

FREE REIN WITH:

Amanda Steege

By **Kelsey Baker**

Everyone knows Lafitte De Muze, or “Lafitte,” Amanda Steege’s star hunter derby partner. And it’s not just because he’s won so many derbies in the last four years; the 11-year-old Belgian Warmblood (Darco—Everlychin De La Pomme, Malito De Reve) is also the star of a children’s book—“Big Wishes For Little Feat,” written by his owner, Cheryl Olsten, and illustrated by Paolo d’Altan—and his connections make a point to share the gelding with his many fans.

“I think something that is very different about Lafitte and Cheryl and me and [barn manager] Tim Delovich is that we really like to let people in to interact with Lafitte. And I don’t think that that’s really normal at the top level of our sport. It’s something that we really enjoy, like when we go down to Wellington [Florida] to do World Champion Hunter Rider week, and Tim will be walking Lafitte to the ring, and he’ll hear all little girls whisper like, ‘There’s Lafitte!’ and we always like to ask people if they want to pet him or take a photo with him. Like, ‘Do you want to come back to the barn and meet him?’”

“Lafitte allows us to try to make our sport a little more inclusive and get people more interested,” she continued. “That’s probably the thing that I like best about having him, that I feel like I can share him with other people and sort of get people a little bit excited about horses and horse shows.”

Steege and Lafitte earned a few wins in \$20,000 WEC Ocala 3’6”-3’9” Hunter Derby classes this winter in Florida. In February, they captured third in the \$100,000 WCHR Peter Wetherill Palm Beach Hunter Spectacular (Florida). And on May 14, they topped the \$25,000 RBD Classic Cup USHJA International Hunter Derby at the Aiken Charity Horse Show in South Carolina.

“I’ve never had a horse that wanted to win and wanted to go to the ring as much as Lafitte does,” said Steege. “He just is really excited about his job, and he loves to go to the ring for any class, but definitely he always

feels a little more into it for a big ring or a big crowd or nighttime class.”

Steege, 46, is based at her Ashmeadow Farm in Califon, New Jersey, and Ocala, Florida, where she keeps her training program focused on hunter horses and riders.

“We don’t chase for points,” she said. “We generally have very competitive hunters and competitive amateur riders, and those horses can show at 10-15 horse shows a year and qualify for all the finals and year-end things we want to go to. So it makes it so that we only go to horse shows that we really like and that are really high quality.”

Were you involved in the process of writing “Big Wishes For Little Feat”?

I was not at all involved in the process, but we’re very proud of the book. That was all Cheryl’s doing. She had it illustrated and everything else, but I think it’s great to have Lafitte and ride a horse that has sort of become a sort of ambassador.

You have a degree in psychology. Is it ever useful as a hunter professional?

Definitely. I mean, I use it a little bit for myself for performance anxiety and dealing with nerves and things like that. And then I also try to teach those skills to my amateur clients that have similar issues.

I do a lot of visualization for my own showing, which are sort of tactics that I learned through my psychology degree. So basically if I have a big class with Lafitte, after I’ve walked the course, I usually try to find someplace quiet where I sit down, and I go over the course in my head. It’s almost like I’ve watched a video of myself doing the course.

Usually we know ourselves, and we know where our problem areas are. If I’m a little bit nervous, the first time that I’ve watched the “video” in my head, if I make a mistake in an area where I’m concerned about then I’ll



Amanda Steege and Cheryl Olsten's Lafitte De Muze jumped to the top of the \$25,000 RBD Classic Cup USHJA International Hunter Derby at the Aiken Charity Horse Show (S.C.). *A&S PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO*

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make myself stop and “rewind” and go back and redo it until I’ve watched myself doing the course really well.

I find that when I do this visualization, when it’s time to go in the ring, a lot of times my body just does things that I’m consciously thinking of at the moment. So I like to talk a little bit about that with my riders. We talk about the power of the mind and positive thinking: Instead of going into the ring saying, “I’m worried about getting the lead change after the first jump,” we talked about saying, “When I land in the first jump, I need to make sure that I step up, and I step out, and I sink into my left heel to do the lead change,” instead of sitting at the in-gate being negative or worrying about the things that could go wrong.

It’s part of the game to know where the hard parts are going to be for you. But trying to think about all of that in a positive way, as a thing you can do to make it go well, instead of, “I hope I get the lead change after the first jump.”

What’s your favorite horse show?

I don’t know if you saw the little post that recently went around online about the Queen of England; she had arrived at a horse show and was all smiles, and I was like, “That’s me!” Like, “When are we going to another horse show?” I get butterflies in my stomach.

Some of my favorite horse shows are the Aiken Charity Horse Shows and the Devon Horse Show; that’s a favorite for my whole team. We love to go there and make it almost like a vacation while we’re there. And we love the new World Equestrian Center in Ocala. It’s like Horse Disneyland.

Tell me about your first horse or pony.

My first pony was a small pinto pony named Pepper. He roamed free-range on our farm at the time, and I’d guess the farm was 50 or 60 acres. And Pepper didn’t have a stall; he just wandered around and sort of went wherever he wanted to go. My family’s farm feeds grain twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, but the neighbor’s farm fed their horses lunch. Pepper learned how to take

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the trail through the woods and go over to the neighbor's farm to have lunch. He was a really awesome first pony, good to play with and to groom. And he was a really good leadline pony.

Who has been your biggest influence?

I would say my father, Mitch Steege, would be my biggest influence. And also the late Bill Cooney and Tom Wright.

What's the best piece of advice you ever received?

Listen to the horses.

What's something people don't know about you?

That I peed my pants the first time I jumped. I was probably 5 years old. I wasn't really supposed to be learning to jump that day. I had just learned to canter on a small horse named Teapot. Teapot could jump big; she was a hunt horse as well, so she wasn't scared of anything.

I was really proud that I had learned to canter, so of course I wanted to show everybody who came to the farm that I could canter. So I was cantering around the ring,

but I wasn't looking where I was going. And I accidentally steered Teapot to a 3' in-and-out, a vertical two strides to an oxer. I had never jumped any jumps before, and Teapot jumped the in-and-out. They said that I stayed on, and that my position was fine over the jumps, but when I landed I burst into tears, and it was because I peed myself!

What's your dream vacation?

Pretty much any vacation is my dream vacation. We don't get to take that many of those these days. I actually just got back from a really amazing girls' trip in Mexico with five amazing horse girls. So anywhere that I can go with good company like that I would be happy to attend.

We went to Cabo, and it was a group of girls that all got along together really well and are all horse people. So unlike my normal friends, we all got up at like 5:30 in the morning and went to the gym for two hours, drank our coffee and watched the sun come up. Then we spent the whole rest of the day relaxing by the pool and drinking cocktails and eating. I think that was my first vacation in like eight years.

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If you could change one thing about the hunter show world, what would you change?

I want it to be more accessible to people, as competitors and as spectators. I would love for more people to get involved and to have more education about it. My favorite hunter shows that we go to have lots of people there to watch, like some of the international hunter derbies. I just wish more people could be involved from both sides.

I think the things that they've been doing at the World Equestrian Center have been really helpful for that because they are really drawing in a lot of local people there that aren't horse people.

It's an expensive sport, so I feel like that cuts down on some of the competitors. I wish that it was more easily accessible for people to get to do it.

If you could ride any horse, living or dead, which would you choose?

I think Sapphire. Oddly, Sapphire has the same sire as Lafitte [the Belgian stallion Darco]. She looks like Lafitte in jumper form.

I met her a few times. She was very friendly. They shared her with people. I can remember being at Devon, sort of towards the end of her career, and they would let people get photos with her and things like that.

What's the last book you read?

"Riders" by Jilly Cooper. It's a romance novel, but it's all based in the horse world, mostly in England. It's all about grand prix riders and things like that. It first came out when I was a kid; I remember everyone at the horse world was reading it and would all be talking about it at the shows. There's a lot of scandal. And it randomly came up this winter with some of my clients, and none of them had read it. So then all my clients got it, and we've been reading it together.

What quality do you value most in a horse?

Heart.

In a human?

Loyalty.

Do you have any pets?

I have two dogs. Well, I have one dog who's mine, a tricolor corgi named Ben. And then my boyfriend Tim [Delovich] has a dog named Tatum who's a rescue from Danny & Ron's Rescue.

What do you like to do when you're not at the barn?

Go to the spa. I'm a total spa girl. My Mondays are usually booked with spa appointments, massages, nails, whatever. I like it all.

If you didn't work in the horse world, what would you be doing?

I think probably I'd be doing something with sports psychology.

Describe yourself in three words.

Hardworking, empathetic and intuitive.

If you could try a different discipline, what would you choose?

It would definitely be something with the Quarter Horses, maybe reining or barrel racing. We've gotten to see a little bit of a glimpse of the Quarter Horse world when we're in Florida [at the World Equestrian Center in Ocala]. I have a few clients who've done it, and I'm so jealous of the crowds and things that they have at their big shows. It seems like they really have an awesome, I don't know what you call it, but however they've done it where they've gotten these big prize money purses for classes. But I know that a lot of the stuff that we're doing now in the hunters in USHJA is because of Colleen McQuay, and it's been modeled after her knowledge of the Quarter Horse world.

What would you tell your younger self?

To have more faith and confidence. I think I worried about so many things when I was younger that I wasted a lot of time and energy. I should have just been more confident in what I was doing.

What's the hardest thing about being a trainer?

I think carrying everybody else's hopes and dreams on your shoulders and feeling responsible for their disappointments. At this point in my career, I understand the ups and downs of horses, of working with a living animal. But sometimes it's hard to carry all of those hopes and dreams, and then disappointments and failures, while feeling like you're trying to make it all go so well for everyone.

Where do you want to be in 10 years?

Honestly, I would like to be doing exactly what I'm doing right now. 🐾