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# Memories from the Vet Box with Max Corcoran

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Max Corcoran and Walk On the Moon competing in the 2006 Waredaca Training Three-Day Event. Photo courtesy of Max Corcoran

When super groom Max Corcoran mentioned in 2005 that it would be fun to participate in a USEA Classic Series event, her employer and eventing legend Karen O'Connor took that to heart.

"I did a lot of grooming for the classic format when Kentucky and all those other competitions were proper long format," Corcoran shared. "When Gretchen [Butts] started offering the Classic Series at Waredaca [Gaithersburg, Maryland,] she asked if I would come up and do some lectures to help people understand what the 10-minute box was and how to pack for it. I did that a few times and said to Karen, 'Man, it would be so fun to do one of these.' And so Karen's like, 'You want to do one? Yeah, you're gonna do one next year.'"

Corcoran pushed back a bit, but when David O'Connor caught wind of Karen's master plan to get Corcoran qualified the following fall, the ball really began rolling.

"That was in October of 2005," recalled Corcoran. "So the next year happens, and Karen and I go off to the World Championships [Aachen, Germany] in 2006 and we come home, and I see my name on the list of entries for the next event and I was like, 'Woah, woah, woah! What is going on?' And Karen said to me, 'We have got to get you qualified for the Training Three-Day!'"

David offered up his great Thoroughbred event horse Walk On the Moon, or "Danny," to be Corcoran's Classic Series mount, and the real preparation began. Corcoran ran a few horse trials with Danny in order to earn her qualification for the Three-Day, and while she was busy fulfilling her grooming duties in the weeks leading up to Waredaca, Lauren Nicholson (neé Kieffer) stepped in to help keep Danny conditioned. When the event ultimately rolled around, the tables were turned, and Karen stepped in to play the role of groom for Corcoran so she could focus on her job as the rider.

"There I was, going to the Three-Day, and I was completely petrified. It was really nerve-wracking," she said. "On the groom's side, I knew exactly what I was doing, but on the rider's side, I had to start all over. I had to think to myself, 'Did I pack all my clothes for the trot-ups? Did I do this? Did I pack that?' I remember looking at Karen and saying, 'There is so much stuff to remember!' And Karen looked at me and said, 'Well, I hope you've packed the groom's kits because I don't know how to do that!' It was really fun trading places and for the two of us to see what each other usually had to know how to do."

Karen didn't let anyone take on her responsibilities as Corcoran's groom, which led to many fun and comical memories for the pair to look back on. From braiding to mucking stalls, Karen was there to support Corcoran in her first-ever Three-Day endeavor.

"She would come in the morning and start mucking stalls, and all of the parents of the kids who were there loved it," Corcoran said. "They would say to their kids, 'Karen O'Connor is mucking a stall; that means you can, too! Karen O'Connor is braiding a horse; that means you can too.'"

When it came time to compete, Corcoran was feeling her nerves, noting that riding one of David's horses definitely added a bit of pressure to the weekend.

"David is seriously competitive when it comes to his horses, so I couldn't screw it up!" she said. "So, I do my test, and Karen and my good friend Colby Bauersfeld, who used to work for Phillip Dutton for years, are there, and I come out of the ring, and I was like, 'Oh my god. I

nailed that test. That was like the best test! I can't even believe I just did that!' And Karen said to me, 'Yeah, it was really good, except you were on the wrong diagonal the entire time.'"

Now that she can laugh about it, Corcoran can look back on the test with a sense of humor, but at the time she was panicking over her potential mistake. "They were laughing at me and even told me I changed to the wrong diagonal over X, but Danny won the dressage anyway because he is perfect."

Following dressage, it was time to get ready for the next phases of the competition. Corcoran said she was a bit overwhelmed by all of the minute markers she needed to remember, but she found peace in resuming her normal grooming routine of putting together their steeplechase bucket for Karen to bring along for use in case they needed any supplies following the steeplechase phase. The crew got their buckets for the 10-minute box set up and ready before Karen and Bauersfeld made their way down to the start of steeplechase to see Corcoran out of the start box.

"I'm going as fast as I think I can go," recalled Corcoran, "but I am panicked because this is the first time I have ever worn a cross-country watch. I thought it started beeping on the minute, but apparently, it beeps five seconds before the minute. So the whole time I thought I was five seconds slow, and I just kept thinking I needed to go faster! But, if you kick Danny when he's jumping, he likes to buck or hop. So he's bucking, and I'm kicking, and I'm panicking. In the meantime, apparently, Colby looks at Karen and says, 'Hey Karen, where's the steeplechase bucket?'"

As it turns out, a confused Karen left the steeplechase bucket in the vet box with the 10-minute bucket, so she took off running back to the vet box, completely missing most of Corcoran's steeplechase round.

Speed was something that Corcoran always struggled with leading up to the Three-Day. She shared that she often felt as if she were flying around cross-country, only to come up 10 seconds too slow. She shared that having the steeplechase phase in the long-format helped her become a bit braver and helped her learn to land, kick, and then gallop on from each jump. When it came time for her cross-country round at Waredaca, she applied what she had learned in the steeplechase phase and broke her habit of going too slow, coming in 10 seconds under optimum time.

Show jumping was on the last day, but Karen had to step away to attend a different horse trial. Thankfully, Bauersfeld was there to help Corcoran by setting jumps and preparing her for the ring.

"Of course," Corcoran recalled, "I had two of the biggest misses in the show jumping warm up. I mean, I crashed through jumps. I was so nervous. I hate show jumping warm up, and it was

so bad. And then I went in and Danny, of course, was the true professional and jumped clear around and he was awesome."

With a (near) perfect dressage test, learning to let go and go fast in the speed phases, and a double-clear show jumping effort, what more could Corcoran ask for out of the weekend? With all of their phases complete, however, one more big surprise was on the horizon—the pair won their division adding not a single fault to their dressage score.

The memory and the experience is one that will stick with Corcoran forever. "I encourage everybody to do [a Classic Series event] because it literally is so much fun. You learn so much about riding. You learned so much about your horse. You learn so much about management and horse care, and it is so fun."

Everyone was thrilled for Corcoran for the win, and it was a great way for the whole barn team to draw a close to the 2006 eventing season with a little extra special celebration.

But, of course, the burning question still remains: how would Corcoran rate Karen's grooming skills on a scale of 1-10?

"Well, I would give her two scores," Corcoran said with a chuckle. "I will give her a 12 on the scale for enthusiasm, but I would probably give her about a six for skill. We had such a good time, and it was so good for everybody. We had obviously worked together for a long time and for both of us to swap roles and have that knowledge was great. We already had such a mutual respect for one another as competitor and groom, but this experience was so fun, and we definitely had a giggle over it."

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