

Selecting A Friesian For Dressage

A Trainer's Perspective

By Jessica O'Donnell Viveiros
With Charlotte & John Dumford



Victoria R schooling piaffe. Matthew O'Donnell©

Selecting your ideal Friesian dressage partner is a complex process. Of course, everyone's needs and goals are different, and there are many perspectives to consider. While some enjoy showing their Friesians through the lower levels at local dressage shows, others aspire to compete up to FEI! To find some common ground and give us some helpful insight regardless of the rider's goals, we asked several professional dressage trainers at all different levels, both in North America and in The Netherlands, to describe their involvement with the Friesian Horse, advice for finding and evaluating a performance horse, and pro tips for selecting a Friesian performance horse. This first segment features trainer Jessica O'Donnell Viveiros of Lady Bug Stables.

Friesians have been a part of my life for the past 12 years, from competing in dressage to riding one on my wedding day! Ever since I was a young girl I have always been in love with this beautiful breed! They, to me, are the fairytale horse and have the temperament to match. I have had the pleasure of training several Friesians for clients over the years. Victoria R, Andries 415 x Ulke 338, is a 10 year-old mare owned by Michele Jalbert that is currently schooling 4th level dressage. She has a super work ethic and shows lots of potential to be a FEI Friesian with a great start to piaffe and passage! We hope to get her scores for her sport predicate.

I have successfully competed Lillee DCTF, Sape 381 x Ritse 322, a 6 year-old star mare owned by Kathie Crellin, through first level dressage. Lillee was also Reserve Champion at her 2016 inspection with a IBOP score of 78.5. With this score she was also 5th in the US and Canada for the Iron Spring Farm IBOP Cup.

I also have a couple young up-and-comers, such as 6 year-old mare, Nadia (Doaitsen 420 x Tamme 276) who will be making her debut in the show arena this year at training and first level, and 5 year-old stallion, Peter (Sape 381 x Doaitsen 420) who has just been started under saddle this spring and is showing incredible willingness to please! Both horses are owned by Mackenzie Palumbo.



IBOP with Lillee DCTF. Jamie Savoie©

I also started 6 year-old mare, Jasmine ISF (Pier 448 x Heinsse 354) under saddle for owner Brooke Brown in the winter of 2017, and she went on to riding the IBOP at the 2017 inspection like a total professional. Even though she was a tall mare at 17.3, she was super athletic and had such a talent for dressage with great swing and suppleness in her trot and canter!!

Finally, I am honored to have Liza van de Meikade (Maurus 441 x Sjaard 320) owned by Claudia Rayner, at Lady Bug Stable. This 6 year-old Crown mare, winner of the 2016 FHANA Central Mare Show, also shows exceptional talent for dressage with her willingness to sit and push powerfully from behind. Currently in foal, Liza will begin her training in the fall for our 2019 goal of earning the Sport Predicate.

One thing I really love about this breed is that they really love their person or rider. They will give you everything they possibly can. But I also feel like they are a breed for which you have to make training and learning fun. The more moments you can find to praise them and make a big deal about something they did, well the better! They are super smart and don't need long training sessions to pick something up. Once they figure out what you are asking move on to something else because they've got it.

I often start my search online looking at all internet sources or local breeders. Even if they don't personally have the horse you are looking for, they could possibly point you in the direction of someone that does. Social media is also a great way to look for a quality under saddle or young Friesian for sale.

Stay within your comfort zone whether that be your budget or the level of training that you're looking for. For instance, you don't want to buy a young green horse if you are a beginner or have little



Friesian mare, Elite (left), owned by my father, John Viveiros, and Friesian mare, Liza, owned by Claudia Rayner.

experience with young horses. I try to tell my clients not to look at a horse that is definitely over budget. Keep in mind that you are taking time out of someone's busy schedule to show you a horse that is unsuitable due to budget constraints.

Whether your goal is to ride an IBOP, or maybe to earn a Bronze medal and sport predicate, look for something that has three solid gaits. A good walk and canter is a must. Those are the two gaits that must come naturally. You can always develop a good trot, but you can't change the walk, and a quality canter is needed for a good flying change as you move up. If your goal is to be showing within a year, try to find a horse that is training at, or a level above, your goal.

I think involving your trainer is very important. They have ridden many horses and know what things to look for. They also know how to try a horse and make sure it is absolutely suitable for the client. Let them really test the horse and take it out of its comfort zone to make sure that when the horse is under a little pressure, it is not going to be naughty and come unglued. Your trainer will also be checking to make sure the horse is in good condition and healthy. You don't want to waste your time and money on a pre-purchase exam when your trainer might have picked up on something from the start.

I like a Friesian to have good energy and willingness to push from behind. I think many people have been so blinded by the Friesians' extravagant use of the front legs that they forget what is pushing them forward. I also look for a Friesian that is willing to use its whole body, willing to work over its back, and has a good long neck. I will also go back to the canter. I always feel like that is a gait that is so overlooked on Friesians. At an inspection they only look at the walk and trot unless the horse also does an IBOP, but to be a dressage performance Friesian, the canter is just as important. They need to have good balance and be willing to sit in the canter.

I have definitely seen a great improvement in breeding Friesians over the years. The Friesian today is much more sport-like, which makes them super versatile for both dressage and driving. Shorter backs and long legs typically make a super performance horse. They also have much better self-carriage and impulsion these days.

When selecting a Friesian performance horse, the buyer has to choose between buying a schoolmaster or a lower-level or "prospect" Friesian. Most schoolmasters are worth their weight in gold! They are great for the adult amateur that just wants a fun, safe horse to ride at home or show. They are also

fun for young riders who have goals of riding upper levels. We have great Young Rider test and competitions for which a school master would be the perfect choice. A lower level or "prospect" Friesian can be great for someone more advanced that is looking to learn about the training scale and how to bring a horse along. To me it's very important to look for a young Friesian with a good temperament before anything. They need to be willing to learn and have a little pizzazz, as I like to call it. Conformation is important, and so are gaits.

In conformation I like to see a well-balanced horse with a long leg. I like a good angle to the hind leg so that the horse is more willing to bend its hocks and push from behind. I also look for a horse that does not have a much shorter front leg, as a nice long forearm is ideal. If the foreleg is too short, it can make keeping the horse off the forehand difficult. A short, strong back is also ideal and makes collecting the horse much easier. A long, uphill neck which most Friesians do have, is preferable to a very short neck. A short neck can make contact in the bridle difficult, and can also negatively impact the ability to ride the horse long and low. Horses that have a shorter neck also tend to go behind the vertical much easier. I like a horse that is flexible through its body and willing to bring its hind leg under its belly when on the circle. Some Friesians are built more straight behind and only want to track straight, making balance on the circle difficult.

When shopping for a performance Friesian, I always recommend trying them at least two days in a row. The first day most likely the owner or trainer will show you the horse, and you will jump on after that. It is always good to be able to watch the horse go with someone with whom they are comfortable. That way you can get a feel for how they typically work for their usual rider. The second day I like to start them myself. That's really the test. See how much riding it takes for the horse to loosen up and relax. Determine how much work it takes to get the horse on the aid system. I think a true partnership will take months to build with a new horse, so don't expect to get on your new Friesian at home and have the perfect partner immediately. Everyone rides differently, and we all use our aids a bit differently. But I believe you should get a good feeling after two days of riding as well as just being around the horse in the stable.

I think the most important thing to remember is that few horses will have an absolutely perfect pre-purchase exam. Even young horses can have little things that are not text book. I always recommend flexion test. The most important things to X-ray are feet, hocks, stifles and knees. The saying is real: "No hoof no horse!" Many young horses can also have OCD (Osteochondritis dissecans), and although that is typically fixable with surgery, it can be very costly. I also like to have a normal health exam done, checking eyes, heart, lungs, and teeth along with normal blood work.



©Kristen Nordstrom