Dressage

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Equestrian sport must be the only Olympic sport where women compete with men on the same terms. Men and women enter the same competition with no advantage to either sex. Selection of competitors is made on merit, provided that you are able to get to the contests. Given this gender equality, I find it so hard to understand why my country favors women in funding sportspeople.

I am too embarrassed to even name my country, but we have competed in many Olympic Games and other international events. We have a strong tradition in the equestrian field. That is why I am ashamed to name my country, with the policies that forced me, a man, to compete in the Olympics as a woman.

I was raised on a farm, and I could ride almost before I could walk. Not only ride, but jump as well. The family farm had fences and hedges, but also small streams, fallen trees and other obstacles that I would never cross other than in full stride. Casual cross country races between me and my brothers or other boys were common, but show jumping was different. This was multiple obstacles in a short course where turning was as important as jumping. It is true that more girls did this as a sport, but I had the skills.

The only area of equestrian competition that was not for me, was dressage. It is difficult for me to explain what this is, other that to say that it requires training your horse to do specific steps on command, and to follow a strict course before judges. I always thought that it looked silly, and it was only when I got a new horse that I discovered that I could do that, as well.

My new horse was named “Gamma” because he was the third born, just like me. And just like me, he was clever and a little mischievous. Even without prompting he would do little tricks in a open field, including jumping in the air and kicking up his hind legs, just like the Lipizzaner stallions at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. He loved for me to show him new tricks, including falling on command and pretending to be dead. We thought that it was just a joke, but I began to see the possibility that we might win competitions.

The problem was funding. Even if you are not like the city riders who need to pay the costs of keeping competition horses, equestrian competition is expensive. Horses need to be transported and kept at the venue. In a large country that is a big problem. Then there is riding equipment and costumes, and many other things. And for some stupid reason the only funding available was for girls only.

I am not sure why this is, but there is no doubt that women dominate equestrian organizations in my country. The only men who compete have money, but my family is fairly poor. Even when it came to raising money from my local community, we are all poor. Farming is difficult in my region. There are wide spaces to ride in, but the soil is not always kind, and there are long periods without rain. We did not have enough money. I needed to access money from the central administration of this sport, if I wanted to take it seriously.

It was my mother who suggested that I should apply for a grant using a girl’s name. I am fairly sure that it was a joke for her too. She did not believe that I would receive any financial assistance when I had not won a single real competition. All I had was video evidence of my abilities.

But a new video needed to be prepared. I had to ride as Melina. That is the name that I will use. It is not the real name that I used, but I am keeping my identity secret for reasons that will become clear later.

My mother told me that my own hair was not quite long enough, but that I could add a long fall of hair (sometimes braided) at the back appearing under a riding hat. I did not even have such a thing, so she made one for me from her own very long hair. But my face needed more effort. I was young enough not to be too concerned about whiskers, but I liked to think that I had the face of a young man. Some work on my eyebrows, eyeliner and lipstick soon showed that was not so true.

With my new appearance my mother filmed me doing all the steps and jumps, and also riding cross country, and at my insistence we added a few spectacular tricks due mainly to Gamma and his love of performing.

We sent the video away to the Funding Committee. I cannot say that I was hopeful of anything. To me it was just a way of saying: “Look – we have people in this country who have the skills to compete, so be aware of that.” We thought nothing more about it until the response came back – with an offer of funding.

“Who is Melina?” my father asked.

“That is me, Pappy,” I explained.

He was not at all happy with either me or his wife. He said that it was fraud. But as we explained, there was no reason why girls should be favored over boys for funding. Now we had funding. We had access to horse transport, money for saddles, equipment, clothing, and entry to national competitions.

“But now you must compete as a girl,” he said. “How do you propose to do that?”

My mother and I looked at one another. It was as if we somehow did not think that mattered – as if now the funding was in hand, I could just step forward as me. But we both suddenly realized that we were trapped in a lie. It was a lie that would change my life.

My appearance as a girl was quite acceptable, as even my father had to agree, but that is a small part of being a woman.

I said that my horse and I could do a few tricks, but that is not what dressage is. For a natural rider like me, dressage is the most difficult. Essentially it is training a horse to move in a certain way, as if it were natural, “in response to barely perceptible signals from its rider” (as the definition goes). My horse looked like a horse, and I now looked like a girl, but both us were going to have to learn our moves.

My mother was a singer in her youth, and she was able to help me with exercises to raise my voice to a higher pitch. After I had done these exercises, I could speak in that same pitch and sound like a girl, but I needed to practice. My father and my brothers found this very unnerving, but by now it was clear that I was 100% committed to my plan, so they put up with my girlish words.

My mother suggested that I wear some of her dresses around the house.

“But I am just going to be wearing riding clothes,” I said, almost in protest, but not quite.

“Maybe not always,” she said. “But wearing these clothes will help you to learn your moves. It will help you to build a feminine personality which you will need to show when you are on your feet. You cannot spend your whole time in the saddle.”

And then there was the problem in my pants. All riders need to wear tight pants. This is not fashion, it is function, but if I turned up in anything else it would look odd. My mother and I looked for a solution to this problem, and we found one by learning about transvestites.

In my town we have no such thing, but we learned that these people live in the city, and that they have methods of concealing their genitals for even the tightest of garments. But the key was the right equipment, and the suggestion was that some drugs should also be used, to prevent against any accidental swelling. My mother said that she could make the equipment, and that she knew how she might be able to get the transvestite drugs.

How she was able to do that is a long story, but basically, she had a sister who worked for a pharmaceutical company. She saw a picture of the drugs in a jar and recognized the brand name. We could not afford the drugs, but her sister sent them to her for free.

My mother did not tell me anything about the other effects of the drugs, other than to say that they might help me to appear more like a woman “in other ways”. Looking back, maybe she did not realize how great the effect would be, or maybe she just thought it could be easily undone. But I think that she always harbored a desire for a daughter.

She went with me to meet the association, to collect the first part of my funding, and to attend my first competition. As I said, for some reason women were favored under our national system, and sponsors included brands or cosmetic and women’s clothing. With the saddlery we wanted I received a package of stuff that I gave straight to my mother.

“No, we’ll share it,” she said. She was very proud of me. I had appeared before the officials and done a great job of convincing them that I was just a normal girl – perhaps a bit rough coming from the country, but definitely a girl.

My first competition was a great success, but I discovered one thing that I was not expecting. I had been taking the drugs so that I would not get erections, and my genitals were taped up as we had learned to do it, with the head of my penis well back between my legs. But I learned that in this position the tip receives stimulation when you are seated on something moving. I had an embarrassment. Luckily my mother was there with a new pair of pants and a pad to go in.

One of the women coaches had seen that there had been an accident, but she had no idea that it involved a serious spill. She smiled and said to my mother: “A lot of girls have orgasms while riding. It is one of the hazards of female anatomy. Or some might say, one of the pleasures we can take from horse riding”.

Sure enough, I learned from other girls on the circuit that orgasms in the saddle are a thing for women riders. I never knew.

I have to admit that I got used to it once I learned how to contain it. In fact, it became, as she said, a pleasure. I had never masturbated regularly, but now it seemed that every time I was taped back and my tip was rubbed rhythmically, I might come. I needed to wear pads, just like other girls.

Fortunately, it is not so much of a problem when you are in full competition where concentration does not allow the mind to relax into pleasure mode.

And I did concentrate, and I did win plenty of contests.

And the more I won, the clearer it became that I could not just pack up my stuff and drive away with my horse trailer. I had to collect prizes and attend functions, all as Melina.

When I mixed with other competitors at the beginning, I was Melina, that girl from the country – awkward, unsophisticated, and largely unconcerned with her appearance. But that changed. The other girls took me in and tried to make more of a girl of me. It was hard to resist. There is something about equestrian competition that is different. People can be fierce competitors on the course or it the dressage ring, but when we are grooming our horses, we are just horsewomen together.

There were horsemen too, but I was not interested in them. As I say, they were all privately funded, and they seemed superior and uninterested in associating with people like me.

Still, when I was all dressed up with the girls, usually by the girls, some men did show an interest. I played the game and talked to them just like the others, but I was hiding a secret which meant that it could only be talk – no action.

But over this time, it was clear that my body was changing. The drugs that I talked about had softened my body and prevented any body hair coming through where I had shaved myself. That softness was most obvious on the chest and on my behind. I was developing a woman’s shape.

And my hair was changing too. I had ditched the fall of hair that my mother had made because my own hair had grown out and was thick and lustrous. It was not so short when I started all this, so by the time I was at the national championships it was shoulder length and I could wear it in a low bun during competition, and sometimes a few playful curls for the evening after competition.

I have to admit I loved my hair. I liked my long hair as a boy, but as a girl I loved it. I was always playing with it. Even at home, when I usually wore just my boys jeans and a loose shirt to hide my body, I wore my hair up. My father disapproved. My brothers just got used to it. But nobody wanted to be seen in town with me. If I did go into town I went in with my mother as Melina, introduced to people that I already knew, as her niece, staying with us for while.

The National Championships were a 3-day event. That means three days of competition starting with a cross country obstacle course on Day 1, Dressage on Day 2, and showjumping on Day 3. My horse Gamma was strong in all areas, being a great jumper, but we were weak in dressage.

We did not win the National Championships but not because we were not great. The problem was that the dressage judges found that our moves were “Too showy” and “A succession of tricks rather than controlled movements”. But if those judges were not impressed, an international visitor was.

Nigel Kendrick was from England, and I spoke very little English at that time. He knew enough of my language to tell me that he enjoyed watching me and that he thought that I was a very good rider. He spoke to me about the possibility of going to England to compete in the Badminton Horse Trials in May. He was with something called FEI (*Federation Equestre Internationale*), an international association for equestrian sport who were looking for young contestants from all over the world.

There are contests for young riders, but every rider over 18 is looking to compete in any one or more of the six big competitions – the five star events: The Kentucky Three Day Event (USA), The Badminton Horse Trials (GBR), The Luhmühlen Horse Trials (GER), The Burghley Horse Trials (GBR), Les Etoiles de Pau (FRA), and the Australian International 3 Day Event (AUS). I was almost 18, and it was clear that my strength was in the 3 day competitions. That was where I wanted to compete.

The only problem continued to be that I was living a lie. I was pretending to be Melina, a female rider, but I was male. As I said, with equestrian sport and eventing in particular, men and women compete on an equal footing, so I was not cheating, but I was lying. At least, I was then.

The crazy thing is that once I had secured funding through FEI affiliates I could have unmasked myself at any time, and revealed that I was not a girl at all. I would still have been able to compete. But somehow that seemed more problematic than staying as Melina. I still had some sponsorship, and in particular a shampoo brand in my country used me and my long hair in advertising.

I wore it in a long braid when I was competing. It became a signature. Photos were taken of me with my hair down standing next to Gamma with his tail combed beside me. That was the photo of me that appeared in an article in a European Magazine entitled: “The 10 Most Beautiful Sportswomen in the World”. How do you go backwards from that.

And the truth is that after a couple of years of competing, there was no going back. The hormones had played their part, but so had the binding of my genitals to hide my maleness in those tight riding pants, and the constant pounding while I rode. My testicles had died, and the London-based specialist said that they would need to be removed to prevent infection.

My parents were horrified by the news, but at the same time, they had become so proud of their daughter Melina and all that she had achieved on the international equestrian circuit. People in my village knew the truth – how could they not. One moment my parent’s youngest child is their son, and now they have a daughter instead. But when you are famous from such a small town, people will accept you as one of theirs.

I decided that I wanted to be married in my village, at the church that was the centre of my community. The man who proposed to me was another rider, from America. We met in Kentucky in April at the start of the season, and two months after my orchidectomy. We competed for the whole of that year, and by the time we got to Paris in October, he proposed. I told him why I had to refuse him, and he was shocked and heartbroken, but after my final surgery he renewed his offer and I accepted.

“We jump over hurdles for a living,” he said.

The End

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