

Michael Vermaas—
A Gypsy with a Home and Mission
By Ingrid Edisen

Dressage trainer Michael Vermaas believes in getting the job done. After riding internationally on three different continents for over thirty years, the professional rider has settled in the San Antonio area and travels widely to assist his clients. Currently one of his home bases is the Retama Park in San Antonio where he regularly works with a client string of ten horses. It could be said that another home base for him is his car. He drives the length of IH-35, traveling between San Antonio and Austin several times a week to work even more horses and riders, much to his clients' delight.

Built like a formidable rugby player, Michael is tough and no nonsense but eminently fair to the horse. Even horses with "bucking issues" don't faze him. So far in Texas he has not been presented with a horse that did not at least have some kindness in its eye, he explained. He appears to be the sort of person who has lived an intense life and risen up to the challenge rather than been drained. Life has cloaked almost a James Bond type mantle about his being. He is quick to laugh and when pressed can become quite serious. Kay Skillern of L & L Boarding who has him reschooling several difficult horses at her barn, describes him as having almost a Zen-like quality towards his horses and students; not in an ethereal way, though, as he is very much grounded in the world.

"You keep learning until you die," he stated. "And I don't know it all." There are no "closed doors" as far as he is concerned. He is open and willing to learn from everybody and everything. But after scaling the heights of various show circuits in disciplines as hunter/jumper, eventing and dressage, he now has simplified his life.

"I like to teach people who just want to enjoy their horse. Every single bit of improvement is satisfying." It does not matter if a client is show bound or not. His students range from one who is among the top 32 FEI riders in the world, a German Junior National Team member to the weekend rider putzing in the hot Texas sun.

He moved to this state in August, 2005, a few years ago after accepting a position at a barn in San Antonio. Unfortunately, a few months after making his move his new employer told him the barn had to be shut down. By then Michael had developed a tiny independent clientele just numbering three. He hunkered down, made his living expenses and decided to see what the future would bring.

News of his skill traveled as time went on and now he is solidly busy. But how did he gain his craftsman's way of handling horses? It was by adversity. Growing up in the Netherlands, he discovered he was good at sports—in fact, so good that after a while most sports almost bored him. But it was the horses that gave him a challenge. "Every horse is an individual," he said. In kindergarten he rode a black and white pony and by age eight was solidly bucked off. He stayed away from riding for two years. When he returned to it, at age ten, he shunned ponies in favor of the larger horses. He also encountered a riding teacher who "couldn't stand my guts" and relished assigning young

Michael precisely the wrong horse at precisely the wrong time. For example, if hearing the rain pound on the tin roof over the riding arena drove a particular horse nuts, that was the horse given to Michael to ride that day.

“I’m stubborn,” Michael explained. “I didn’t want to give the guy the pleasure that I might stop my lessons.” So, he persevered. In a backhanded way, he now realizes that that experience helped him.

When he was thirteen, his parents moved the family to Portugal. “I hated it in the beginning,” he said. He missed his friends and worked hard at giving his parents a “guilt trip” for making the move. In response, they bought him a string of twenty-two horses and said, “Here’s a string of eight jumping horses and fourteen lesson horses. Now go open your own riding center.” Realizing Michael, at age 14, needed help, they also hired Nuno Oliveira’s assistant Fernando Oliveira and also had Michael enrolled in the International School run by Lord Loch, Sylvia Loch’s husband, who instructed Michael twice a week. Sylvia Loch is an esteemed dressage rider and author herself. Michael’s jumping coach was Marcel Bonaerens who had served as Ludo Phillipaerts’s coach.

With such intense and excellent input as that, Michael’s riding escalated quickly. Soon he was good at placing at all the shows, growing confident that anything below a third was beneath him. His whole life was horses and girls, school and riding. He started teaching riding at age 18. For a while he became quite competitive but that eventually died down and he got put off of it.

When Michael was a young adult, the CEO of Locketite, a British company, offered him a corporate sponsorship to work show jumpers in Germany. Here he got to see the underbelly of the top competitive circuits and did not like it. A \$300,000 horse had to jump whether he liked it or not, Michael said. That was the reality of the show world.

In 1989, he moved to South Africa because Ronnie Cornick, a top jumper rider, had a half Hannoverian, half Thoroughbred that could not be ridden. Michael worked with the horse to make him useable and succeeded. The tough horse had been bred in Namibia, where young horses were turned out to grow up among the lions and whichever animal survived was cultivated back into civilization as a show prospect. Now in South Africa, Michael found camaraderie among the show riding set that he enjoyed, for instance with fellow competitors such as English rider Jeff Billington. The setting was relaxed and supportive. And the expansive parties at all the big hotels connected with the shows made it a fun, happy atmosphere in the early ‘90’s. His visa expired after six months. He returned to Portugal to his own training barn that he’d started in ‘84, continuing to teach and sell many horses to England and Belgium. During this period he was able to ride under Luis Valenca, and the Chief Rider of Portugal and head of the Alter Stud, Dom Jose Athayde.

Before he moved to Texas, he also trained horses for the royal family of Saudi Arabia as well as that country’s national oil company, Aramco.

Having an overview of the international scene that spans thirty years gives him a unique vantage point. He observes that even the Germans are starting to weave more French-like techniques into their training and dressage as the horses they have bred are lighter in frame and movement. And on the other side of the coin, he is seeing the French adopting some of the German-styled techniques. Another comment was on the American style of jumping. In the eighties, he said, the Americans rode (jumpers) with a longer rein. Now he sees that the style has become more “cranked in” which is not necessarily good for the horse, he explains with dismay.

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