

THE ARCHITECTS OF THE DRESSAGE HORSE

How the German Breeding Societies have been selectively designing the dressage horse of the future.

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In responding to a question about the scores given for the gaits of the horses at the 2006 World Equestrian Games in Aachen, FEI Dressage Committee Chairwoman Mariette Withages said “We only judge what we are served.” Imke Schellekens-Bartels had been discussing the scores for the free walk noting that many times a horse with a very large walk has trouble when collecting the walk, and perhaps this should be considered in the scoring. However, Mrs. Withages and the other “O” rated judges who were involved in this discussion at the following Global Dressage Forum noted that there were in fact horses presented to them in Aachen that had both beautiful free walks with a great deal of swing and overstride that could also collect the walk without issue. Horses like Floriano ridden by Steffan Peters was certainly one such example, and he was awarded scores of 9’s and 10’s for his walk.

As long as there are horses that have the natural talent to show the judges the ideal of what they are looking for the rest must accept lower scores. Obviously the training and riding are an enormous part of what the end result in the show ring will be, but none of it can occur without the right horse to start with.

Even as early as the 3rd Century B.C., the Greek general, Xenophon, wrote about choosing the correct horse for the purpose of riding into war, “...To sum it all up, the least troublesome and the most serviceable to his rider in the wars would naturally be the horse that is sound-footed, gentle, sufficiently fleet, ready and able to undergo fatigue, and, first and foremost, obedient.”¹ In other words, the basic character, conformation, and physical ability of the horse were vital to the success of the training and the performance. This is true whether it is a matter of life and death or not.

When Xenophon wrote his treatise, he spoke only of what to look for when purchasing a horse. He does not write about breeding, although there is evidence that selective breeding for particular traits was becoming a practice at the time. There was a large incentive to provide horses that met the demands of those like Xenophon. Creating a horse which has all of the desired traits that met the ideal became the ultimate challenge. A challenge that breeders and breeding societies continue to take on today.

The current demand worldwide for the ideal dressage horse is extensive. Dressage as a sport has grown tremendously over the past few decades. From 1995 to 2005 the number of international dressage competitions doubled², and with it the need for more horses suited for the sport on all levels. Both the elite athletes as well as those appropriate for the amateur riders are being sought after.

So where does one find the ideal horse? Is it a matter of luck and chance? Luck and chance always seem to play a small part, but the systematic process set up by breeding societies around the world, or verbands, as they are called in Germany keep that to a minimum. The German breeders are very aware of what is being asked for, and they deliver it to the best of their ability as they have for the past 400 years.

HISTORICAL GERMAN BREEDING

Originally the structure of the breeding verbands was not as it is today. Some were set up in the early 18th century as a series of state owned breeding stations. The oldest recorded breed that is still in existence today is the Trakehner which was established in 1732 by King Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia for the purpose of breeding horses that could meet the need for lighter, faster, and more agile cavalry horses as the techniques of warfare were changing. At the same time, the need for strong, tough farm horses was also still predominant. The regional Schwaik was subsequently bred to Thoroughbreds and Arabians to produce the desired result.

The Hanoverian State Stud was established by King George of England in Celle, Germany. King George was the Elector of Hanover at the time, and like the Prussian King it was his intention to not only meet the demands for good farm and cavalry horses, but more importantly breed good carriage horses. Also wanting athletic and expressive horses for the carriages, the local heavier mares were bred to Thoroughbreds and Cleveland Bays imported from England as well as Spanish, Neopolitan, and Prussian horses.

In 1752, Duke Christian IV of Zweibrücken, a region in Germany near the modern French and Luxembourg borders, traveled to England and became fascinated with the Thoroughbred horses to the point where he decided to establish the State Stud of Zweibrücker in Birkhausen. His breeding plan was so successful that in 1783 King Friedrich Wilhelm II bought 150 horses from Birkhausen to take up to his newly founded Brandenburger State Stud in Neustadt Dosse just outside of Berlin. When Napoleon subsequently invaded the area in the 1790's most of these horses were taken to France and incorporated into the French breeding program although Napoleon did see fit to re-establish the Zweibrücker State Stud in 1806.

Other German breeds are historically even older, but had a less structured nature to their breeding programs during this time period, and many records were unfortunately lost. Breeds such as the Oldenburg has its roots in the breeding program of Count Anton Günther von Oldenburg (ruling 1603 to 1667) who imported Spanish, Neopolitan, Turkish, Polish, and Thoroughbred horses to breed to the local Friesen stock. The resulting horses were so superior he was able to save the Province of Oldenburg from the thirty years war by paying off would-be invaders with the best horses they had ever seen.

Although there are still modern breeders living in Oldenburg such as the Wilkens family who have lived on their farm since the 1400's and who bred for the Count, too many of the records of these horses were lost to be able to safely say where these bloodlines went to. The Wilkens only have records of their current mare line dating back 102 years, beginning approximately 8 years after the official organization of the first two Oldenburg breeding societies. That mare line has produced the team gold medalist and 2001 BCM #1 world ranked dressage horse, Albano, and the international show jumper, Portvliet, who was a member of the Japanese Team at the 2006 World Equestrian Games.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODERN GERMAN VERBANDS

By the early 1900's almost all of the modern German breeding programs took on the structure they have today. Due to world political events, the breeders formed their own organizations and established common rules and guidelines for the registration and approvals of mares and stallions whether they were working with the already established state owned studs or not. With the

industrial revolution much of the war and farm work was being mechanized, and although horses were still being used for these two disciplines up until World War II, things were quickly changing.

The introduction of the equestrian events in the modern Olympic Games in 1900 and 1912 sparked a new trend and concern for the breeding verbands. At first the equestrian events were limited to military competitors, but in 1952 the ban on non-military competitors was lifted and women were allowed to compete on equal terms. Equestrian sports were now the main economic force for breeding in Europe.

In 1921 the International Equestrian Federation (Fédération Equestre Internationale) was founded to establish rules and define the ideals of what was being asked for in the competitions. Their definition of dressage states, "...High quality is revealed by freedom and regularity of the paces, lightness and ease of the movements. The horse gives the impression of doing the movements on his own accord and shows immediate and even intuitive response to the rider's commands."³ It was this desire for a light, expressive, athletic horse that sparked an even further need to breed out the heavier work horses to create a modern sport horse.

BREEDING FOR SPORT

The Holsteiner verband whose history in breeding horses was started by 13th Century monks of Uetersen in the Schleswig Holstein province took this new sport edict to heart in the 1960's, and bred to a tremendous amount of top Thoroughbreds in the pursuit of creating the best show jumpers and eventers they could. Thoroughbreds such as Ladykiller and the Selle Francais, Cor de la Bryere, were bred extensively. Their bloodlines stem from the stallion Dark Ronald and his sire, Bay Ronald, who are clearly the most predominant sires in the lines of the top international show jumpers of today.⁴

The lines of Dark Ronald were not lost on the other breeding verbands either, and although these thoroughbreds were sought after mostly for their jumping talents their lines also had a great influence on dressage breeding as well. Praefectus who was the dam sire to Olympic dressage gold medalist and five time World Cup champion, Bonfire was an Oldenburg approved thoroughbred whose mare line goes back to Bay Ronald. And one of the best examples of the direct influence of the Dark Ronald line in dressage breeding is through the thoroughbred Angelo approved by the Westphalian verband. He sired Ahlerich who was ridden to multiple Olympic dressage gold medals, and was the dam sire of Rembrandt who is still considered today as being one of the greatest dressage horses in history also having won multiple Olympic dressage gold medals.

Thoroughbreds were not the only refining influence. Unfortunately, one of the casualties of World War II was the extensive breeding stations of the Trakehners. Being in the East Prussian region that was taken over by the Russians, the farms were destroyed. Many horses were killed, but fortunately a few were taken to the West German areas and were either set up in private breeding facilities or in some cases taken in by other verbands. One of the most influential Trakehner sires from this era was Abglanz who stood at Celle following the war. Famous sires such as Argentan, Argentinus, Akzent I and II stem from his line. Not to mention the dam of Weltmeyer, Anka.

Another Trakehner stallion that has more recently been bred to create dressage horses such as Gribaldi, Hofrat, Polansky, Painted Black, and the bronze medalist at the 2006 World Equestrian Games, Blue Hors Matine is the sire Kostolany. Kostolany comes from the East Prussian

Trakehner mare line of Kasette who lived in the mixed colored herd, and was rescued along with a few other mares.

THE INSPECTION PROCESS

In Germany breeding to light and athletic Thoroughbreds and Trakehners certainly was not the only key to success. The foundation lines they were breeding to were well established, athletic lines, and this had to be done carefully and with systematic thought. All German breeding verbands have set up rigid inspections and tests that both the mares and stallions are put through before they are allowed to breed. The directors of the breeding programs are typically educated to the Doctorate level, and the inspection committees include long time breeders as well as internationally successful trainers. These are the people that make the decisions that create a theoretical blueprint for the future dressage horse.

Most breeders will fully admit that one can have all of the best bloodlines in the world and yet still end up with a normal horse. The inspection committees established by the verbands have the task of continuing to improve the breeds not simply based on the lineage, but based on the actual type, conformation, and performance of the horses in front of them. The bloodlines have to prove their physical structure, not just once or twice, but repeatedly to be considered worthy of being a part of the future foundations of a breeding program.

Of course when the inspection committees are looking at the 2 ½ year old stallions they have a very challenging task. Although at times I'm sure they would love to own a crystal ball, the fact is, they don't. They must look at these horses that are not yet under saddle and have the ability to see the potential. Not simply for the sport, but as a future breeding stallion. This is where established criteria from hundreds of years of experience play a great role. Certainly, the individuals on the committee must use their own experience and intuition, but it is with the backdrop of a great deal of education from the past. I think that they will even admit that they don't always get it right, but most of the time they do.

Recently at the Oldenburg Stallion Approvals held in Vechta, Germany this past November the bloodline of Sandro Hit was predominant. The champion stallion, Status Quo (Stedinger x Quattro B), was just one of the many approved and premium rated stallions there stemming from that line. Many feel that there is an unjustified political bias towards this bloodline, but it goes beyond that. As the approval committee explained, they are also judging what they are being served, and they feel that the qualities being exhibited by these Sandro Hit offspring are exactly what they are looking for. It would simply not make sense to ignore that.

For many years the promotion of this line by the breeding committee was challenged, but recently the vindications have begun. Sandro Hit's daughter, Poetin, started it all off by winning the World Championships for the 5 year old dressage horses with record setting scores, and now the up and coming 8 year old Sandro Hit son, Salieri, ridden by Victoria Max-Theurer is having success at Grand Prix. It's tough to think generationally in today's fast pace world, but this is something all breeders must try to do.

Of course this was not the only line being approved or considered. The older stallion parade, or "Altehengstparade" that followed the Oldenburg approvals exhibited many amazing stallions stemming from tried and true lines such as those from Donnerhall, Rubenstein, and Weltmeyer along with new stallions from other breeding verbands. All of the German verbands allow for the approvals of outside breeding stallions if they show the qualities being sought after. One such

example is the new phenomenon Quaterback bred and originally approved by the Brandenburg Verband. Quaterback is exhibiting movement that is absolutely spectacular, but being only 3 ½ years old his potential as a breeding stallion is yet unknown. He has been approved now for many of the German verbands such as the Oldenburgs and Hanoverians, and he is truly an example of European breeding. His lines stem not only from Brandenburg, Hanoverian, Holstein, Oldenburg, Sachsen Anhalt, and Mecklenburg lines, but also from Thoroughbred, Selle Francais, and Dutch Gelderlander blood.

Between him and all of the newly approved stallions from this year, it will be very interesting to see how these new blueprints work out.

¹. Xenophon, trans. M. H. Morgan, The Art of Horsemanship, (J. A. Allen & Co. 1962), 26

². FEI website, “Organisation”, “Facts and Figures”, <http://www.horsesport.org>

³. FEI website, “Dressage”, “About Dressage”, <http://www.horsesport.org>

⁴. Thoroughbred Heritage website, “Ancestry Frequency in Show Jumpers”, <http://www.tbheritage.com/HistoricSires/JumpSires/JumpShowchart.html>