



Two for three

Ellensburg's Mary Burke and her Thoroughbred make a perfect team for three-day eventing

By JOHN TAYLOR
North Country Rider

Nobody ever seemed to be able to handle the young Thoroughbred gelding. His breeder had died before he could break the athletic bay, and the horse had drifted, never learning much of anything except how to buck — and he had a breathtaking aptitude for that.

So no one with any sense wanted much part of him, and eventually he slipped off nearly everyone's radar.

By the time Ellensburg's Mary Burke heard about him, his owner was considering selling him as a rodeo bronc.

The bucking stories didn't scare off Burke, who was looking for a mount for three-day eventing. And the chemistry she sensed when she stopped by to meet the horse — whose formal name is *Esprit de Corps* but who goes by the barn name of Tucker — sealed it.

"When I walked him out of the paddock I immediately knew that he was exactly what I wanted," says Burke, a 47-year-old physical therapist who runs *Burkeridge Farm*, just south of Ellensburg.

Turns out she's got a pretty good eye.

Taking part in their first national competition, Burke and Tucker outdid 35 other riders from around the country to win the Sept. 10-14 Preliminary Horse class of the Wellpride USEA American Eventing Championships in Wayne, Ill. The field included 2004 Olympic gold medalist Leslie Law.

"It just happened to be my day," Burke shrugs.

Burke and Tucker, who's now 13, have trained and shown well in regional-level competitions for the previous five years, qualifying for the nationals each year. The expense and time involved in trailering across the country, however, had always been something of a deterrent.

"I wanted to do it last year," Burke says, "but things just didn't fall into place."

This year, though, with some financial backing from the regional chapter, Burke and her husband, Richard, a 45-year-old Bellevue paramedic and firefighter, made the 39-hour haul back to the Chicago area.

Three-day eventing, which combines dressage, cross-country and show jumping, requires close partnerships between horse and rider. And that's where Tucker and Burke's bond has paid off.

Under the rules, riders get maps and can walk the course before competitions, but horses don't know what they're getting into until the scoreboard lights up and the clock starts ticking.

With "sheeting" rains soaking the area (nearly 8 inches of precipitation fell in Wayne just prior to the events), Burke walked the soggy grounds and set her strategy — counting on Tucker's intelligence and trust in her to shave precious strides.

Tucker, Burke says, isn't the fastest or the most agile horse she's ever seen. But his faith, versatility and consistency generally keep him in perfect step with Burke's game plans.

She figured if she and Tucker hit everything right, they could save 10-20 strides over the 36-obstacle course.

Burke's methodical training — she generally works him an hour and a half a day, five days a week — paid off.

Coming from behind after the dressage portion, she and Tucker pulled into the points lead when it counted to take home top honors in her class.

The victory allows her to compete in the intermediate class next year, which is just a step away from Olympic-level riding.

Burke's got more immediate goals in mind, though. She plans to try an intermediate competition in Montana next spring and maybe return to the nationals.

Riding for her country is a distant-sounding dream.

"It's in the back of my mind," Burke admits. "You never know."

For now, she's just thankful for the support of her husband, her coach (Olympian Amy Tryon), trainer Alexis Lind and the friends she's made along the way.

Including that bay that nobody else seemed to want.

• For training or further information on three-day eventing, contact Burke by e-mail, mburke@fairpoint.net



All photos are courtesy of Mary Burke

