

Breeding sport horses

The dressage sport is growing harder than ever before. More and more the Friesian Horse can be seen in the dressage arena at an increasingly high level. What characteristics make a sport horse anyway?

Is there a difference between a sport horse at Novice level and in the Grand Prix and if so, what is it?

Phryso International asked two expert witnesses: Belgian international dressage rider Peter Spahn and Saskia Meinema.

Text: Laura Boelens • Photos: Jacob Melissen

Peter Spahn is often asked what he thinks of a horse, he says. It depends on the purpose and the goals you're aiming at, he explains. His are obvious: he only settles for a horse with the abilities to reach the top level in dressage, the Grand Prix. Peter feels that is a horse with entirely different qualities

than say a horse that can reach Intermediate level. One thing is for sure. Peter is very passionate about the characteristics of an ideal sport horse.

Character

"A Grand Prix horse's most important asset is his character, his temperament

and his attitude," Peter states. "I don't mean the 'fast forward mode', but simply the willingness to work for you." The best Novice horses are those with good, generous gaits, he adds. "You won't notice the Grand Prix horse there. Chances are it won't be showing spectacular extended movements yet.



Saskia Meinema:
"Breeding sport horses is not always about Grand Prix horses"

Looking at my list of top dressage horse characteristics I'd say there are currently only a few textbook dressage horses. One of them is Totilas." Yet, Totilas' strongest weapon is his mentality, his former rider Edward Gal claimed in an interview. Peter prefers riding the horses from the very beginning. "During that initial period, the horse's muscles always ache a bit. It's important to see how a horse deals with that and how it deals with difficult situations in general. To me, it's a significant criterion." Peter admits to preferring riding gifted horses. He abdicates from horses he has to put too much work into. "I appreciate the right mentality and learning ability in a horse right away. The idea is to reach as much as possible with as little aids as possible, right from the beginning."

Eagerness

Saskia Mienema, an inhabitant of the Friesian town of Dronrijp, is a member

of the KFPS Sport Board. One of its topics is breeding sport-equipped horses. Saskia: "We're not about just breeding Grand Prix horses. A sport horse could be a Grand Prix horse, but not every sport horse is a Grand Prix candidate. Those are the exceptions that surface every now and then. And even then such a gifted horse has to end up with the right, talented rider to evoke all those skills. A performance horse has a number of characteristics, such as character and – very important – eagerness. Willingness to work is eminent. Horses that make it to Grand Prix level are in general not suitable for recreational riders. They often have that extra dimension, that edge that makes them more difficult to ride. They're on the edge sometimes but good and honest horses on the yard."

Many horses Saskia rides she's bred herself. "They're built completely different. I cannot even begin to

compare their exterior, but they are alike in character. They're all pretty hot tempered."

Health

Health is also of the utmost eminence. Peter and Saskia agree. Saskia feels a healthy and vital horse is the starting point of everything. Peter: "If I start working with a horse it first undergoes a solid veterinary check-up. We repeat this on an annual basis. A horse wears because of the work it does. If you start off with 3s and 4s on the veterinary report, you better forget about it. For the breed as a whole it is also eminent to proceed on with durable horses only. No one wants to put years of effort and time into a horse only to find it unable to live up to the expectations due to wear."

Exterior

A horse's build is also very important. Peter feels there is an obvious link

Peter Spahn:

"We have to maintain the Friesian Horse's golden character at all cost"



with character. "An overbuilt horse for example won't easily show its limitations." Peter prefers a light head-neck connection so the horse can easily bring its head on the vertical. The neck should not be too vertical as it prevents a fluent transition to the withers. "I prefer a somewhat compact Friesian Horse. I feel the breed's hindquarters in general are a bit weak. Length then is a disadvantage as every inch increases the leverage. You should always be aware of the horse's weaknesses in its exterior and the possibility to improve them with the right training and riding."

Saskia agrees with Peter's explanation on the light head-neck connection. She adds length of the neck. "I like my horses to have a nice long neck and let's not forget a good back."

Movement

In the sport horse, Saskia values an active, quick hind leg. When looking for the right stallions for her mares she makes absolutely no concessions at this point. "I really want to anchor those traits. I'd much rather make a concession when it comes to exterior than to movement."

Peter adds he prefers to see the horses move freely in a riding hall to form an opinion. When a horse moves freely Peter focuses on the part of the back behind the saddle. "I want to know how well a horse balances when it turns and stops. I want to see the horse put the hind legs way under its body and tilt its pelvis when it takes off again. The dynamics in that area predict the horse's ability to collect. This is of course an eminent aspect of a Grand Prix horse's training."

When it comes to the basic gaits Peter states: "Walk and canter are the most important gaits. You can train trot but if a horse does not have a clear four-beat walk you're in trouble. There is not much you can do about that as a rider. Only few horses can truly be worked on in walk. At Grand Prix level you have to make the walk-piaffe transition. If the walk is too big this is very difficult an exercise."

Peter has seen a big improvement in the Friesian Horse's canter. "Most

Friesian Horses now have a three beat canter, as it should be. Clear suspension is important. You can't really work a Friesian Horse in canter, but you have to for the zigzag half-passes. It's all right for a Grand Prix horse to have smaller movements as long as you can work the gaits. Perhaps that is the main difference between a top-level horse and one that can score a Novice level.

Choosing a stallion

When choosing a stallion you obviously need to be aware of your mare's weak and strong spots. You look for a stallion that can upgrade the weak spots and at the same time maintain the mare's strong traits. Saskia is keen on movement and character. "And I wouldn't choose a hot-tempered stallion for my hot-tempered horses." Saskia doesn't pay a great deal of attention to the stallion's performance in sport. "With young stallions it's often hard to tell. That doesn't mean they're not interesting to breed with."

Saskia does not pay attention to dressage or harness pedigree. "I could do well with a harness-like Friesian Horse with an active hind leg." As far as Saskia is concerned, the "electric" hind leg is one of the biggest criteria when choosing stallions to breed with.

This spring her mares are expecting foals by Anders 451, Maurus 441, Pier 448 and Maeije 440.

Durability

Peter is closely involved in breeding foals out of Anders 451's dam, Hanneke van de Hoogstraat Ster. He now rears a young colt by her and Loadewyk 431. A Ulke 338 foal is on its way. Unlike Saskia, Peter chooses stallions that do well in sport. He also wants the stallion to compensate for the mare's lesser qualities. Peter feels it's a good thing for stallions to be approved on the basis of their performances in sport. "It gives me a lot of information about the horse. Sport is an important measure of a stallion's character." Peter is really drawn to the horses out of Anders 451's mare line. "They're such good and eager horses. And there is so much durability in that line." It's the reason Peter chose Ulke 338.

"Just think what this horse has done. One-in-hand driving, two-in-hand, tandem, et cetera, for years and years in a row. That says a lot about his character." Peter also knows Annigje Model Sport well, who's also a Ulke 338 daughter.

Breeding vision

Saskia had made a presentation in which she outlines KFPS Sport Board's breeding vision and breeding goal. She also describes the sport horse's character. She emphasises again that a sport horse is not necessarily a Grand Prix horse. Saskia: "When breeders and riders continue to make breeding decisions after due deliberation, anyone can breed a horse for their purpose. The studbook has to continue approving a variety of stallions in several directions, a horse for everyone. Too much emphasis is on "modern", "long-lined", long foreleg, built uphill, et cetera. Lots of top-level horses don't have these qualities, so they're clearly not sanctifying. The most important thing for a breeder is being able to breed the horse you want. Most horses go to "average" riders. It's important for us to keep breeding for them. We must make sure we keep the good character."

Good guidance and training are also of the utmost importance when you want to create a dressage horse, Saskia underlines. Everybody needs a mirror, even at top level."

Peter agrees when it comes to the Friesian horse's wonderful disposition: "We must maintain our breed's good and trustworthy character. The average rider or driver is unable to deal with a hot-tempered horse. It's all about perseverance. If a horse has that trait, you can always sharpen it up. Anders 451 is really, really sharp. But many of his family are used as recreational horses. It's all about mindset. I feel that currently a very small part of our Friesian population is a bit non-cooperative and mean. It's a tendency of the last two years, I'd say. The studbook should keep a close eye on that. Also, too many all-round stallions are approved now. We'd better choose stallions for their extremities." •