

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: PIAFFE AND PASSAGE

By Gerhard Polltz

The recent discussion about the importance of piaffe and passage at the highest levels of the FEI tests has prompted me to do some research into the writings of the European masters and experts on the subject. As most of the material is not available in English, I have done some translating to provide food for thought for those concerned with training, teaching, and judging at the FEI levels. The maximum points obtainable at Grand Prix and Grand Prix Special is 410, out of which the possible total for piaffe and passage related scores is 130—barely one third (31.7%) of the test. Those who suggest that there is a preponderance of piaffe and passage in the Grand Prix test should refocus their attention on the totally illogical omission in the collective marks of the coefficients for a) freedom and regularity of the gaits, and b) seat and position of the rider and correctness of the aids. It would be considerably more to the purpose of dressage if those coefficients were reinstated.

If a horse performs adequately in all the other movements but is lacking in the execution of piaffe and passage, this can be attributed to several causes, some of which are: 1) the horse isn't ready (lack of talent?), 2) lack of ability in the rider, and 3) gaps in the horse's training. If these defaults cannot be overcome, then such horses should be shown at Prix St. Georges and Intermediate I, and in Europe that's where they remain often for their entire show career, winning large sums of money into the bargain! The problem of showing High School movements had already been a matter of controversy as early as 1952, as evidenced by an address given by Alois Podhajsky (then the Director of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, bronze medalist in the 1936 Olympic Games, and 7th in the 1948 Olympics. —Ed.) to the German Judges Association shortly after the Helsinki Olympics:

I contend that the principles of classical dressage need be fully applied to dressage tests and only the consequential

adherence to these maxims will enhance dressage as sport. It would be unwise to throw overboard the rules of classical equitation simply because some of its exponents have used these methods badly. Should we reject [change] the rules of the FEI because we only saw caricatures of piaffe in Helsinki? Quite the reverse, we should adhere to the classical principles even more unyieldingly in order to benefit dressage in the long run.

The importance of the piaffe is further emphasized in an essay by Gustav von Dreyhausen entitled "Basic Principles of the Art of Dressage":

The correct or incorrect functioning of the back becomes evident in the piaffe. The piaffe is the most obvious test of the correct schooling in the horse. If it is developed with ease and into the rider's hands, the basic training of the horse has been correct. If this doesn't happen, the training has been faulty. Apparent collection, even though the horse is elevated, on the bit, and Lord knows what else, is pseudo-collection if the hind end does not come under in such a fashion as to make the back stretch into the hands.

General Albert Eugene Edouard Decarpentry in his book, *Piaffer and Passage*, points out:

Certain irregularities of diagonal gaits, often nearly imperceptible at the trot, are still difficult to discern in the passage, even though they always become worse in that movement, only appear clearly in the piaffer.

There is absolutely no doubt that the highest priority should be given to the permeability (*Durchlässigkeit*), suppleness, and regularity (*not* just quality!) of the gaits. However, many judges either do not recognize shortcomings in this regard or are reluctant to score appropriately. Unfortunately this is true in Europe as well as in America.

The only answer to this is more education for all concerned. Sound judging based on a profound knowledge of the classical principles will in the long run benefit and guide the sport of dressage in the right direction. It is particularly important that these principles be observed at the lower levels as well. Felix Bürkner (German officer, 1883-1957, rode in the first Equestrian Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912, competed successfully at Grand Prix level until early 1950s, author of the German School Quadrille, Head of the Army Riding and Driving School Krampnitz. He was, next to Otto Lörke, perhaps the most prominent German horseman of this century. In 1950 he was the first German to compete abroad after World War II, when he rode *Zigeunerbaron* in London. —Ed.) has this to say in an essay entitled "How Does the Dressage Judge Recognize a Horse Correctly Schooled in the Basics?":

It takes years of careful education even with a talented horse until a correct and artistically perfect result in piaffe and passage can be obtained. Premature practicing of piaffe and passage with insufficiently prepared younger horses is detrimental to the whole schooling program and will result in irregularities in the basic gaits, a tense back, and disturbances in the horses mouth...The judge should not degrade himself by merely registering mistakes in the execution of the program, but must reward correct basics. Otherwise his function is detrimental to the nature of the art.

All the authors seem to agree that there is a direct connection between correctly schooled basics and the positive result this has on piaffe and passage and that, conversely, forced and faulty training of piaffe and passage always has a detrimental effect on the basics. Gustav Steinbrecht (German equestrian, 1808-1885, studied under Louis Seeger, a pupil of the famous Oberbereiter in Vienna, Max von Weyrother. His posthumous book, *Das Gymnasium des Pferdes*, goes directly back to la Guérinière and is still

considered to be the fount of Germanic equitation. –Ed.) in his **The Gymnasium of the Horse**, makes this point:

True collection has its foundation in schooling the horse to go securely forward and in aligning the haunches to the forehand [Straightness]. Those who truly understand bending the horse and grasp the essence of lateral work, especially the shoulder-in, do not need much advice about piaffe and passage...Continuing the schooling according to these guidelines will inevitably lead to passage as a natural result which in turn carries the seed of piaffe.

Brigadier Kurt Albrecht, the some years ago retired Director of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, talking about gymnasticizing the horse's hindquarters in relatively early stages of training, has this to say in his book, **Dogmas of Classical Equitation**:

Omissions in this field are always very difficult to rectify. This is evident even in

some of the better horses showing at the highest levels who, in spite of talent and willingness, are only able to perform a few piaffe steps under apparent duress and by visible efforts from their riders, so that the inherent ease and elegance of this greatest of all school movements is totally lacking. Merely diagonal steps in no way constitute a correct piaffe!

Talking about true collection in the classical sense as opposed to horses that can just do tricks, Albrecht has this to say in his book, **Guidelines to High School Dressage**:

A horse that has merely been taught the tricks will always go differently from a horse which has been correctly schooled! In particular that level of dressage formerly called Haute École should be characterized by refinement and perfection in each movement and tempo so that it becomes truly art, and not merely the showing of raw talent...It is therefore easily explicable that the piaffe is a crucial test of this level because it demonstrates

the most sophisticated form of collection and is a manifestation of the horse's true brilliance. Mere diagonal stepping does in no way fulfill these criteria...Because the correct transition from piaffe to passage [how these should look is described in detail in previous paragraphs] demands such an enormously powerful use of the haunches, it displays the ultimate perfection of a top level dressage horse.

Why the FEI has decided to give additional scores for the transitions at the highest levels may be explained by the following translation from Waldemar Seunig's book, **Von der Koppel bis zur Kapriole** (Published in the USA as **Horsemanship**. –Ed.):

The transition from piaffe to passage and vice versa have to happen without any loss of rhythm whatsoever. A further absolute test of permeability are the fluid transitions between passage and extended or collected trot. They prove whether the elastic contracting of the horse's back is the result of correct riding.

And again in an excerpt from Prof. Alfred Knopfhart's book, *The Foundations of Dressage*:

Impulsion and permeability in a dressage test cannot only be judged by the different tempi and movements (extended trot, rein back, lateral work, etc.) but even more so by the quality of the various transitions, which is why in some of the FEI tests the more difficult transitions are given extra scores.

How much importance the masters attach to the schooling of piaffe and passage to enhance the horse's way of going becomes obvious from some comments in Podhajsky's book, *Classical Equitation*:

...neither should the elasticity in the activity of the legs fade, nor should the movement lose fluidity. These demands can only be fulfilled if the gymnastic forming of the horse is perfected...The piaffe will improve the subsequent training. The

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increased ability to balance and to be more permeable will add more brilliance and expression to all the other movements. The piaffe will create more powerful haunches, thus benefiting the basic gaits.

If we are going to make claims to dressage as a form of art, why should we seek to minimize that in which the truly artistic ultimately manifests itself: piaffe and passage? Grand Prix and Grand Prix Special are not only tests of correct basics and the Campagne School, but also of Haute École, and therefore totally comprehensive. Before we consider ourselves artists, we should contemplate a very true German saying: *Kunst kommt von Können* (art develops from ability)!

Richard Wätjen has this to say in his book, *Dressage Riding*:

One often hears that the practice of Haute École is senseless as it does not serve any practical purpose. One can only reply by saying, why do human beings practice the arts such as music, painting, sculpture, and so on? The desire and endeavor to reach complete harmony between horse and rider—who must both be naturally gifted to it and by hard work and long systematic training—should be the ideal aim of every rider who intends to practice riding as an art.

If more riding academies existed like the one in Vienna, the understanding of this art would be greater and more widely known. Furthermore, the oft-practiced wrong methods which lead to erroneous conceptions would be avoided. ¶

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