

Dressage is a discipline spurred by the endless pursuit of harmony and perfection. With her subtle and sympathetic riding, Hermès partner rider Jessica von Bredow-Werndl comes pretty close, setting the horsemanship bar high for the new generation.



UNEE BB WEARS ARPÈGE DRESSAGE  
SADDLE, DOUBLE BRIDLE, PAD AND  
BANDAGES BY HERMÈS THROUGHOUT

# Jessica von Bredow-Werndl

Text Susanne Madsen  
Photography Jonas Bie  
Fashion Emilie Guldbrandsen



JESSICA WEARS WOOL TOP WITH ZIP  
AND SILVER EARRING BY HERMÈS





JESSICA WEARS COMPETITION SHIRT, BREECHES, JODHPUR BOOTS AND HALF CHAPS BY HERMÈS

Jessica von Bredow-Werndl's stallion Unee BB is not in the mood to do press. Like any self-respecting celebrity, he has a suite at the far end of the stable, away from prying eyes, and is rather unimpressed when we interrupt his post-World Cup beauty sleep. The vibe: don't ask for autographs. "He looks grumpy but he's very cuddly when I'm alone with him," says von Bredow-Werndl. "He's a star. And he knows that." Finely chiselled and devilishly handsome, Unee has the coat of a black panther and an aloof, aristocratic swagger. There's a dreamy kind of darkness about him; a graceful, raw power. If Lestat de Lioncourt had a horse, Unee would be it.

"He's a little cocky. When I first met him he was actually quite bored and not very interested in getting a new rider as he'd had a few already. Since he's a stallion you really have to convince him that what you're doing is a good thing. So I decided to ride him without a saddle. And then he was awake and it was really interesting for him to have something different. That was my first positive connection to him," she says, stroking his velvet coat. Eventually, the saddle was put back on, but they still go bareback for kicks and chilling out, or the occasional special freestyle performance – in a snaffle, of course, because that's just how they roll.

Regardless of which horse she's sitting on, the poised and elegant von Bredow-Werndl has the kind of textbook-perfect seat you'd like

**"I came second with just one point behind Isabell Werth, but I realised it's not important if you win or if you're second. The most important thing is how your way and your communication with your horse develops. I was so happy with it I didn't even mind that it was just one point"**

## Interview

to bottle up as a magic elixir. Her riding is light and invisible, discreet and effective. Watching her and Unee together, you can't fail to notice their connection, a partnership that came about in 2012 when Unee's owner Beatrice Bürchler-Keller offered her the ride. He helped catapult her to the Grand Prix podiums the following year – and she him. If their "whoa, where did those two come from?" rise to the top of the world rankings felt extra "breakout stars of the year", it was also because von Bredow-Werndl had been away from the Grand Prix circuit for five years.

After her successful time as a young rider raking in medals with her horses Bonito and Duchess at the European Championships, she and her brother Benjamin Werndl decided to take a break from Grand Prix to develop their promising young horses, working with two of the ultimate dressage greats, Isabell Werth and Jonny Hilberath, as well as Andreas Hausberger, a head rider at the Spanish Riding School. It was a sympathetic and considered move, especially in a world where some dressage stables have a tendency to push youngsters too fast in order to quickly paint a flashy picture.

There's none of that at Aubenhausen, the Werndl family's yard outside Munich, where "the horses tell you how long it will take". While the talented Trakehner mare Dalera BB is capable of doing Grand Prix this year, for example, she's in no hurry. "Even if she understands what she should do, her body still isn't ready because she hasn't got the muscles yet to really hold it. When they compete they really need power because the energy from all the people and the other horses absorbs energy from the horse. So it needs to be very strong, and in its mind too. I have to take the time to show them what's coming and what's going on."

Von Bredow-Werndl offers many observations in this vein. She talks about managing the horse's psyche as well as its physical condition, about the value of getting "a real connection with your horse's mind". For her, a horse isn't a machine for performing show-pony tricks on. It's an equal, a fascinating creature to learn from and understand. She has been a vegetarian since the age of four, when, horrified at the thought of eating a baby pig, she started tipping her meat onto her brother's plate at supper. "I'm not against eating meat, I'm just against the way animals are treated. That really hurts me."

Rescue dogs from Greece bounce around the yard, tailing von Bredow-Werndl's mother, Micaela Werndl, who is fuelling our shoot

with biscuits and chocolate in between riding her horses. Her husband, Klaus Werndl, is the only non-rider in the family; he originally bought the yard for his sister, who bred horses. "If everyone in the family rode it would be a catastrophe," he says, brilliantly deadpan. "You need someone in the background, someone to drive." (Something long-suffering competition chauffeur parents can no doubt relate to!)

Jessica von Bredow-Werndl got on her first pony at the age of four and has never looked back, with her pony Nino the Champ introducing her to the poetry of dressage. Along the way, she earned herself a degree in marketing and communications (something that eased her mind while she made the leap to professional rider, knowing she had something to fall back on just in case) and has married Max von Bredow, a former event rider. She belongs to the new wave of riders who train out of the saddle as well, with a daily schedule of running and yoga. Her reasoning: if you know what it's like to push through a hard workout, you'll be much more aware of the importance of recovery time for your horse.

But her workouts are also designed for mental clarity and strength. "I've learned that it's important not just to manage my horses but also to manage myself, because I sometimes take too little time off. But there is still space for improvement," she says, laughing. Breathing and concentration techniques are a constant in her life since one of her first outings after transitioning to horses, when competition nerves set in and she finished 12th at the second qualification for the European Championships with Nokturn. After entering the arena she promptly rode the wrong way. Twice.

One word in particular keeps popping up throughout our conversation: feelings. "One thing is to know the technical part of riding, and the other thing is to listen to your feelings. It's more important really to *feel* what to demand of the horse and how you can explain to the horse how to do that for you," she says, smiling. This innate, emotional approach is what she loves about dressage: getting to the point where you're one with your horse. "To do a dance and give the aids so nobody can see what you're doing. It just looks like the horse is dancing with you. I already had it in Amsterdam [at the Reem Acra FEI World Cup Grand Prix Freestyle] with Unee: he was dancing to the music and he was so easy and it was just fun." She's beaming at this point. "I came second with





JESSICA WEARS WOOL TOP WITH ZIP, BREECHES, STRIPED BELT AND GOLD EARRING BY HERMÈS



DOUBLE BRIDLE AND SILK SCARF BY HERMÈS

SHUKRAN





JESSICA WEARS SOFTSHELL JACKET  
AND SILVER EARRING BY HERMÈS

just one point behind Isabell [Werth], but I realised it's not important if you win or if you're second. The most important thing is how your way and your communication with your horse develops. I was *so* happy with it I didn't even mind that it was just one point. It was just being so proud of the stage we have already reached together. You set your boundaries in your mind but you can move them and change them. Sometimes it works out and sometimes not. Even with Unee, no one expected him to improve that much, no one had ever told me I had a real chance to qualify with him for the Olympics three years ago." But, she adds, "for Germany every year it's tough."

Still, it was a surprise to most when she didn't make the Olympic team, especially after such amazing results as a bronze medal in Las Vegas for the 2015 World Cup finals. It's probably a small consolation but Germany, after all, is to dressage what Swedish songwriters are to pop music: everything. Putting their Olympic team together must inevitably always be a bit like trying to decide if you'd want Madonna, Michael Jackson, Prince or David Bowie to play at your birthday party.

But there's 2020, and her ballerina mare, Zaire-E, is surely heiress to Unee's throne. "I think she will be the next superstar," she says, planting a kiss on Zaire-E's muzzle. "They always say genius and madness are very close to one another: during the first years of her education it was more the crazy part of her coming out, and now it's more and more the genius coming out!" Zaire-E is fresh in from

**"With my Facebook page, I think I have helped so many normal horses to go out in the field. When they see that even Unee is allowed out every day to buck, then they're probably thinking: OK, if a world-class horse is allowed to do that then it can't be too bad"**

the paddock and about to change into her indoor Hermès clothes. She also has an Hermès saddle, because von Bredlow-Werndl works with the French house.

"When they first approached me, I was a bit hesitant because I had a very good collaboration with Pikeur & Eskadron, and you don't just throw a partnership away. But the more we got to know each other and the more we shared our values and ideas about a collaboration, the more excited I got. And I have to say, when I told Pikeur & Eskadron about my chance they were really nice and said, 'You would be stupid if you didn't do it.'"

Inspired by Unee's bareback beginnings with von Bredow-Werndl, the partnership has resulted in the Hermès Arpège dressage saddle. Laurent Goblet – the house master saddler for 35 years – has translated von Bredow-Werndl's wishes into a saddle with maximum contact that can translate between her aids and the horse, freeing the spine and withers for movement. It also features subtle blocks that support a correct leg position without locking you in. "I wanted a comfortable feeling. But the most important thing was that the horse said yes. The horse would tell me if it wasn't comfortable. It's very close to the horse, closer than any saddle I've ever had before."

For von Bredow-Werndl it was the practical spirit of Hermès and its "modern but traditional" attention to detail that drew her in. What's her earliest memory of the brand? "You're waiting for the Birkin bag, but no!" she says with a laugh. "I didn't know what a Birkin was until I started the partnership with Hermès. But my grandma worked in a shop in Munich that sold Hermès. She couldn't afford many things but she was always saving her money to buy a nice scarf. She would have been really proud now because it was her favourite brand, but unfortunately she died six years ago. I've inherited some of her scarves, and from my other grandma who died last year I have a Kelly bag."

With its red stitching and pronounced curves, the Arpège saddle is almost sexy, like something out of a Helmut Newton image. Unee, of course, looks quite dashing in it. He's in the indoor arena, under the chandelier, charming everyone between shots, but otherwise not that into having his picture taken. "Get out the horse sounds!" von Bredow-Werndl exclaims. YouTube delivers: a whinnying soundtrack. Unee instantly brings it. His neck curves, his face becomes alert, his eyes and ears point towards the promise of ladies somewhere on the horizon of the

snow-capped Alps outside the arena window, out across the hillsides – the outdoor gym where he and his stablemates do their strength training, such as trotting uphill or cantering on the gallop track.

"I try to make every day a little bit different, so every day is exciting for the horses. On the one hand it's important to have routines, like going out in the field every day or feeding at the same time, but the rest I try to change." She'll separate weeks of strength or technical training, with recovery and time off in between so their minds and bodies can relax. Youngsters do free jumping regularly to keep them interested and happy, and technical things are practised no more than two or three days in a row. But the schedule is always flexible. "You really have to concentrate on your feelings to be able to make a good plan for your horse. To find the right balance. And Unee taught me that. But all my horses have a completely different rhythm. Some need longer for recovery, some don't. It's very difficult to be that focused and listen to your horse when it's telling you what it needs. But this is the art of training horses, I think."

"With my Facebook page, I think I have helped so many normal horses to go out in the field. When they see that even Unee is allowed out every day to buck, then they're probably thinking, 'OK, if a world-class horse is allowed to do that then it can't be too bad,'" she chuckles. "I try to be a role model to help other horses." As for her own role models, she has several. "I'm trying to find my own way, always having an open mind and looking at others and what inspires me, what doesn't, what I might do differently." Carl Hester, who shares her views on the importance of turning out horses and hacking, comes up in conversation. "I admire Carl as a personality and a real horseman. He's absolutely down to earth."

When you ask her what she'd like to change about dressage, she practises what she preaches. Instead of talking about what you'd presume she might find unsavoury about certain areas of the sport, her reply is gracious and constructive: "Just to focus on the beauty of dressage and not look for the faults or the mistakes. 'Cause nobody is perfect. Focus on the positive things. This is also one of my most important things in building up horses. Focus on the strengths and you will develop the weaknesses as well. Don't look for bad pictures, look for the beauty of dressage. That's important for the future. And it is a beautiful sport." ■





STORAGE BUCKET AND  
WEEKEND BAG BY HERMÈS



JESSICA WEARS CASHMERE  
WRAP, COMPETITION BREECHES  
AND JODHPUR BOOTS BY HERMÈS