

KYRA K the place she calls home

TEXT & PHOTO - SARA SILFVERBERG



Though a heavy rain pours down on the rooftops of this quintessential English farm, there is a flurry of activity in the indoor arena. Here, the top horses are nurtured, and apprentices train to the echo of raindrops off the roof. She's carrying on about the weather, clutching a cup of coffee in one hand, and juggling a manure picker with the other. One of her eyes is on her pupils, while the other watches Richard riding a beautiful youngster. An indoor school is a good place to be in this stereotypical English weather, and on a day like this, Snowhill Farm is the best place to catch up with Kyra Kyrklund. Snowhill is the charming cottage-style spread where Kyra and Richard have lived for four and a half years now. It also happens to be the place some of Finland's elite riders are moving, just to be close to this atmosphere of inspiration and wisdom, and share the same spring showers as one of the world's best riders and trainers of the season. Close to Kyra and the place she calls home.



"Kyra, is it always this rainy here?" I ask, peeking out through the doors of the indoor school across the yard to the place where the outdoor arena once was. As I have understood, most of the riding and training activity usually takes places there. Now it lays there, empty, calm and covered with puddles, though, with only an occasional detail to reveal that the sun truly does shine in these parts sometimes.

"You have terrible luck coming now," she replies. "This is the only rainy day we have had amidst weeks of sunshine and heat." "And," she continues, "now everyone that has that misconception of England always being rainy will have their proof, as well as more evidence that that we English always talk about the weather, as if it were the most interesting thing to discuss," she says and laughs. She has this way of laughing that lets you sense the wry humour beneath the surface. She's sharp and she knows it.

"You have been living here for four years now, or four and a half to be exact, is this 'home' for you?"

She takes a sip of coffee, "Well, even though we have been living here on this farm for four and a half years, we have been living in England for almost ten years now. So, this country has been our home for quite a long time." She reflects and continues, "Snowhill Farm is special though. When we still lived at our other place, we gazed up here every time we drove by, and thought 'Isn't that one of the prettiest places on earth.' 'Imagine getting to live there,' we often said. And now we do."

You can hear the warmth in her voice when talking about the farm. Snowhill Farm is the first place she has owned, and she and Richard take care of it as if it were a newborn baby. It's more a home than a farm. A farm, true to size, with a generous fifteen hectares of land to it, but with the nuances of a home; flow-

ers blooming in every corner, and statues presenting themselves amongst the green leafiness. I wonder out loud how she likes the English climate compared to the Finnish. Kyra replies at once, "I love it! Climate-wise I feel it is as big a leap from Finland to Sweden as it is from Sweden to England. Roughly translated, it's almost tropical here compared to Finland. You can easily ride outdoors all year along if you want to. Even though it's hard to believe at this very moment, we hardly use our indoor arena." As she is saying this, the heavy rain falls even harder on the roof. I have a hard time believing her right now, but instead ask her about the great respect she has gained all over the world as a rider and trainer.

"So many people have a great deal of respect for you. Though, I think half of them are scared by your personality and the strength you embody. Why do you think that is?"

"Well, I am honest, there's your first clue. People nowadays are scared of honesty. They would rather you wrap your words up in nice pink paper napkins so hopefully no one will notice the real truth. I try to get it out loud and clear. To me there is no 'almost clean change', or an 'almost good piaffe'. It is simply either clean or not. Good or bad. As clear as that.

"So, people respect you for your honesty, what do you respect in other people?" "I like honesty, and humour too," she says. "And people with a healthy self perspective. People need to loosen up a little, and not take things too seriously."

A young man enters the indoor arena, he also has a Finnish accent, as he introduces himself as Henri Ruoste, I come to understand he is one of the up and coming Finnish stars in the world of international dressage. He too, has moved all the way from Finland to a farm close by, just to be in the vicinity of Kyra and the knowledge she provides. He defines

Kyra with just a few words; essential accuracy, basal, and lucid. He candidly remarks "She is the very best trainer in the world," and points out, "No one can bring the truth to light the way she can." I understand him completely. Kyra is one helluva woman. His display makes me wonder if she herself has any mentors from imparting inspiration and knowledge.

"I try not to put people on a pedestal," she says and then continues, "Putting people up on a pedestal means you admire all their qualities, but at some point even the perfect picture will reveal a crack, and you will start seeing mistakes and fallacies. And then, it's a long way to fall, and it's quite unnecessary. It's better to see people's good sides, and let them be human." She finishes the coffee and puts the cup down, while Henri mounts a seven year old gelding by Don Schufro.

"Do you mean to create a Finnish team?" I ask, and nod towards Henri and the horse. "Quite possibly," she says, "Actually that is a dream that would be really nice to see come true. There are quite a few good Finnish dressage riders that have the right qualities."

"Would you suggest you are the one creating Finnish dressage culture at the moment?" I ask. She replies quite confidently, "Yes, without bragging I would say that I most definitely am."

As she answers, Richard changes horses and mounts a beautiful eight year old mare, Edith Piaffe by Edinburg. Richard is relaxed in the saddle, with a seat and posture many riders would envy.

"What are these qualities of a horse or rider that you look for." She answers without hesitation, "The very first priority for a horse is always the energy. I love horses with a lot of energy, but without being spooky," she says and explains that all her horses have had a lot



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of energy and quite a few of them have are over-sensitive to sounds. Everyone, in fact, except Master. Kyra looks at the riders passing her and reflects on what she sees. “The most important qualities of a rider,” she says, “is to know the basics; the seat, balance and the impact of your aids.”

She gazes across the indoor school, where Richard is riding. “He is really good at these things,” she says. I suddenly get a feel for the togetherness they feel and the amazing relationship the two of them have. Richard and Kyra have been together for more than eighteen years. They got married last winter, and spend almost all their time together.

How is it possible to keep a relationship still passionate and refreshing after that long?

Kyra laughs and says, “Well, it’s not exactly like we spend all our time together 24/7; we do things apart quite a lot too. He is a trainer in Germany, and I work in Sweden, Finland and Portugal, so we have some time apart. But basically I think it’s important to give each other space. I also subscribe to the saying “those who play together, stay together” she mentions with a smile.

“But, how is it to live with your trainer? Do you constantly talk horses,” I persist. “I do believe that horse people are quite special, and that your partner really needs either to be a horse person himself, or understand all the odd time schedules, the riding or training discussions over the dinner table and the many hours spent in the stable.” Kyra says with warmth in her voice, “Richard is fantastic. He is much more my trainer now than he has ever been before. Now we have teamed up together, and we always ride together, almost always. He is the one who gives me second opinions, new solutions and new ideas. In return, I give him competition experience and the feelings a competitor

encounters when being on the hot spot in front of everyone’s eyes.”

Kyra is intimately familiar with this subject, having been in the hot spot ever since she was very young and met the then three year old Matador who would speed her to the top of the world’s elite.

I ask whether as one of the world’s top riders, she still feels the same challenge when competing as she did before?

For Kyra this seems to be a subject she is used to talking about. “Riders should compete with themselves rather than against the other riders. I am only concerned about how my horse is performing, not how the placement or the ranking compared to others,” she says.

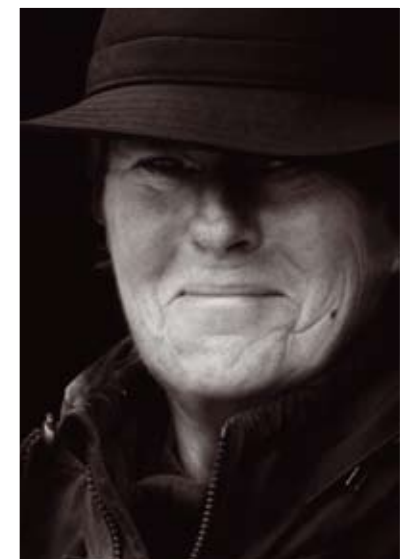
“That’s why I will probably always compete. I have it in my blood; I need the challenge.”

A horse is led in by one of the grooms. It is one of the few horses that Kyra has at Snowhill for training. It’s Emerald, a mare by Master, who came just two weeks ago, after having been on the waiting list for almost two years, according to Kyra.

“There are people who think I only accept horses that I like for training. That’s not true. Of course I want to like them, but it is more important that the rider and the horse have the same goals and have equal ability to achieve them. For me there’s really no prestige in making them all into Grand Prix horses, I like them too much to press a horse that does not have enough of the right qualities and abilities to go Grand Prix. This will lead it to become a mediocre GP horse, instead of staying as a super-talented Prix St. George horse.”

Kyra is very clear and sure in her opinions, I wonder if she is as clear and structured as a trainer.

“I am quite structured in some ways as a person, but honestly, you can put up any structure you want when training horses, and in the long run it’s always the horse that decides the training anyway.”





To me, training a horse is like standing on a ladder. You move up or down on this ladder depending on what you want to improve, sometimes you need to go down many steps to be able to fix a step that is maybe several rungs up.”

When she says this, I get a feeling that any horse is an easy game for Kyra; everything is so obvious. “Is it as easy working on your own qualities as on those of the horse”, I wonder. Kyra hesitates and says, “Well, working on your own personal qualities is always difficult. I am very stubborn and sometimes I think it is hard for me to tactfully tell people something that they might find unpleasant. I don’t want to create tensions that could lead them to misinterpret me. Sometimes I even find myself biting my tongue and walking away instead of telling them what I feel or think”. I ask her what qualities would be a rider’s worst enemies and she answers without hesitation, “The worst enemy of any rider is anger. Anger is often an expression of fear or panic, and that never brings out anything good.”

Speaking of good things, I feel I need to at least ask her if she considers herself a trendsetter or a fashionista, regarding to the Kyra K clothing and the saddles she co-designs. She clearly says that she just never thought of a business at all; she simply wanted to create some nice clothes or a nice saddle for riding. “I believe in what I do, and other people tend to believe in what I do as well. I think that other people see me as trustworthy. If I suddenly would put a bag on my head and tell everyone that it’s really the best way of learning the flying changes, some might soon ride with a paper bag on their heads, but very soon they would realize it’s just a stupid paper bag accompanied by a lie, and I’d lose their respect. Therefore I’m really careful about putting out any paper bags without really having tried it out properly myself first.”

Kyra possesses exactly the characteristics of a true and honest person. It is no surprise that so many people respect her to the degree they do. While the horses leave the indoor school with the daily training done, Richard and Kyra head for their house, for an hour of lunch and horse talk.

It is at this moment that the inherently efficient side of Kyra shines through, and while walking past a beautiful flower bed she simply can’t resist the inclination to pull out the new weeds that have appeared. With this efficiency, determination and a fundamental work ethic, it’s clearly not due to coincidence that she is where she is today. While she possesses true talent, what comes across most is a hard working woman who loves what she does and does what she loves.

I ask her whether there’s one basic truth she can reveal, which would be helpful for any aspiring rider. She stops for a second, contemplates the question, and recalls an adage her father once told her, which helped her succeed, and by which she still lives.

“There are three things you have to learn in this life. First, know what things you can change, and in these you’ve got to put all your heart into. Second, realize that there are things you can’t change, and don’t invest energy in them. And finally, learn how to distinguish between the two.” She takes a pause, and applies this to her own riding. “I have learned what I can change and what I can’t change throughout the years, and I am happy to know that my horses are where I should be investing my energy and ambition.”

That energy seems to pour forth from Kyra Kyrklund as effortlessly and endlessly as the English rain.



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