew I was going to vet school, I was always fascinated by it."

Ziemer, 68, began breeding when she was just 16, and other than a hiatus during veterinary school, she's stuck with it through the years, earning a gold U.S. Dressage Federation Breeder of Distinction Award in 2021. She and her husband, Jerry Waddle, operate Pura Vida Farms, named for the Costa Rican phrase meaning "pure life," in the rolling foothills of Bahama, North Carolina, where they've created their own piece of paradise breeding horses and ponies for dressage and jumpers.

"We've been wanting to produce horses that could go to the highest level of the sport with their movement and

conformation but also have the temperament to be safe to be around, and to be enjoyable, and rideability," she said. "That's what we've done."

A LOVE FOR VARIETY

Ziemer grew up in Roanoke, Virginia, and though her family moved to a farm when she was in her early teens, she was the only one interested in horses.

"I remember that my parents bought a pinto stud colt for \$125, including saddle and bridle. He was very wild, and he knocked my front teeth out," she said with a laugh. "So we started the hard way with very novice parents that were quite apologetic."

Undeterred, Ziemer sampled as many disciplines as she could. She began in saddle seat before moving to Arabian western pleasure. When she discovered Pony Club, she found her eventual path to eventing and later dressage.

"I was absolutely fascinated by the way they plot all aspects of horsemanship, and of course I was one of the typical kids that loved to jump, so cross-country and jumping were very exciting to me at that point," she said.

At 68, Ellen Ziemer still competes, and she's hoping to earn her USDF silver medal with Elmholt's Galant.

SHARON PACKER
PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO





Though her first attempt at breeding was with the Arabian stallion she evented, she's gravitated toward warmbloods since. "I gradually moved towards the warmbloods, primarily because I was going for temperament and rideability," she said. "I must say, I loved my Arab, but he could jump six feet sideways."

Though veterinary school wasn't Ziemer's original goal, she pivoted from her plan to become a trainer after getting injured by a stallion she was riding.

"I decided that it was better to start using my head in a better way than getting hit on the head," she said.

She attended veterinary school at Ohio State University, where she met Waddle, who was studying small animal medicine. She spent three years at the University of California, Davis, completing her large animal medicine residency before moving to Pennsylvania to work at the University of Pennsylvania's New Bolton Center.

Once back on the East Coast, Ziemer resumed her breeding ventures and purchased her foundation mare, a Thoroughbred, from Olympic eventer Phillip Dutton. In 1993, she and her husband moved to North Carolina with just six horses. Three decades later, their farm has grown

Retired veterinarians Ellen Ziemer and Jerry Waddle, pictured with Synergy PVF, have created a strong dressage and sport horse breeding program at their Pura Vida Farms in Bahama, N.C. *PHOTO COURTESY OF ELLEN ZIEMER*

to house 80 horses, plus a full menagerie of other livestock, which are the byproduct of her youngest son's 4-H experiences and a failed attempt to quit riding. Though the couple have three children (Erica, 39, Mark, 36, and Bryan, 27) none of them currently ride, but Ziemer wasn't able to give it up.

"I tried to actually move away from horses because I had too many concussions, and I was told I shouldn't ride," she said. "But then I couldn't stop riding; I just decided to ride very safe horses and keep on going. So we enjoyed sheep and goats, and I actually had a certified dairy at one point and made cheese. We had some dairy cattle as well. We had pigs. I did the farmers' market for a while and sold products there. So now we have just a few, maybe 20 beef cattle and 20 ewes and about 20 goats, so we're way down on that. We have a few alpacas.

"I've tried to really have a full, fun life," she said.

A SHIFT IN FOCUS

In 2020, Ziemer and Waddle retired, which has allowed them to focus their energy on their breeding efforts. Ziemer credits Waddle for elevating their goals.

“He is the one that had us actually go to Germany and start importing some warmblood mares and ponies,” she said. “It was his decision to try to take this to the next level after he retired and sold his veterinary practice.”

Dressage trainer Kaitlin Blythe has been working with Ziemer’s young horses for the past several years and has noticed a difference in the quality of horses bred at Pura Vida.

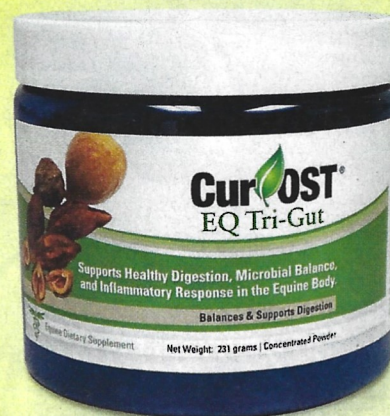
“I’ve always been fascinated with the curiosity of what you could produce.”

—ELLEN ZIEMER

“She’s definitely stepped up the quality of her broodmares and is kind of picking some stallions that are still proven but are a little bit newer [bloodlines] that will pique some trainers’ interest,” said Blythe. “That’ll really start paying off in the next few years for her.”

The couple breeds roughly 15 horses and ponies each year, but Ziemer expects they’ll decrease that number as their focus shifts towards high performance. While she hopes to sell foals young, any young horses still on the farm get extensive handling. Jim Thomas of Bar T Horsemanship does much of the early training, and they’ve paired with a local 4-H club to give kids the opportunity to work with the yearlings. Some have taken Ziemer’s young horses to compete in hand at the North Carolina State Fair.

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“We’ve had a ball with that. We have kids come over and, helping us under supervision, learning how to handle young horses and getting the extra benefit of having them work with our horses,” she said. “It’s been a good win-win situation.”

She’s also partnered with local pros to bring along some of her horses. Olympic eventer and show jumper Doug Payne is training her 3-year-old Westphalian stallion Europa PVF (Eldorado Van De Zeshoek—Chiara T, Clarimo) as a jumper, while Blythe comes to her farm to train and compete several of her young dressage prospects. Blythe has also purchased two horses from Ziemer.

“Most of them have very good temperaments and are really trainable and also obviously talented for disciplines that they were bred for,” Blythe said of Ziemer’s homebreds. “They do such a great job handling all of the foals, because I have historically not been super into being around babies, but theirs are so well handled. They all lead and stand for the farrier and all that stuff.”

While Ziemer has professionals work with her horses, she hasn’t hung up her helmet yet. She switched from competing in eventing to dressage after a few too many falls, but she still enjoys showing. She’s competing at fourth level with

In addition to broodmares, Ellen Ziemer has two 3-year-old stallions. She competes Mufasa D (pictured) in materiale dressage classes. PHOTO COURTESY OF ELLEN ZIEMER

Elmholt’s Galant, a 15-year-old New Forest Pony (Strandager’s Bandit—Elmholt’s Isabella), and hopes to earn her USDF silver medal with him. She’s also competing in materiale classes with Mufasa D, a 3-year-old German Riding Pony (McFly High D—Desteny), and she expects to continue riding for many years.

“I’m probably addicted to horses, to be quite honest, but it’s such a sense of purpose and enjoyment to be around horses, and the riding helps me be motivated to stay physically fit,” she said. “At my age I need to really keep working hard at that. That’s what makes me exercise and get out there and do things, because I just love to ride, and I love to be with them.”

“I feel that the connection with the horses is kind of a lifelong challenge and passion, because they get to the point where . . . it just feels like you know what they’re saying when you listen to them,” she continued. “I just love it—every aspect of it.” ●