

Can Eventers Ride Real Dressage? *By Tim Holekamp*

It's every Warmblood breeder's intention to produce exceptional foals that ultimately perform well in dressage, jumping and/or eventing. At our home farm in Columbia, Missouri, my wife Cheryl and I have bred Trakehner sport horses for 25 years, and for several reasons our main interest has been eventing, especially since cross training is so useful for evaluation and properly starting of each young horse. Plus we raised a gaggle of children on our homebred horses, all of them active in Pony Club, which during those years focused mainly on combined training. I have found the culture of three-day eventing to be closest to the one I most admire, with hard work, tough ambition, high-stakes horsemanship testing, personal responsibility, and a certain camaraderie—all key elements.

After nearly 20 very successful years eventing at the lower levels on our young horses, Cheryl has refocused on FEI dressage, studying it as a major challenge, becoming a licensed "r" judge, and earning that coveted USDF Gold Medal in 2006 on one of our Trakehner broodmares she raised and trained herself. Besides breeding, over the years we've been active as volunteers in both worlds of eventing and dressage.

I often wondered about the differences I have detected in the way dressage is approached between pure dressage competitors and eventers. Asking the top judges for an explanation of the differences has consistently led to the answer: "There are no differences." I guess there is a certain defensiveness in those voices telling me this, but no further understanding resulted. It is pretty clear to me that obedience is valued highly in eventing dressage, perhaps more than expressive gaits, though correctness and regularity is sought in both forms. One thing is for sure—even at the international level event horses and riders are not asked for FEI-level dressage movements, other than the most basic ones.

In the eventing world there is still much angst about the increasing emphasis on dressage performance in world level competition. There have evolved some riders and horses that produce almost incredibly "perfect" performances in the four-star tests (Bettina Hoy, Ingrid Klimke, William Fox-Pitt and others come to mind). The hard cold fact is that the supposed ascension of the Warmblood in upper level eventing has been



largely fantasy. All three of the above riders have been competing just about exclusively on Thoroughbreds in recent years.

Whoa! You might say, what about my own Trakehner stallion Windfall? He held the record for the highest score in dressage at the Rolex CCI**** until a couple of months ago, won a Pan-Am Games gold medal, an Olympic bronze medal, and retired with an incredible string of top placings, very often winning the dressage phase. Ah, but Warmbloods do come with various pedigrees, don't they? Windfall's sire, Habicht was himself sired by an Anglo-Arab and Windfall's dam was a pure steeplechasing Thoroughbred. So he actually has more Thoroughbred blood than Trakehner blood, and only one grandparent had ANY Trakehner blood in her pedigree. So although we do see more and more Warmbloods here in the U.S. at the lower levels of eventing, I would submit that this is related to the ease of training them, often having a gentler temperament and improved athleticism amongst modern Warmbloods across the board. What this leads us to is a comparison of the pedigrees of FEI-level dressage horses versus top eventing horses—nearly all pure Warmbloods

versus mostly Thoroughbred or Thoroughbred/Warmblood crosses. This fact alone does tend to make a difference in the dressage performances one sees in top competition.

But what about the riders? Sometimes there is an assumption among "pure" dressage folk that the form of dressage seen in three-day-eventing is somewhat diluted in quality. By this I mean that dressage riders do not give eventers much credit for ever mastering "real" dressage. Despite the obvious fact that dressage judges at horse trials are the same folks as the judges at USDF competitions, judging by the same rules, standards, and scoring methodology, there really IS a general impression of some kind of "difference". And that difference often focuses on the riders, who very nearly never overlap between the disciplines at the upper levels.

So for fun and to make a point, New Spring Farm's recently added young trainer, Michael Larsen, decided it would be worthwhile to pit himself against the USDF's first big ladder rung in achievement, the Rider's Bronze Medal. To understand the challenge fully, one must know that there are many dressage riders who work for years to earn this honor, needing two scores above 60% at each of the three levels First, Second, and Third, from different judges for the two scores at each level. And USDF rules do not allow one to show a horse at more than two adjacent levels at one show, so at least two shows are needed also.

Until June 5, 2009 Michael had never shown any horse at any recognized USDF show, though he had evented for years, even briefly up to advanced level several years ago. The St. Louis Area Dressage Society conducted a pair of back-to-back shows June 5-7 (counting as two separate competitions on the same weekend), and had enough judges coming that it was at least theoretically possible to ride all six needed rides in one weekend to earn a Bronze Medal. We have a young ATA-approved stallion, Baron Verdi, never shown above third level in dressage, campaigned as an eventer and a jumper, but lately he has mainly been a homebound breeding stallion. Michael had been sharing the riding duties on him with Cheryl for the previous two months, and all of us agreed that


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this was the mount for the 'Big Challenge.' As it happened, Cheryl and I were out of the country that weekend, so Michael took Baron to St. Louis on his own, adding to the pressure.

Stallions will be stallions of course, and the first warm-up at the SLADS show grounds included some airs above the ground, but from that point on horse and rider found the work ethic needed and behaviors were all steady and yeoman-like. The judges seemed to enjoy this pair,

in fact enjoyed them enough to more than make the weekend successful. Here are the scores:

First Level Test 1	73.000%	from Leslie Weiss 'r'
First Level Test 2	70.556%	from Leslie Weiss 'r'
First Level Test 4	72.363%	from Sue Malone-Casey 'S'
Second Level Test 2.....	72.973%	from William Solyntjes 'S'
Second Level Test 2.....	72.973%	from Anne Rawle 'S'
Third Level Test 1	64.359%	from William Solyntjes 'S'
Third Level Test 1	65.897%	from Sue Malone-Casey 'S'
Third Level Test 1	64.615%	from William Solyntjes 'S'

So, as one can see, Michael's USDF Bronze Medal was won by a pretty substantial margin. Their tests qualified them for show championship only at First Level, and they won it. Michael received for Rider scores of "7" on six of the tests, and one "6" and one "8". Baron Verdi for Gaits earned six "8"s, one "7", and one "9", that "9" from Sue Malone-Casey. Mission accomplished; USDF Bronze Medal certificate issued and received in one weekend by an event rider riding "eventing dressage" or "real dressage?" You be the judge. 

About Tim Holekamp: He and his wife Cheryl own New Spring Farm in Columbia, MO, and in Ocala, FL, and have been active Trakehner breeders for the last 25 years. They currently stand two stallions, Windfall and Baron Verdi, and have won numerous ATA awards. Tim served on the ATA Board and chaired several committees for many years in the past. He is presently on the USEA Young Event Horse Task Force and the USEF High Performance Owners' Task Force. Cheryl is a Grand Prix rider, a trainer and coach, and a USEF "r" dressage judge and USEA YEH judge.