Has performance horse breeding lost its way? An interview with Dr Lehmann

Dr Lehmann was for 30 years – from 1966 until 1995 – the head of the Westfalien State Stud and is the man credited with turning a basically agricultural group of horses into the modern sport horse type. But Dr Lehmann is not happy with the direction of modern breeding, in particular the breeding policies of the Hannoverian Stud Book, from which the modern Westfalien drew so much of its inspiration – and blood. In this interview, conducted with the help of Britta Züngel of Die Hannoveraner, Dr Lehmann calls for a return to the older aim of breeding an all-round sporthorse.

“You should take care in a big breeding population that the dressage stallions can still do some small showjumps, and that the jumping stallions still have a high rideability. If you are breeding in a certain direction, there is always the danger that the offspring go too far in one direction, and you end up with jumping stallions that are not rideable. The changes in the philosophy of showjumping course building has helped make the showjumping horse more rideable, in former times, the horse just had to jump with power, now there are more technical problems. People used to think that a showjumping horse had to have a big ugly nose, little eyes, a dumb looking horse – but this was even the breeding aim of some people, they thought a really tough looking horse, like Roman, would jump higher.”

“I didn’t want Roman, he was too big with a big head, but he was a brilliant showjumper, but I tried to breed something else.”

But does the dressage horse need jumping talent – or as has been argued, is there a negative correlation between jumping talent and dressage ability?

“I think that the negative correlation between the trot and the ability to showjump may hold true for this Hannoverian population of horses from which it was calculated, but it is not God given – it is just a result of these calculations from this group of horses. For example, Milton was a beautiful horse, he had very good basic gaits – so the negative correlation may work as a statistic for a whole population, but does not apply to the individual horse. Or look at Ahlerich, Paul Schockemöhle said he would have been a very good showjumper…”
But not perhaps, Rembrandt or Ganimedes?

“Ganimedes no, but Rembrandt he was a good jumper – and Ganimedes could have competed at medium level jumping with no problems. The most important aim in Warmblood breeding is the elasticity and the balance of the movement, and the conformation of the horse. The horse must always be in self-carriage, we aim to breed a balanced horse.”

Isn’t the pressure of the market, where the higher prices are being paid for horses of dressage breeding, pushing the breeders into dressage specialisation, irrespective of the policies of the Verband?

“‘You cannot define what a showjumping pedigree is – look at ET. The breeders are aiming to produce a really beautiful looking horse that they can sell as early as possible. So often people believe that these sorts of horses cannot jump. Take Stakkato, his father is Spartan, but the mare is by Pygmalion is a Trakehner stallion not known for his jumping.”

Do you think the Hannoverian studbook is in danger of losing certain important bloodlines because of the concentration with over fifty- percent of mares bred to Weltmeyer, Rubinstein, Donnerhall, or their sons?

“Yes, we have lost the D line – not with Donnerhall but the Duellant influence which was responsible for Dux of Dr Klimke, and Doublette of Rosemarie Springer and Willi Schultheis. These were dressage specialists, yet we lost that Duellant bloodline. The mother of Grande was by Duellant. With Grande you would say he is by a showjumper out of a dressage mother line, and yet he was a genius as a stallion.”

But Dr Lehmann you yourself are talking about ‘dressage lines’ and ‘jumping lines’ and applying those terms to horses bred thirty, forty years ago – yet we often think this way of describing horses as dressage or jumping bred is a modern tendency?

“Of course breeders talk about dressage lines and jumping blood, but you shouldn’t do it. Look at Pilot, with a lot of dressage blood, like Graphit, yet Pilot was one of the best ever showjumping sires and all his offspring had rideability. From the great jumping line of Precipitation, through Furioso II we have Florestan (below) who produces horses of high rideability for dressage and showjumping. It is most important that any stallion should be able to jump small jumps. The freejumping is a qualification for the stallion licensing, and the stallions that do not show any jumping ability should not be licensed.”
Is it ever likely to happen that this process will be reversed, and that the Hannoverian Verband will look to licensing stallions with both abilities?

“I would ask the licensing commission not to license stallions that cannot jump but if there was a really really spectacular stallion who could move, but not jump, then you can put him in a big population. You can do that once or twice a year, with a really big population and a really spectacular stallion. We present the stallions on hard ground at the licensing, and if the young stallion shows high elasticity and a really nice and flowing movement, then he can jump.”

At the international seminar at Verden many speakers were talking about either breeding for an international competition horse, or a horse for the leisure rider, that you could not do both at the same time. To prove this, we would have to find the full-brothers and sisters of the international stars which are difficult horses to ride. I don’t believe this – I think that if we try every time to breed international superstars, then we get one once every thousand if we are lucky, and the others if they are given to leisure riders will be nice easy horses to ride. Do you agree?

“You are right, top horses should be rideable for everyone. The breeders are absolutely wrong if they think they can sell all the rubbish to the leisure riders. It is really wrong to think that the horse that makes the housewife happy riding in the forest can’t breed high performance horses – the horse of the housewife must have really high rideability.”

“If you look at the pedigree of the international competition horses they are not always bred along the fashionable performance lines. For example, Gigolo (above), he is out of a half-Thoroughbred mare and by a stallion with no reputation, and from his type and his conformation, you would say he is nothing.”

Is it a danger for the future that the breeders no longer breed to the stallions of their local stallion station,
but get chilled semen from the top stallions – will this prevent another radical outcross – like Grande – emerging?

“I agree, and one of the problems is that the breeders are changing, they are now often businessmen with no knowledge of horses. The people who really know something about breeding, then their chances are far better than in former times, because they are now the best of the best, and the others are really of a very low standard. There are two kinds of breeders: the mare owner – and the breeder, and there is a difference. One of the problems for the future is that the breeders are not using enough Thoroughbred blood, you must have Thoroughbred blood to have elasticity, and the Thoroughbred improves the ground covering quality of the trot, and the willingness to perform.”

Our interview had come to an end – but it is a debate that goes on and on….

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