

Good Horse or Camel? Our Recent Trip to Europe

By Julie Penshorn 4-15-09

That is the question, according to John Byrialsen of Skal, Denmark. He calls a “camel” a horse with inactive hind legs and a “too pretty” face and outline. He says this type of horse generally drops out of competitive ability when it tries to go beyond the PSG level.

John, owner of a huge breeding farm featuring both dressage and jumping-bred horses, continually shared his passion for “hind legs.” Watching a horse with good hind legs work is inspiring. You get a sense of the great freedom and range of motion allowed to the shoulder as the motor in the back supports the horse so it can be free in front. When the hind legs work well, they bend and to a varying extent, carry, propelling the horse elastically in apparently effortless balance.

A camel, on the other hand, develops a hump on either side of the withers area as he lifts his front feet without the requisite throughness to raise the whole back. A camel has hind legs that don’t step under, and improper development under the saddle area of the back. “A camel is only transportation,” says John.

We met John on our recent trip to Holland, Denmark and Germany, during which we spent time with some very knowledgeable horsemen and women. We looked at young horses and we looked at Grand Prix horses, and almost uniformly, we were disappointed with the quality of the training and riding.

Going to these countries is like going to the Mall of America. You figure you should be able to find something you like with all that selection! We looked at almost 150 horses and came up with only one upper level horse we really liked that passed our flexion/soundness tests! The upper level horses were so behind the leg and the bit that their changes were sluggish and they waited for a spur for every upward transition. The trainers wanted to give us bigger spurs to ride these horses and we often had to put them on and feign their use in order to avoid ridicule. Far be it from us to argue training methods with people from the “best” countries in the world, though we felt frustrated when horses couldn’t even make a trot transition from the walk without a stab.

My student, and fellow traveler, Layne Sandercott who is an FEI rider, often had to get on the horses so I could see what they really looked like when their head wasn’t between their knees or on their chest. At some barns you’d get on a horse and wonder where the neck went. It would feel like you were on the edge of a drop-off as the neck disappeared from view!

I often felt I wanted to “rescue” horses while on this trip. That was disconcerting, since these countries are home to our role models in equestrian sports. Deep and round often is interpreted as ONLY that, with no element of forward to bring the horse through and into the correct relationship with the bridle that leads to a complete circuit and thus, the completion of the circle of the aids.

One of our stops was at Bert Rutten’s place in Holland. Bert was a member of the Dutch Olympic team in 1984 and he also was a coach of the team for awhile. He was fascinating to discuss theory with, saying, “You can’t blame the riders. The good ones just do exactly what it takes to win. You have to blame the judging.” He also suggested that a missing element of the training scale is FORWARD, and it should be at the very bottom of the pyramid with rhythm and relaxation, not up at the top (as impulsion). It needs to be a key in every movement, every step and every piece of training.

This trip reminded me that “feel” is everything. Personally, I don’t think I’ll ever have as good a set of eyes as I have feel under my seat. The seat “feel” comes from years in the saddle. It comes from time, good horses, bad horses, camels and quality hind legs.

In my opinion, the quality of the rider's seat is really somewhere in the gut, the core, or the "bear down" as Mary Wanless calls it. By stabilizing ourselves we can ask the horse to become level with this back and not drop us into a hole (Mary Wanless calls this the "man trap"). From that man trap we may be able to produce a fancy front leg when we ride the horse in two pieces without throughness, but we can't get the very best out of any horse and we will likely run into soundness and tension problems (can't tell you how many horses we saw that ground their teeth incessantly – and we were told a good solution is to shoot a big syringe of olive oil into their mouths before competitions – Heaven forbid that one should actually address the root causes!).

We are so afraid these days to use our whips, because it is a visible correction. "It's so cruel," some say. What's cruel to my mind, is not riding the horse forward enough to get his back up because the hind legs have not been pushed under! What is cruel is to stab a horse every stride and pull his head in to a frame where his muscles can't possibly be free to move elastically. What is cruel is to copy bad work and make it part of one's own work, just because no judge has criticized it. What's cruel is losing one's integrity in the interest of pleasing an easily-fooled judge.

What is cruel is keeping the horse essentially behind the bit all his life except for the short moments when you actually enter at A and leave at C, hoping that his head will come up from the excitement so you can avoid the comment of "behind the vertical."

At some point in the history of dressage we began to develop such capable horses that even with bad riding they looked good. The breeders continue to try to produce everything needed for high scoring horses, because often riders are not doing their part to improve the horse!

We saw a horse at a big-time German trainer's barn that looked like his whole body was made up by a dressage judge committee trying to accomplish the "perfect" movement for dressage. He elevated his legs in an almost uncanny way and actually seemed to snap and then flip his hind feet. We were told he was WAY out of our price range (we didn't tell them we thought he looked like junk)! And, of course, he belonged to Americans who hire what they think are the "best" trainers for their "expensive" horses. I must say, they are not very loyal to the American economy.

If you are looking for examples of poorly trained horses, pick up any dressage magazine. Compare the activity of the front and hind legs of any picture. Remember what you learned somewhere along the line but have decided to ignore because it seems no one is practicing it: the hind leg should be at least as far forward as the front leg when lines are drawn through both forward cannon bones at trot. See how many you see like that. I bet you will find, hmmm, maybe one. See how many you see whose poll is at the highest point. See how many riders you see who are bracing their heels in their stirrups, because that is a symptom of trying to ride a horse that is not through from behind and doesn't know what a half halt is (except one or two pulling reins)!

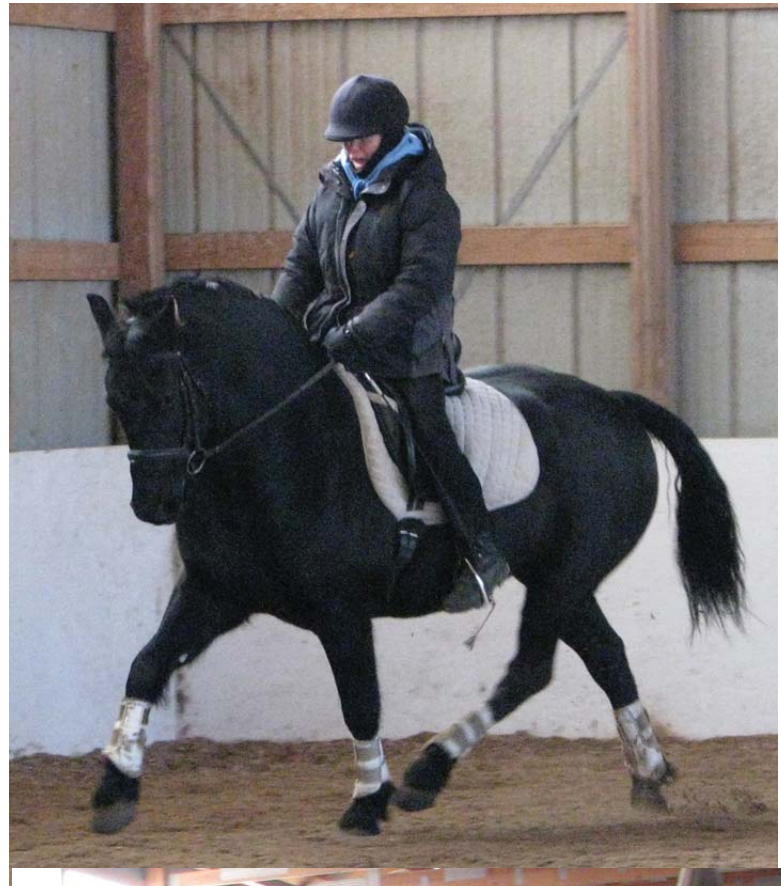
Finally, the piaffe and passage are logical outcomes of good half halts and good riding. They do not require a ground person to teach. They don't need to be taught from the ground. The good trainer just closes up the horse (brings the hind legs under) in the walk, then activates the horse a bit extra. Before you know it you have a step or two of piaffe.

What's the passage? the horse waiting for the half halt and the extension all at once; supreme collected trot with lots of impulsion; a logical outgrowth of good collection at the trot. There is no trickery about it. It doesn't require someone running alongside your horse with two whips creatively touching one leg and then the other. This makes the horse ugly. (I bet you can think of some example of this in recent Olympic history.)

In Holland, Denmark and Germany a lot of the gross national product comes from the sale of horses. It's fun to go there. It's convenient because even though you put a lot of miles on a car, you don't have to fly from city to

city like you would here. However, we Americans do not have to copy the practices of keeping horse in stalls 23 hours a day, riding backwards, and grinding with seat and legs for everything. We can do our own thinking, too. We can take the best of what we can get from overseas, and we can also go beyond that. After all, isn't thinking outside of the box one of the main ways our country has become its best? I intend to continue to believe in myself, listen to my horses, and ride my ride. I challenge you to make yourself an expert on thoroughness and lightness and see how it changes yours.

Look at this picture of a 6 year old gelding. Summer's Pince. He's a 15'2" hand Morgan Friesian cross who I've been riding for about a year and a half. Compare the hind leg activity to the front leg – it's actually more active than the front leg in the trot picture – and, as you can see from my winter coat, we are just warming up (well, it looks like I'm a bit cold!). He learned the rules: he knows he must use his hindquarters.



You can see the very first (pretty much his only) attempt at a tiny step of piaffe in the lower picture. He caught on right away, although he needs a lot more pieces of the puzzle and muscle to be able to really do it with "sit."

