

Open Letter as of December 18th, 2009

Attn:

- FEI
- German National Equestrian Federation (FN)
- German National Horse Judges Association

To whom it may concern:

More than two years have passed since I sent my last letter to you. I have neither received a reply nor have I gotten the feeling that you have actually looked into and dealt with all those questions that – it seems to me – have become really urgent and important by now. Decades ago, you chose or, for that matter, started tolerating a way of schooling and training horses that values spectacular performances higher than established principles in order to fill stadiums, achieve higher TV ratings and enthuse the masses. This movement periodically reaches new climaxes every other year.

Looking at the economical side of the horse industry only, you might very well see a considerable increase, i.e. success.

Looking at current events though with YOUR teachings and ethical principles in mind, which every organization or club directly or indirectly imposes on itself by ways of its regulations, you are facing an incredible defeat.

Do you actually still care about the horses themselves as formulated in most of your rules and regulations? I cannot shake the impression that horses have become mere extras such as bikes to the Tour de France and that the actual goals are fame and money.

I understand that no one likes to question themselves and to admit mistakes that might have been made. However, you cannot honestly believe that those people, who are still tuning in and applauding, will continue to do so once they realize that most of what is happening is make-belief at the expense of the horse. The sentiment is about to change! The regulations of the FEI describe a well-trained horse as a “happy athlete”, they speak of looseness and impulsion generated in the hindquarters. Reading this, my only reaction was: How stupid do you think we are? Is there any other sport in the world where doing the exact opposite of what the regulations prescribe is generally tolerated? Exactly these rules are still valid, are they not? From a historical perspective, they have been tested over centuries and approved.

You award a horse a score high enough to break the world record that does not fulfill any of your own criteria. You are looking for flexible and systematically trained “back movers”, yet

you make “leg movers” superstars, that are shown in a skillful and technically accomplished way.

For reasons of credibility, however, the Germans have been enforcing a very offensive and transparent anti-doping policy. We are working hard on doping regulations, but forget to ask ourselves what the reasons for the increasing number of doping incidents are. In this context, should we not be asking why so much treatment in the area of orthopedic and psychopharmacological issues is necessary in the first place? Is it not the case that a horse trained and presented according to the principles of classical teachings (regulations of FEI and FN) – a horse that moves cadenced and balanced, shows self-carriage, looseness and whose back muscles are flexible – requires considerably less medical attention than a “leg mover” full of negative tension?

Classical teachings equal actively practiced animal protection!

How do you suggest veterinary doctors are supposed to react when, shortly before a show, “sports equipment” worth millions of dollars suddenly “breaks”? Would you as a rider, owner or trainer, who is directly involved, not be tempted to fix it? Which role does the veterinary profession play in all of this? On the one hand, a vet has an obligation towards the owner (and the horse?) and receives great questionable honor if his efforts to fix the damage pay off without being picked up on during doping tests. On the other hand, this vet will always exist in some gray area of legality since only these kinds of actions show that you are a good vet, who can join the conversations at the top of the “food chain”.

Why are so many institutions and educated people concerned about damage control and the treatment of symptoms?

Riding as a sport on such a high level is also about culture and art. It is supposed to create role models instead of questionable superstars.

If doping regulations were as clear as they are said to be and if we did not want any medical intervention, why do people require team veterinarians to be taken to shows? In case of emergency, a vet carefully chosen by the event’s organizer may just as well tend to the horse – and besides, almost everyone knows how to hold a hose pipe to cool down a horse or its legs. What do we expect from a “personal” vet during such an event?

Have you ever thought about the condition that ends most of the promising careers in dressage?

More and more often, dressage horses, which were showered with glory only a day ago, vanish from the main stage. Only in rare cases can a downfall be predicted because of massive swelling above the fetlocks. Most of the damage to the suspensory ligament is caused in the

respective fetlock, invisible from the outside. Usually, lame excuses are being used even though it should be obvious to every horseman – no matter if he is involved in auctions or in the show circuit – that an increase in negative tension causes an increase in this type of injuries!

Even in world championships for young horses, forelegs flung about in a showy and flashy way receive the highest scores! These kinds of movements originate from tense back muscles rather than from active hindquarters.

There is no way that only “leg movers” should win and that we should simply approve of the extremely high drop-out rate with regard to “show movers”!

Another issue related to the problem discussed here is the fact that real collection does not exist anymore. It is biomechanically impossible for a horse with tense back muscles to flex or bend its haunches. Nowadays, horses that we assume to be flexing their haunches really only are pushed together and were trained to fling up their legs.

Attempts to explain uncontrollable psychological tension in high-performance horses by means of their lineage and bloodline are plain ridiculous. As every experienced rider knows, negative physical tension always causes psychological agitation and stress. When a horse is skittish and hard to control, this is usually not its own fault or its own doing!

A correctly trained horse is calm and has strong nerves because it is relaxed (especially with regard to its muscles) and trusts its rider.

There will always be misunderstandings with regard to classical teachings – we are merely humans after all. However, such systematic aberrations are incomprehensible and unacceptable to me!

Moreover, there will never be “new” or revised teachings of how to ride and train a horse. Horses have always been horses and will always be. The psychological and physiological concept, which is the basis of classical teachings, will always remain valid. There is no doubt that there will always be well schooled “back movers” with a flexible back and relaxed muscles displaying movements that are balanced and natural (i.e., not artificial or showy). It also goes without saying that there will always be “leg movers”, pushed together by impatient and insensitive riders. In my opinion though, it is high time that the people responsible for defining and implementing the rules of our sport finally remember what they decided on and start putting it into practice. How is it possible that our distinguished and professionally competent national trainer repeatedly recommends the renunciation of the training scale as the only way to be successful? The balancing act between theoretical commitment and practical implementation that has been practiced over the last decades is starting to hurt badly –

especially the horses. I only see one way out of this calamity: consequently and unequivocally following and practicing the core principles as defined in the Principles of Riding (as published by FNverlag, Germany, or Kenilworth Press, UK, for the English translation)! Let us once again adhere to our rules and regulations!

About 50 years ago, Dr. Gustav Rauh said that it was a judge's honorable task to distinguish a "leg mover" from a "back mover". A "leg mover" should never be considered for high rankings even if his performance was technically perfect. Only "back movers" could be in the rankings – the quality of technique was only judged after making sure that a horse really was a "back mover".

How are riders at grass-roots level supposed to interpret world record-high scores for "leg movers"? Do you honestly believe that you can continue to fool the public in this way? Where is this journey supposed to go? Where is this ride headed?

Yours sincerely,

Gerd Heuschmann

Veterinarian and author (*Finger in der Wunde [Tug of War], Stimmen der Pferde, Mein Pferd hat die Nase vorn!*)