A Call for CHANGE

According to Germany’s Christoph Hess, dressage training and judging need a return to classical standards

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In 2007, the influential German equestrian magazine St. Georg (st-georg.de) published an interview with Christoph Hess, an FEI 4* dressage judge and then director of the Training and Education Department of the German National Equestrian Federation.

The subject of the interview was the controversy over certain training methods, especially hyperflexion or “rollkur,” which the FEI has since condemned as inhumane when sustained over a period of time. Hess weighed in on the rollkur controversy and offered his thoughts as to how the dressage sport must police itself.

Given the renewed uproar over alleged cases of rollkur documented on film and in photographs at the 2012 London Olympic Games, the USDF Instructor Trainer Committee thought it worthwhile to bring the Hess interview to an American audience. USDF certification examiners Cindy Sydnor and Gerhard Politz translated the text into English and obtained permission to publish this adapted version.

St. Georg: Our magazine has published reports of such training methods as the use of ropes and pullies, withholding water, and electric shock, in addition to exaggeratedly deep riding of the neck and head. The German National Federation (FN) has stated that some of the training methods cited qualify as cruelty to animals.

Christoph Hess: First of all, I would like to say that I am convinced that our training methods described in the Guidelines and Manuals for Riding and Driving are correct.

The following is planned: First, a small group of experts from the FEI will address this topic. The intention is to examine already existing material and data regarding functional anatomy, biomechanics, and animal behavior and to pose essential scientific questions.

Next, a larger international working group must be formed under the auspices of the FEI. This group must include not only veterinarians but also active riders, trainers, judges, and representatives from the FEI Welfare Committee. It is important that this group consists of representatives from the most successful dressage nations, namely Germany and the Netherlands, but also Spain, Sweden, and the USA.

SG: What should this larger group do?

CH: First, we have to establish what is “normal” based on scientific evaluations regarding the training, handling, and treatment of horses. There are still vastly differing points of view. I remember visiting the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Jerez, Spain, after the 2002 World Equestrian Games. There, a stallion was led in and put in the pillars. He stayed actively in the piaffe for twenty minutes without interruption. I left because I considered this animal cruelty and felt it was unethical horsemanship.

The discussion about training methods in which the horse is made too tight in the neck is not new and has been ongoing for a long time in our FN working group, “Future.” On this subject there are two considerations. One is physical: What is “too tight”? At what point is a horse’s natural scope of movement impaired by the restriction of his neck? In addition, there is the psychological aspect: At what point is the rider mentally abusing the horse by this method of training? One must absolutely not destroy the horse’s personality.

SG: Are you familiar with other methods cited in our magazine, such as ropes and pullies, withholding water, and electric shock?

CH: I have never heard of the use of ropes and pullies, but I have heard of withholding water. In Athens [at the 2004 Olympic Games] I wondered why a horse that was on one day so wound up could be so completely quiet the next day.

I have never heard of the use of electric shock.

SG: In the future, how do you want to control the training in the warm-up arena?
Congratulations to the Participants in the USEF/USDF Dressage Seat Medal Program

The 2013 Finals will take place August 15-18 at the Stanley Park Fairgrounds in Estes Park, CO. The USEF Dressage Seat Medal Finals are presented by Dressage Today.

Congratulations to the 2012 USDF Dressage Seat Medal Semi-Final participants. Champions and Reserve Champions will be invited to compete in the 2013 Finals.
CH: [At national-level shows in Germany], that is not a problem. In the warm-up area, there is always a judge who can issue a warning and, in the worst cases, can eliminate a rider. Usually this judge will first speak to the rider, then give a warning, but not immediately issue a red card.

Internationally, it is different. The [FEI] stewards are more like technical delegates, responsible for the running of the show. They do not look at the warm-up area the way a judge would and are not authorized to give warnings or to eliminate anyone. This is now going to change. The stewards will be given greater authority. It is being considered to place judges at the warm-up areas at international shows. The opinion, “I have no business being concerned with what happens in the warm-up; only the five minutes in the show arena are important,” can no longer continue.

At small shows we often have the situation in which it is not the rider’s intention but rather his lack of skill that makes him unable to ride the horse correctly. Many horses curl so much that the rider can’t do anything to prevent it. The higher the level in dressage, the less the rider can use his lack of skill as an excuse, and the greater is the rider’s responsibility.

A top competitor must be clear about his role; the correct ethical attitude is expected. On the other hand, it is undeniable that a top competitor has to be ambitious. Just moseying around will not cut it. But certain boundaries must never be crossed.

SG: Have dressage judges unintentionally contributed to this development by awarding high scores for spectacular movement?

CH: We have to ask ourselves if we are still on the right path or if we are demanding too much; whether we tolerate shortcomings in one area for spectacular movement instead. This applies also to horses we see at the German National Championships (Bundeschampionate) and at the World Championships for Young Dressage Horses. One must realize that this is a negative development. The basics of dressage are about three things: rhythm, relaxation, and connection. When these three goals are achieved, one can then ask for more. However, quite often with some of the top horses, one of these basics is lacking, and sometimes all three. Then riders frequently try to hide this with spectacular gaits. One has the impression that the rider doesn’t even try to develop relaxation and looseness in the horse. Instead the rider is only controlling tension.

SG: Has the introduction of the kür (musical freestyle) contributed to this situation?

CH: Surely. But I am a friend of the kür; it is good for dressage. Without the kür things would look rather bleak.

We have to consider whether the demands of the Grand Prix are still OK: whether we are still really overseeing correct rhythm, relaxation, and connection. I would reintroduce some exercises, such as walk pirouettes, the Schaukel (rein back, walk forward, rein back, in a specified number of steps), the flying change in medium canter. In order not to lengthen the test, one could shorten the piaffe-passage tour. The marks for these exercises, together with the marks for the collected and extended walk and the final marks for thoroughness, would test the correctness of the training better. And it would give the Grand Prix score a different weight in comparison to the kür. Yes, the influence of piaffe and passage is too strong. Horses like Anky [van Grunsven’s] Salinero or Martin Schaudt’s Weltall score points mostly in piaffe and passage. That is not ideal.

SG: Can a judge recognize if a young horse or a Grand Prix horse has been trained according to classical methods?

CH: One can definitely recognize this, especially in the walk when a horse goes in a clear four-beat rhythm and in extended walk stretches his neck.

SG: Hardly any horses nowadays are truly in front of the vertical, as the rules and guidelines demand. Is this sufficiently penalized, or have the judges (and spectators and journalists) become accustomed to this picture?

CH: In training a horse can be ridden a little deeper to make him use his entire body—of course, not nearly as extremely deep as is practiced by some. But in the test we should not be influenced only by looking at the outline. If the horse seeks the bit, stretches himself, and then pushes back correctly from the bit, it is a smaller mistake if he is a little behind the vertical than when a horse is in front of the vertical and tight in the throatlatch and can no longer use the neck as a balance beam. The deciding factor is whether the horse moves through his whole body. Indeed, we have to ask ourselves if we have become too accustomed to the picture of the horse behind the vertical. This topic needs to be addressed repeatedly in judges’ forums. When judging, we must always ask ourselves if our measuring skills of the criteria are in top form.

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