

was plagued by trouble with splints that refused to settle for two whole years. "My vet advised me to have them fired and I wouldn't. But I had to in the end, and it was the only thing that put them right. In retrospect I did wrong because I took him jumping, but it used to be old advice, to get the splints over and done with. Then he got badly kicked by a mare on his hind leg when he was covering. That kept him out of work for seven months, and of course there was the pus in his feet where he kept tearing his shoes off and standing on the nails. My father was scandalised, all that money and the horse seemed to be always lame!"

So in actual fact, 1992 was Cassander's first season in the dressage arena. He began by being second in a Novice Qualifier at Hampton Court, before going one better at Chepstow. He won two Elementaries at Tong, was runner-up in the Regional Final at Somerford, and won both the Elementary and the Novice at West Wilts, the latter by a convincing margin of 30 marks. But the greatest triumphs came at the National Championships at Goodwood when Cassander and Serena were victorious in both the Novice and Elementary classes. "Of course, I honestly didn't know how good he was going to be. Obviously he worked nicely, but we don't go to many 'upmarket' shows, so the first ones weren't 'hot' classes."

Serena originally considered Cassander to be rather a feminine name for a macho stallion, and at home he is called Cassis or Mr Quick. I had no sooner stepped into the yard at Sheepcote when I was given the opportunity to see Cassis in his role as working stallion. "He gets about 30 mares a season," explained Serena. "but we're going to use him to 'tease' a mare who has just arrived to test if she is in season, because he is a good natured character and doesn't mind such things." Though he was a magnificent sight as he strutted out to meet the new lady, the stallion was indeed perfectly obedient when he was led back to his box without really making her acquaintance. "There's an Advanced event mare that he can cover later on this evening," consoled Serena.

## Daily Routine

A typical day in the life of the 16.1hh nine-year-old begins with breakfast at 7.30am. In the covering season he teases his mares at 8.30 so the vet can be informed as to the number to be covered by the three stallions in the yard. He is always ridden sometime in the morning, and always with other horses, mares included. Sometimes he is turned out for an hour or so in the paddock, and after lunch he usually covers a mare, and sometimes another one in the evening. Occasionally he is let loose in the indoor school for a run.

"He loves to hack out and go in the river, he's mad about water! He gets a day off whenever I go to a show with the other horses, which is about once every ten days. Flatwork? Well, I don't do much compared to most dressage people, but a lot compared to non-dressage people! He's actually a highly intelligent horse, and once he's got a movement, I might not have to spend long on it. So after 20 minutes warming up, I perhaps only need to spend 10 minutes on passage. He's not the sort of horse that has to be in a receptive mood to learn, he just says, 'OK, so today we're going to work on x . . . and I rarely have to work him for longer than 45 minutes. He's quite a confident horse, and he's going very well at Medium level, so I don't need to keep going to shows to know that. I want him to be a horse that makes it at Advanced level, not be a horse that wins lots of nice Medium classes and

goes no further. He has a nice piaffe and a good passage, though his changes are a bit suspect at the moment. When he changes, he does it well, it's just that he's a bit casual sometimes, and if he lacks attention for the first second in a movement, he can usually get away with it, but changes are so cut and dried – you either change or you don't, and he sometimes says, 'Oh sorry, did you say change?'

Cassis has now won three Championships at Medium level, displaying his obvious ability to perform an excellent test. Being a stallion is not, as one might imagine, a problem at a show, and in fact he tends to be very nervous of working in amongst other horses, especially when the area is crowded. "It's awful, with people riding so close to you with long whips, he keeps getting flicked and he hates it. I don't carry one. A horse ran into him at Goodwood, and made him very tense, so I had to take him away and work him in quietly in the lorry park. He jumped out of the practice arena at Addington because someone barged him."

Addington was also the scene of Cassis' only competitive 'wobbler'. "We were walking along the narrow path to the arena for our test when a litter bin swung in the wind and frightened him. He galloped off, and I can tell you, I'm no wimp about stopping a horse, but I thought we were going to be in the International arena! I managed to turn him into the International practice arena, and he was genuinely frightened and stood shaking. While I was soothing him, I was told to get out in no uncertain terms, but I wouldn't let myself be bullied and let him calm down until he'd walk back to the



national arena, where we should have been doing our test. I almost ran over half-a-dozen spectators on the way down, but he was a little more sedate on the way up, though he was still peeking at those bins. We had to go straight in, and he went snorting up the centre line with his tail up over his back! By the last four movements, he suddenly switched off again, and got tremendous marks

for them, but he was naughty again when the bin squeaked as he went back up the path! But the next day he settled beautifully and went out and won, but no-one could believe that my well-mannered horse had behaved like a hooligan! I never plaited him previously, not even for Goodwood, because I truly think his neck looks better with his mane unplaited, but when it was mentioned that one of the judges considered it an insult, I obliged and plaited him up. So when someone asked me what went wrong, I jokingly told them being plaited had upset him!"

## A Perfect Gentleman

Cassis is a perfect gentleman in all respects, though Serena invested a lot of time in regaining his confidence travelling in the lorry in the early days. He still bangs impatiently on arrival at a show, but once he has been unloaded and had a pick of grass to inspect the venue, he is happy to be re-installed.

Surprisingly, out of all the excellent movements Cassis executes, Serena considers his walk to be his best one. "He's had a lot of nines for his walk, and I think it's a pace that often gets killed off with training, so I'm glad he's retained it."

Who Cassis would be if he were a human being had Serena pondering extensively, claiming not to be well acquainted enough with topical characters to know. However, the staff insisted that Patrick Swayze was a favourite candidate, good-looking, sturdy and an excellent mover. Serena, recalling 'Dirty Dancing' agreed that the movement was OK, but objected that her horse was much more handsome! Whatever else, it appears that Cassander is definitely destined for stardom. □