

The biggest plus, of course, is finally being able to spend more time with her husband of two years, Californian veterinarian Greg Staller, after a hectic trans-Atlantic relationship.

If she hadn't met Staller when she was trying out at Gladstone for the 2010 FEI Alltech World Equestrian Games Team (she wound up as the reserve rider), she might have moved to France, Italy or southern Germany, she said, "an area where I could enjoy myself a little bit more" as compared to northern Germany, where she was based.

But coming home has had multiple benefits, beyond being able to celebrate the Fourth of July and watch baseball to her heart's content. It is enabling her to become an instant part of the American dressage scene, and share the knowledge she gained from her time in Europe, where she trained with such big names as the late Willi Schultheis, Rudolf Zeilinger and Morten Thomsen.

With previous experience from being on the executive board of the International Dressage Riders Club, she has taken a big role in governance, serving on both the U.S. Equestrian Federation's eligible athletes committee, of which she is vice-chair, and the high performance dressage committee.

"I've been really pleased and surprised by the Americans' ability to work in committees," she said.

Robert Dover, the new U.S. dressage coach, commented, "It's great to have her back in the U.S., not only because of her ability as a competitor, but also because she is extremely active in working with the USEF to progress our sport. Catherine has proven herself to be an extremely strong rider and trainer with great experience, having lived in Europe for so many years."

Recently, Dover said, he discovered she had an unexpected side as "an amazing stand-up comedian," when she did a routine that had people in stitches at a foundation benefit party. Staller has very definite ideas about what should be done to get American dressage riders back on the podium for global championships, where they haven't been since the 2006 WEG.

"I think that (dressage) nations that have been successful in recent years have not only found a good source of support funds for their teams, they've also had a real structure in which riders come from the very bottom up to the top; they have had a very well-developed pipeline," she observed.

"When they have their A-team picked out, they have very specific training goals for their riders and are using a lot more technology in the development of top Grand Prix horses than we do -- aqua training, monitoring of the pulse during work to check fitness, scientifically looking at shoeing to see how they can aid horses and keep them sounder longer; nutrition, which has advanced so much in the last 10 years. The top, top teams are being made aware through their federations and their training programs of all the things that are available to them and I do not see that happening in the U.S. yet."

She is, however, impressed by the committees on which she sits, noting "there's a lot of new ideas coming into the committees, a lot of inspiration. Our focus is on planning the best possible programs for a pipeline and our elite riders to move them toward success; planning those things first and then finding the money to support them.

Everyone looks toward Europe as a role model for successful teams and we should never turn our eyes away from that continent. If we want to catch up and be a world power again, we have to look at what the Europeans have been doing. I've been really surprised at the quality of horses we already have in America. I was more than pleased by the number of top-quality horses"

On the other hand, she cautioned, "What I see is that the majority of American riders don't have a real system in place for training their horses to the top level. I feel like we need to be a stronger

training nation. We need to learn more about systems that get them from training level to Grand Prix and I think I can be helpful there. You can't buy a top Grand Prix horse, you have to make it. We've got a lot of developing to do in getting our trainers to the top level."

Staller, 49, is an original, who is determined and rejoices in "telling it like it is." She grew up in Michigan, where her demands for a pony were answered at age six. Always eager to show, she was annoyed one day that her mother didn't get up early enough to take her to a competition, so at age 14, without a license, she drove herself and her horse to the showgrounds.

Her dressage got a basis with Bodo Hangen before she decided to immerse herself in Germany, long the epicenter of dressage.

She is just starting to ride again after suffering in February from recurrence of an old back injury after she decided to help unload 650 bales of hay. But she has three horses in the pipeline and is gearing herself to try for the teams for the 2014 WEG and the 2016 Olympics.

Winyamaro is "ready to go," though he is being ridden by her assistant, Austin Devlin, as she recuperates. Known for his fluffy forelock, the 13-year-old Hanoverian by Walt Disney "is a showman and way too sexy for his shirt -- that's the way he thinks of himself," she said slyly. Hotmail, an 11-year-old Oldenburg by Michellino and just starting Grand Prix, is a "sprightly horse." She compares him to Mikhail Baryshnikov.

"Remember, Baryshnikov brought athleticism to ballet, and this horse brings athleticism to dressage."

Patronus is a 9-year-old Danish-bred stallion by Pablo from a jumping line. He's moving up to Grand Prix as she spends a lot of time retraining the basics. "I'm teaching him my way," she said. But everything she has is for sale.

"I'm not a sponsored rider," she said. "I make my living doing this. It's always been my goal to send horses out into the marketplace who are good educators, so I'm not afraid to pass on some of my better horses."

With Staller's horses in the picture, the USET Foundation stables -- empty most of the year -- have come alive.

"It's nice to have horses here and her training here," said Maureen Pethick, the foundation's communications and facilities coordinator.

"It is great to have another person of her caliber in New Jersey for people at that level to train with. She has a great competitive background and lived in Europe for a long time, which gives her a really good understanding of what you have to do to get to these high levels. She'll be a good mentor."

In the future, Staller is hoping to build a facility next to her husband's Running S Clinic, where she will continue to train horses even after she finishes competing for what she estimates will be another seven to 10 years. Every horse she takes in is being ridden with the principle that they will all make Grand Prix, though it doesn't always work out that way, and she is busy with sales. She also is involved with breeding, giving her a multi-dimensional business.

Staller helps some top-level people, such as Pan American Games double gold medalist Chris Hickey, but also has been contacted by the Pony Club and will spend some time with the kids. She is getting involved with the para-equestrian program as well.

"I still have a lot of international business and do a lot of business around the U.S.," she said.

While she is motivated to share her knowledge and experience with "riders who can benefit from it," she adds, "I'm trying to keep a fairly low profile at the team because I really want to focus on my own training. I fit whatever I can into my schedule, but my main priority is getting my top horses up and running for the international shows."

