



AGE IS BUT A NUMBER *for* JEAN BRINKMAN *and* FAITHKEEPER

By Jump Media ■ Photos by Erica Hills Photography



Many people might balk at the idea of getting on a horse at the age of 81 years old. Many less would turn that ride into competing at a USDF-rated horse show and completing a Prix St. Georges test. But for Jean Brinkman of Wellborn, Florida, it was just another day of bringing horses and joy into her life that has already had an abundance of both.

Two years ago, Jean was considering joining The Dressage Foundation's Century Club, in which membership comes from a combined age of at least 100 years old for horse and rider. The Century Club was established by The Dressage Foundation in 1996, at the suggestion of the late Dr. Max Gahwyler, noted dressage judge and clinician. The purpose of The Century Club is to honor senior dressage riders and horses that are still actively riding and competing. The Century Club has had 513 members since its inception.



"I just love riding and training, more than showing," said Jean. "I like goals, [and] when The Century Club idea came up, I thought, 'That's another goal.' At the time, we were a year away from the century. Now we're 102! We're well over!"

She was planning to complete that goal in 2020, but due to COVID, it was postponed. On her birthday



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this year, her daughter Erin, also a dressage rider and trainer, urged her to complete the ride to join The Century Club with Faithkeeper, Jean’s 21-year-old homebred Trakehner mare.

Jean remarked, “I did the Prix St. Georges at home in the ring. I could have sent [a video] in, but it didn’t seem fair to do it at home. I thought I should come out somewhere. Life is supposed to be fun, and I thought it sounded like fun.”

Jean and Erin decided to attend their first competition at World Equestrian Center – Ocala at the WEC Dressage XIV Show August 27, 2021. Jean entered the USEF Test of Choice class and performed the Prix St. Georges test. They received a score of 62.059% for second place. It was Jean’s first time back in the show ring in 15 years.

While the accomplishment of joining The Century Club is impressive, the fact that Jean rode Faithkeeper, a horse so dear to her heart, added yet another layer of meaning.

Jean bred Faithkeeper from a mare, Feodammee von Krotenbach that she imported from Germany, with her flagship stallion Martini. Jean imported Martini’s dam while in foal in 1978.

“I was a horse-crazy kid,” said Jean, who has run her family’s Valhalla Farm for more than 40 years. “I always wanted to breed and ride and train horses. I imported a mare who gave me Martini, who became the leading dressage sire in the country for dressage for a few years. In 2001, he passed away, but in 2000, Faith was born. I took Martini to grand prix. He was my heart horse. He gave me Faith, and I raised her.”

Erin mentioned, “Her name came from a Native American word that translated to Faithkeeper. I knew she would be the horse to keep my mom riding. It was like, ‘Ok God, I think she’s going to be the one that keeps her riding.’”

Faithkeeper has been Jean’s horse her entire life and while she started out as “a real hot thing,” she mellowed with age. “She really tries hard, like her father,” described Jean. “She loves to do her

extensions. You just release and off she goes. That was her father too. She’s got a lot of his traits.”

Jean still owns and runs Valhalla Farm with her husband Roy, who is 89 years old and manages their cattle herd. Erin is a trainer at the farm, her daughter Shannon is an award-winning equestrian photographer, and they also have a son Jason. Since 1972, the Brinkmans have been breeding and training warmbloods for more than four decades and produce their own hay at their working farm of 450 acres.

Jean and Faithkeeper competed up to Third Level, and then Jean made the decision to have Faithkeeper be a schoolmaster for the many working students that came through her teaching program. “She’s a great teaching horse because if you don’t do it right, she doesn’t do it,” said Jean.

The pair have overcome many obstacles, including colic surgery and Jean’s hip replacement five years ago. “I gave up on the idea of riding,” admitted Jean. “I thought, ‘My riding is done. I’m in my 70s.’ But then I had a hip replacement and I was like, ‘Hmm...I think I can ride again!’ So, I took Faith back!”

Jean was cheered on for her Century ride by family, friends and past students who came to World Equestrian Center – Ocala to see her historic ride, including her half-brother, whom she met just two years ago – he at the spry age of 93 – after a “23 and Me” DNA test gave Jean unexpected results of unknown relatives that live in Ocala.

Jean thought her Century ride couldn’t have happened at a better venue than World Equestrian Center. “It’s the best facility I’ve ever seen anywhere,” she said. “The attention to detail as a horseperson is just beyond anything I’ve ever seen. My horse’s stall is so lovely. You don’t see many barns that are so correct for horses; they thought of everything. It’s just masterfully done. I’m very thrilled to be here and have my Century ride here.” 🍷