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The Chronicle's Eventing Horseman Of The Year: Buck Davidson

By *Molly Sorge*

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Buck Davidson has always been a great rider, but in 2009 he seemed to truly come into his own. Davidson's year was headlined by being the highest-placed U.S. rider at the Rolex Kentucky CCI**** on My Boy Bobby and finishing 11th at the Burghley CCI**** (England) on Ballynoe Castle RM, but he achieved success with virtually every horse in his large string.

"I'm probably riding fewer horses, but riding those horses more successfully. That's great for me," Davidson said. "Riding good horses reconfirms the good things that you do. They make me believe in myself. That helps me believe in them, and then they believe in me, and it all starts spinning the right way."

Davidson believes everything improved for him in 2009. "I'm better; the horses are better. I can't say it's one thing, but it's all the people in my barn who help me, and it's all the sponsors that give me the best equipment," he continued. "It's the owners who send me wonderful horses to ride, and it's having the best vets, the best farriers. Everything is sort of coming together and, hopefully, we'll have a run for a while."

When he walks into the barn, Davidson said he has the luxury of seeing "some good horses," which always helps a rider. "You're only as good as what you're sitting on," Davidson said. "For so long, people said to me, 'You need better horses.' But I was just trying to survive financially, and that's why I was riding all different kinds of horses. This year I was very lucky that all of the horses were good. Most of the horses in the barn won at least one event, and I've got great owners who provide me with great horses."

But it's not just the horses that made the difference according to Davidson's father, legendary event rider Bruce Davidson.

"If you look at Buck, his life is more in order. He's matured, and he's serious about what he's doing. He's physically fit and in a position to ride that much better," Bruce said. "I think he's hit the point where he understands his abilities, and he knows that he can make a living and that he can attract owners and he can produce a horse. With all of that comes a lot of confidence."

When Buck struck out on his own six years ago, leaving his father's farm to build his own business, he had a five-year plan. He knew he'd have to concentrate on supporting himself at first, but he eventually wanted to shift to focusing on his riding. That transition happened this year and was a turning point.

"I used to ride in an event, get on a plane on Sunday night, teach Monday and Tuesday, fly home on the red-eye, and ride Wednesday and Thursday, then go to an event and do it all over again. It was crazy. I think I was just basically tired," Buck said. "I still probably teach a lot by

most people's standards, but much less than I used to. I've learned to say no. If I don't have time, I say I can't do it. I still need to [teach]—I didn't get rich all of a sudden. But it's not as intense. I literally used to go and buy a bale of hay at a time, because that's what I could afford. Now, I can at least buy a tractor-trailer load and go figure out how to pay for it later."

Buck's challenge still remains balancing his lesson and clinic programs with his own riding. "Buck is dedicated to whatever he's doing," said Bruce. "He's in the barn first thing in the morning, and he's the last one out at night. He doesn't leave one part of it to anyone else. He knows what it takes to do each job, and I'm very proud of that because all of my kids had to work to grow up."

On top of that hard work, Buck has genuine talent. "He's accurate. He's got a great eye and a good sense of balance, so he puts horses in a spot where they can jump clean and confidently," said Bruce. "When one has that ability, horses tend to like you and go well for you because they know you're helping them. I think the one thing Buck has way over me and most people is that he rides better in competition than any other time. We all like to think of ourselves as good competitors, but he's truly a great competitor. He thrives under pressure."

Carl Segal has reaped the rewards of Buck's competitive streak as the owner—with his wife Cassie—of My Boy Bobby and Ballynoe Castle RM, but he also values Buck as a friend.

"He's a very honorable and honest young man who works very hard," said Segal. "Buck's an incredible horseman, and he's great at training horses and competing. He calls us all the time and tells us what's happening and includes us in the management of the horses."

The Segals might be Buck's most well known owners right now, but Buck knows he wouldn't have been able to reach these heights without all of the owners who've entrusted him with their horses over the years.

"It takes a long time to get to where I was this year, and I had a lot of people—like Janis Smith, who owned Mystic Mike—supporting me for all the years before this point," he said.

PERSONAL PROFILE

Age: 33

Residences: Farms in Riegelsville, Pa., and Ocala, Fla.

WEG hopes: The 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games will be held at the Kentucky Horse Park. Bruce Davidson's individual gold at the 1974 World Championships brought the 1978 World Championships to the United States, which led to the creation of the Kentucky Horse Park. "I never really cared about going to the Olympics or going to the World Games, but [the 2010 WEG] is one thing that matters to me," Buck Davidson said. "Kentucky is a special place for our family—it came about because of Dad. To be able to do something like the [WEG] at Kentucky would obviously be a dream come true."

Being Bruce Davidson's son: "Some people think I have it easy because of who he is, and some people think I have it hard because of who he is, but at the end of the day, you have to make your own life," Buck said. "As I get older, the stuff he's done gets cooler, but at the end of the day, he's just my dad. It's great to have him to bounce things off of. He's done it longer, better than anyone else."

2009 COMPETITIVE HIGHLIGHTS

- 3rd—Rolex Kentucky CCI**** (My Boy Bobby)
- 11th—Burghley CCI**** (England) (Ballynoe Castle RM)
- 7th—Jersey Fresh CCI*** (N.J.) (Titanium)
- 8th—Bromont CCI*** (Que.) (Triomphe)
- 1st—The Fork CIC*** (N.C.) (My Boy Bobby)
- 1st—Wits End CIC***-W (Ont.) (My Boy Bobby)
- 2nd—Wits End CIC***-W (Ballynoe Castle RM)
- 2nd—Maui Jim CIC*** (Ballynoe Castle RM)
- 1st—division of advanced at Maui Jim Horse Trials (Ill.) (L.A. Albert)
- 1st—division of advanced at Southern Pines Horse Trials (N.C.) (My Boy Bobby)
- 1st—two divisions of advanced at Rocking Horse Winter (Fla.) (My Boy Bobby and Ballynoe Castle RM)

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