

## Drasius Arkus of Greystone Farm *Respecting the Horse*

By PAM GLEASON, Photography by Gary Knoll

When Drasius Arkus first arrived in the United States, he had \$100 in his pocket and a telephone number. A Lithuanian, Drasius had always dreamed of going to America. His plane landed at JFK airport. He passed through customs, then started calling the number to try to get someone to pick him up. He hadn't realized it at the time, but the person he was calling was 800 miles away in Chicago. America is a big country.

Drasius was in luck. The person he called was, indeed, coming to JFK to pick up some relatives. But it wouldn't be for another week. By the time Drasius had finished making his phone calls, he had fed \$50 worth of quarters into the pay phone. With just \$50 left, no one else to call and nowhere to go, his only choice was to remain at the airport and wait the week out.

"When I saw the movie 'The Terminal' with Tom Hanks, where he has to live in the airport, I almost cried," says Drasius today. "Then I thought, who gave them permission to make a movie about my life?"

### **An Old World Education**

Drasius was born in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. He grew up in the city, and during summers, his family spent time in the countryside where Drasius's grandparents lived on a farm. He loved the animals, especially his grandparent's draft horse. In Vilnius, there was a state-sponsored riding academy where trainers were charged with developing horses and riders for the highest levels of the sport. At 10, the age at which children were admitted to the academy, Drasius began his riding career there.

Lithuania was then part of the Soviet Union. The Soviets had a plan and a system to be internationally dominant in every area of athletics, including the equestrian sports. The official riding academies all over the country would admit 40 or 50 children every six months. Those that the trainers thought had the talent to make it to the top would stay; the others would be weeded out. Long-legged Drasius was one of the talented ones. He went to the academy six afternoons a week, riding horses from early afternoon until evening. He was chosen by the showjumping coach to jump, and so jumping is what he did. At 13 he was competing, and by the time he was 18, he had passed the highest test in the nation. He was a Master of Sport and a member of the Lithuanian national showjumping team.

At 18, like all men in the Soviet Union, he was required to enter military service. Since the government considered athletics to be an important part of their national strategy, for Drasius this meant going to Moscow where he would ride and train with the Soviet showjumping team. In Moscow he met his mentor, the Soviet coach Ivan Kizimov.

Ivan Kizimov is a legendary horseman, who won numerous medals in Olympic, World and European championships, including the Olympic individual gold (1968, Mexico) and the Olympic team gold in dressage (1972, Munich.) After the end of his competitive career in 1976, he became the head coach of the Soviet equestrian team.

"Ivan Kizimov is not just an ordinary athlete, an ordinary rider," says

Drasius. "He can feel the horse from inside out. He taught me how to feel a horse, how to touch a horse for real. He showed me when a horse needs to be touched, when he needs to be pushed, when he needs to be pulled. He is a real horseman."

Kizimov, like other followers of the old European school of riding, is a firm believer in dressage and flatwork for all horses, but especially for jumpers, and he transmitted his system and his methods to Drasius.

"The philosophy of the European school is if you can't control the horse, you can't jump. It doesn't matter if the horse can jump a house, what matters is, how are you going to get to the house? If you can't get to the house, how are you going to jump it? The European school is all about riding the horse between the jumps; it's all about the feeling of the horse."

After four years in Moscow with the Soviet showjumping team,

Drasius left the military and went to Mühlen, Germany, where he rode and competed show jumpers for Paul Schockemöhle, who owns a huge sporthorse breeding and training facility. Three years there, and he was ready to move on. It was 1991. America was his dream and his destination.

During those years, Drasius had some thoughts of returning to live in his native Lithuania. But when he went back to visit his family, all those thoughts vanished. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Lithuania was establishing its independence and the Soviet Union was crumbling. By 1991, the Soviet Union was no more. Now independent, the Lithuanian state had closed the riding academy.

"I was shocked," says Drasius. "All the showjumping horses, the dressage horses, the international horses, all had been given to the police force. So now policemen were riding these great horses on the streets of Vilnius to control traffic. The whole system was gone. It was sad, and I got really disappointed. I said, that's it. It's over."

### **Establishing an American Career**

After his long week at JFK airport, Drasius traveled to Chicago, where there is a large Lithuanian community. He started out doing various different jobs. He had no connections in the American horse world, and it took him many years to make his way back to showjumping. It was a slow process. People would hear that he could ride, but they had no idea that he had trained with an Olympic medalist or that he had competed at an international level. Eventually, however, he ended up at various prestigious hunter/jumper barns in the Midwest and on the East Coast. He rode horses for many different trainers, did some competing, and did some teaching.

Then he arranged to bring Ivan Kizimov to the United States to give clinics to top American riders. Soon, Kizimov was visiting the States every six months or so, developing an American following. Drasius,



who sometimes acted as Kizimov's interpreter, became known to many people at the top of the sport. He made a reputation for himself on the showjumping circuit as someone who is particularly good with young horses and with horses that need more flatwork and education. His name may not have been especially well known, but people recognized him, and he was hard to miss: there are not a lot of lanky, 6 foot 3 inch riders hanging around the show ring. People often referred to him as "the Russian."

### **Greystone Farm**

This October, Drasius begins a new venture as the trainer at Greystone Farm, a boarding and training facility that he is opening with his partner Sharer Dale. Sharer, who came to Aiken a few years ago from Ohio, is a realtor at Meybohm Real Estate Company and an accomplished amateur jumper rider. Over the past year, Sharer and Drasius have had a barn together where Drasius has helped Sharer with her own horses and has taken in some outside horses and students. Although he wants to teach serious amateurs, Drasius has also coached a few professionals in the Aiken area, especially event riders who have wanted help with both their dressage and their stadium jumping.

The new Greystone stable was built as the community barn at the Steeplechase residential development on the Southside. It sits on 20 grassy acres surrounded by perimeter trails in a location that is convenient both to Aiken and to Augusta. The barn itself was designed by Pam Thompson of Laissez Faire Sotheby's in downtown Aiken. She explains that she modeled it after a classic car garage that was featured in Architectural Digest. It has 12 large stalls downstairs, a spacious apartment on top, and a balcony that will be a covered observation



and clinics for anyone who wants to improve their horses and their riding.

"Drasius is very focused, and he is always thinking," says Sharer. "His true desire isn't about business, it's about doing right by the horse. He's very good with young horses, and he's very structured and disciplined. The way he teaches is great for amateur riders, because he sets a standard for you, and you almost have to live up to it. He really drills you on your flatwork, and you might do ground rails and cavaletti every day. It really makes a difference in the horses."

Sharer says that she and Drasius plan to fill their 12 stalls this fall and winter, and that the stable has plenty of room for expansion. But they never want to have more than about 15 horses in training.

"I'm not looking for big business," says Drasius. "I'm looking for perfection. I'm looking for people who want to ride and are serious about the sport. I like to be involved with every horse and every student in my barn."

Sharer says that she sees their new venture as something that will be complementary to other training programs that are already in Aiken. Because Drasius does not plan to travel extensively, he can be available to Aiken-based riders who might need some extra attention while their own coach is out of town competing. He would like to assist anyone who might need some extra help with their flatwork or their jumping, from dressage riders to event riders to jumper riders. He welcomes anyone who is willing to be disciplined and serious about riding.

"I don't like to see the kids riding with earphones, listening to music, talking on the phone," he says. "You can't do that. My students learn to be really focused. Every detail means something, and you have to do it right. You can't put on the boots and the saddle at the same time. There is no multitasking with horses."

In fact, for Drasius, respect for the horse and for the sport is paramount. The way Drasius keeps the stable (spotless) and the horses (immaculate) is a reflection of his belief in the equestrian traditions he was brought up with.

"Under Ivan Kizimov, you were not allowed to get on the horse with dirty boots, because it doesn't show respect for the horse," he says. "It is important. The happiness of the horse counts a lot. I compare horses to human beings. If you want to be successful as an athlete, you have to make a training program. You have to eat right. You have to exercise. Everything about horses is about making a routine. They don't like chaos and drama. Horses like a schedule. It gives them happiness, and if they are happy, then they can perform."

Greystone Farm will be open for business this October. Sharer and Drasius welcome anyone who would like to see the new facility to give them a call. They are planning a "Meet the Pros" clinic on Saturday, October 17 to introduce the public to their new place. The clinic will include jumping lessons, along with a talk from a veterinarian, a course walk with a course designer and a barbeque in the evening. For more information, call Sharer at 803.522.3648. 🐾



deck. Sharer and Drasius plan to put in a Grand Prix jumper ring and a regulation-size dressage arena. They look forward to taking a limited number of horses in training, and Drasius will be available for lessons