



## Davidson Dominates At Rocking Horse Advanced

by Kat Netzler

*After enduring a series of unfortunate events last season, Buck Davidson is back on top with two different advanced-level horses, and four more are waiting in the wings.*

The latter half of 2008 didn't quite go as planned for Buck Davidson's two top advanced horses, My Boy Bobby and Ballynoe Castle RM. One's competitive edge seemed threatened by imminent burnout, while the other couldn't even manage to complete a recognized event from June until February.

But at the Rocking Horse Advanced Horse Trials in Altoona, Fla., on Feb. 17, Davidson and his two chestnut geldings put the past squarely behind them.



Davidson, 32, Ocala, Fla., won two of the three advanced divisions at Rocking Horse with "Bobby" and "Reggie," and he rode a total of 18 phases on six different horses at the one-day event.

"I did my last dressage test and went right over to the show jumping, and four of my horses were standing there waiting for me with absolutely nobody else there," Davidson said, laughing. "So I said, 'Well, I guess it's just going to be the Buck show for awhile.'"

Thanks to the coordination of his assistants and the careful scheduling of event secretary Rick Dunkerton, Davidson managed to fit in all of his rides and wasn't even the last to go on cross-country at the end of the day.

"It was just a fun, beautiful, safe day, and it was great," Davidson said. "Everybody from our barn was there, and I was so excited for the Segals, because I don't think they've ever had two advanced wins on one day."

Carl and Cassandra Segal, Pottersville, N. J., own Bobby, who was formerly ridden by Jessica Kiener, and Reggie, whom Davidson has trained up himself. The latter horse, a 9-year-old Belgian



Warmblood-Irish Thoroughbred (Ramiro B —Ballyvaldon Natalie), cleaned up in the advanced test A, division 2, which came as a big relief after last summer's setbacks.

As alternates for the Olympic team, the pair flew to England to quarantine before the Games. After the selected horses went on to Hong Kong, Buck and Reggie remained in England to compete in the

advanced division of the British Open at Gatcombe Park in August. But during their stay in Europe, Davidson and Reggie inexplicably fell prey to every eventer's worst nightmare: pure and simple bad luck.

"He should have won that, but I jumped the wrong fence because that's how I walked the course," Davidson explained. "They put up the fence that we were supposed to jump afterwards, and I never saw it, so that was a bit of a bummer."

Davidson then re-organized and aimed Reggie for the Blenheim CCI\*\*\* in September. They were tied for fourth out of 84 horses after the dressage, only to have the event canceled the next day due to extreme rain and flooding. Then, trying for one last European competition before flying the horse back home, Davidson entered the Boekelo CCI\*\*\* (the Netherlands) in October, but he fell off at the 12th fence on cross-country.

"He just sort of bellied a log, and he didn't actually lay over it, but it threw him right on his nose and just chucked me," Davidson said. "I've never been chucked out of it so fast in my life."

The trip-up was a disappointing end to a frustrating season, but it didn't cause any physical or mental setbacks, so Davidson was able to take it in stride.

"In some ways, everything happens for a reason," he said. "[Reggie] got hard fit for the Olympics, and he didn't get to go there. Then he got hard fit for Blenheim and didn't get to go there. Then he had to get re-jazzed up to go to Boekelo, and there's only a certain amount of time you can have a horse fit and primed. They can't stay that way forever, and if you go over it, they break. Maybe falling off early in the course was a good thing; maybe something worse could have happened. So I just saw it as a blessing in disguise."

Davidson's sense of responsibility is evident whenever he talks about Reggie's future. So far the gelding is on the path to his first CCI\*\*\*\*, the Rolex Kentucky, this April, but if more setbacks come his way, Davidson said he won't be discouraged.

"Certainly his career is far more important than Rolex this year," he said. "He's just 9 years old, and he's a dream horse. You spend all your life riding a bunch of donkeys so you can ride him."

Davidson clarified that he's ridden countless mounts of great talent throughout his career so far, and none of them would come close to qualifying as "donkeys." But Reggie is simply the most gifted mount he's ever had.

"He got a 29 in dressage in the advanced at Gatcombe and a 39 in the CCI\*\*\* at Blenheim," Davidson said. "He's a ridiculously good show jumper. If he does his job and I do mine, there's not too many who are going to beat him. I know he's competitive anywhere in the world."

Rocking Horse was no exception, as Reggie topped the dressage with a mark of 32.9 and never looked back. Even with 1.6 cross-country time faults, the win was his over Leslie Law and Fleeceworks Mystere du Val (38.2).

## **Acapulco Jazz Jumps Up For A Win**

**Bonner Carpenter made her trip from Texas to Florida worthwhile with a win in the advanced test A, division 1. The 21-year-old rider is majoring in sociology and psychology at Southern Methodist University, so for several years she's flown back and forth from Dallas on weekends to compete in spring events.**

**Carpenter keeps her horses, including her longtime partner and Rocking Horse winner Acapulco Jazz, in training at Mike Huber's Gold Chip Stables in Florida. He and assistant trainer Heather Morris keep the 18-year-old Mexican Quarter Horse gelding in shape, while Carpenter stays fit by riding another of her advanced horses at Huber's base in Bartonville, Texas.**

Because he had so many other horses to ride at Rocking Horse Winter II the weekend before, Davidson scratched Reggie from what was supposed to be his first spring outing, at intermediate. That made the gelding a bit fresher than expected going out at advanced, but Davidson said he was still fully focused on his job. Often spooky and rowdy on his home turf, Reggie seems to have a particularly convenient sixth sense about competition.

"He's a bit of a nightmare sometimes to ride at home," Davidson admitted. "But our personalities probably mesh. We both like to have a good time, but then when it's time to go we both get pretty serious I think.

"When we were getting ready to do the final Olympic selection trial, he was being a bit of a jerk about his [lead] changes," he continued. "And the day of the test he gets all four of his changes perfectly, and everybody's like, 'How'd you pull that off?' He just knows. It sounds cheesy, but he knows when to show up, and he hasn't let me down yet."

### **Bobby Is Back**

Davidson said Reggie took to the cross-country course at Rocking Horse with his typical exuberance, but Davidson was thrilled to find a similar energy in Bobby, who won the advanced test C division (38.9).

"He had some confidence issues last year, but now he's in the bridle and wants to go someplace," Davidson said. "He's got all the jump in the world, it's just a matter of whether he really wants to do it. And it feels like he does now."

Davidson took over the ride on the 13-year-old Irish Sport Horse last summer after Kiener had problems at the spring CIC\*\*\*s. While the gelding placed well after his rider change, Davidson still felt he wasn't firing the way he should. Bobby had a run-out on cross-country at the Fair Hill CCI\*\*\* (Md.) in October, and Davidson said it felt like he'd simply run out of gas mentally and physically by the end of the course.

"I thought, 'Well, it's not going to do him any good to have a break right now. He needs to keep getting better,'" Davidson said. "So we took him over to Wales [in November] for the Express Eventing, and that sure didn't go as well as everybody had hoped."

Organizers of the indoor eventing competition came under heavy fire after most horses were unable to complete the massive and difficult combined show jumping/cross-country course, and Mary King's horse Call Again Cavalier was fatally injured.

"I was a bit nervous to see what the lingering effects from that would be for Bobby," said Davidson, who retired halfway through the competition. "But he feels like a different horse for me now, and even for Jess, who takes him on gallops a lot. He's been dragging her all around. That's fantastic, because usually you'd have to

Carpenter was thrilled with her win at Rocking Horse, especially because it came with a career-best advanced dressage score (38.8) for "Jazz."

"That test was probably one of the best of his life," Carpenter said. "He's not a dressage horse by any means. He's 16.1 hands, but his stride is insanely small. I don't think he's ever scored below a 40 in advanced before, so I couldn't have been happier."

In seventh place after the dressage, the pair had the last rail down in show jumping but still moved up two spots to fifth. After they posted the fastest round in their division on cross-country with 2.8 time penalties, they overtook leaders Missy Ranshausen and Critical Decision by more than 10 points.

"I had a fall earlier in the day on another horse, so it kind of woke me up for Jazz," Carpenter said. "He was so great everywhere. He always is. I don't have to balance him up until a stride out, so time comes very easily for him. He was going at a comfortable pace—it wasn't like I was really pushing for time. Cross-country is definitely his thing."

Carpenter and Jazz jumped clean and fast around the Rolex Kentucky CCI\*\*\*\* cross-country last year, but the gelding was unfortunately spun at the jog on Sunday morning. Carpenter hopes to return again this year and complete the event.

"It was a great experience in general to be able to jump around that cross-country course and to know that he could actually do it," she said. "Jazz isn't the scopiast horse in the world like most of the other horses you see jumping around advanced. But he just has the biggest heart, and I think that's what makes him stand out."

take a big pair of spurs to encourage him on.”

Bobby placed second in the dressage (33.3) at Rocking Horse but took over the lead with one rail down in show jumping and 1.6 time faults on cross-country. Darren Chiacchia and Windfall II finished second, nearly 10 points behind.

“He was spot-perfect,” Davidson said. “The only thing he did wrong was that he was playing with all the show jumps, kicking out behind for fun, and he ended up kicking out that one rail behind him. But he’s ready. I think he’s ready for something really good this spring. We’ll see. This is the year that he’s either a great horse or he’s not. Hopefully he will be.”

If Bobby’s performances keep improving, he may also accompany his stablemate to Rolex Kentucky in April.

“If you had asked me six weeks ago, I would have told you Bobby was going to [the CCI\*\*\*] at Jersey Fresh (N. J.),” Davidson said. “But if you’re asking right now, I’d say it’s 50/50. If he’s as confident going around Southern Pines (N.C.) and The Fork (N.C.) as he has been at his first two events, I would think that he would go to Kentucky.”

While Reggie and Bobby were the stars of the week, Davidson is also building a string of advanced horses to back them up. At Rocking Horse, he also rode Triomphe and L.A. Albert and was especially proud of his two advanced first-timers, May I Tell Ya and Titanium.

“We definitely talked about how this was our hardest two weeks in Ocala, but I knew going in to Tuesday that they were all ready,” he said. “I didn’t care whether they were first or last, I just wanted them all to go well, and they did. I think it might be my year. It’s started out well, and I have a good feeling. Last year was tough and disappointing, but I think this one’s going to be good.”

*Kat Netzler*