

# Friesian horses deserve good riders

**'There is also a Friesian in the class. Then at least we will not be last;' a conversation between two riders in the warm-up area. This preconceived notion of the Friesian horse in dressage is common. Since the moment that a Friesian participated in dressage tests riders and owners have had to deal with the at first stubborn bias that Friesian horses need to pull a cart. That this is not completely true is, however, becoming clear to more and more people. The number of 'dressage Friesians' is steadily growing, and performances alike; those are the most effective to stop the nay sayers in their track.**

*Text: Ineke Jansen, judge • Photos: Bart van der Hoek • Translation: Anneke van den IJssel.*

Riding dressage with Friesian horses stood at a low level for a long time. In the 1950s and '60s riding association LR De Oorsprong in Huisterheide near St. Nicolaasga in Friesland was very successful in lower level dressage classes. But this was not yet the higher levels of dressage. A pioneer in this field was around 1950 cavalry captain Dr. H.L.M. van Schaik of Wassenaar with the Friesian Wopke. Van Schaik did many demonstrations but there were no sport performances. In the 1970s, more and more people rode Friesian horses in

dressage at higher levels. Wil Gerritsen-Fiedler with Feycko, Jos Hofer-van Diest with Drys, Jaap de Bruin with Elger, and Jaap Hartendorp with Cor, e.g., stood out and performed in the dressage ring against many prejudices. Later on Javancka de Wit rode with Jakob 302 and Feitse 293 pref, Suzanne Hazelhoff with Heinse 354 sport, and Bennie van Es with Stientje at the national KNF championships (Levade) and even later Dunja Constant rode with the now late Rimmelt 323 (he later on moved to the United States) at ZZ-Light level. A

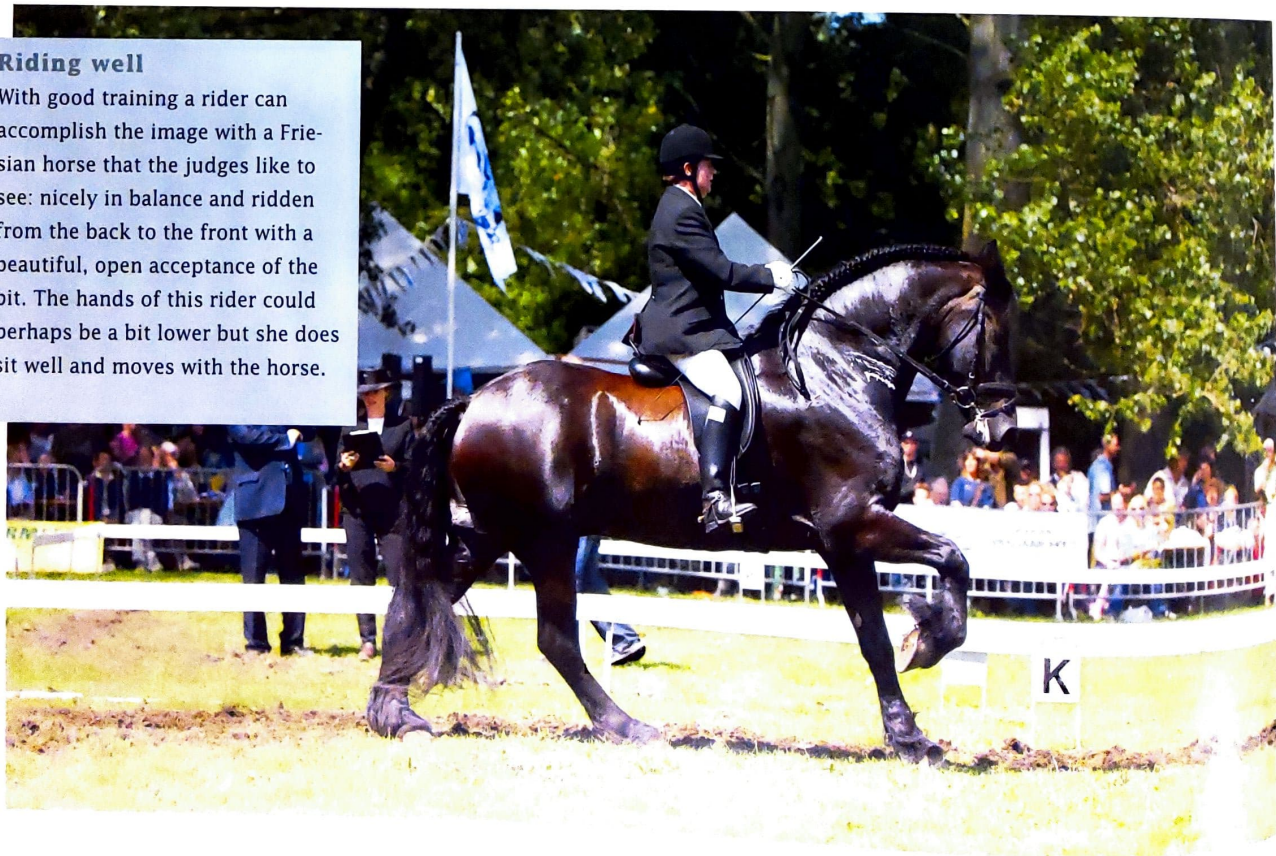
number of top riders also had great value for the Friesian (dressage) horse. Alex van Silfhout, e.g., with Lammert 260 and Tineke Bartels-De Vries, first with Reyert 337 and later with Wilke. Peter Spahn of Belgium with Adel 357 and Saskia Meinema with Friso van de Oostwal (s. Rimmelt 323) are both showing at Grand Prix level.

## Not without opportunity

They and other successful dressage riders make it that the Friesian horse in dressage is taken more and more

### Riding well

With good training a rider can accomplish the image with a Friesian horse that the judges like to see: nicely in balance and ridden from the back to the front with a beautiful, open acceptance of the bit. The hands of this rider could perhaps be a bit lower but she does sit well and moves with the horse.





seriously, even if it will take much more work to get the Friesian settled in the international top. The road to the Olympic Games is very long, if not endless. No one can estimate if that will ever come within reach.

Back to the present. Does the Friesian not stand a chance in the heavier dressage classes? Absolutely not. They have already proven that multiple times, even if the number that truly is shown at high levels not very large. Friesians differ; in exterior, type, and movement there can be big differences. The breeding of Friesian horses these days is more focused on the dressage horse. From baroque to sport horse with more length and suppleness.

Whether it concerns a KWPN or a Friesian horse, a dressage horse has to be pure in all three basic gaits. The walk of the Friesian is at times a bit hasty and short. Friesian horses are not always good walkers but if there is sufficient connection between forehand, middle, and hindquarters, the development of a good walk in the Friesian horse is very much possible. If not then it becomes more difficult, e.g. when the shoulder is too steep, which makes it that the horse has insufficient freedom in the shoulders. But that goes for any other horse as well, so also for the 'warmbloods.' Friesian horses can in trot in general move well but under saddle you often see that it is not easy for the horse to stay connected in trot, because they can also move big to the back. Friesian horses that under saddle are not sufficiently closed also often have difficulty with the canter. In the dressage ring we can see a canter that should have a better connected stride, more off the ground with more suspension in which the hindquarters have to be the basis of a beautiful, round canter stride. Too often we see that the canter stride is if you will aborted at the loins, which makes the horse move halfway in the four beat.

## Suppleness

As a dressage horse the Friesian has to show sufficient suppleness. Suppleness is essential to be able to develop the

quality of the movement. A Friesian horse can exude that maybe he will do it tomorrow. It cannot be a coincidence that Friesian horses that on the same day have to show in a second dressage test often are presented less on the ball to the judges in the second test, although Friesian horses can vary greatly in physical capabilities and character. Starting and training has everything to do with character. A difficult character can at a certain level even offer an advantage, because sometimes it turns out that so-called more difficult horses want to fight more. Such horses do require the right mentoring. With a strong personality the rider has to be subtle in its handling. The rider has to prevent that the horse is ridden against its personality. It is the art to use 'difficult' character traits in a positive way. That also goes for Friesian horses that do not immediately give the impression to have fun at work. In addition one has to little by little with much variation and transitions try to get the horse quick in responding to the aids. A Friesian in general has to be stimulated while a KWPN horse usually has to be subtly 'brought back.' If you force it such a horse will throw his hindquarters out and then you can put your legs on forever to make it move. The goal has to be to ride the Friesian such that a light leg aid already produces sufficient response. In short: you have to find or breed within the Friesian horse population a terrific (genetic) talent if you want to achieve the level of the KWPN horses in dressage. This talent will then also have to be trained to the highest level by the right rider with the right education. Remember that the warmblood breeders have been at it for a long time and are continuously working on quality control so that they can maintain and improve their position in the worldwide dressage sport.

## Riding better

Especially at M and Z levels the horses have too little riding technical support during the dressage test to show themselves from their best side. In general the riders really do not ride that well. Much can be improved. Riders on Frie-

## Dressage Tests

During dressage tests it turns out that many riders pay too little attention to a number of items. Dressage tests have been established and adjusted to the training phase and age of the horse. For the composition of dressage tests much thought has been put into the six phases and principles of training. Those are put to the test in a logical fashion in the dressage tests. Study, therefore, the 'Skala der Ausbildung,' the training process of educating the horse in logical sequence and keep educating yourself to come to the correct execution of a good dressage test.

sian horses do not ride worse than riders on KWPN horses but the problem is that a Friesian horse because of his natural backlog in exterior, type, and movement as compared to the KWPNs requires a better rider to fully come to fruition as a dressage horse. To learn to ride well requires much time and especially a good trainer but will later on in the dressage ring be worth it in twofold. If a judge is of the opinion that a Friesian horse should pull a cart and does not belong in the dressage ring this subjectivity will for sure seep into the evaluation. A judge has to evaluate what he or she sees. In the dressage ring it is about the combination of horse and rider as a whole. Whether it concerns a Friesian horse or a KWPN horse does not matter. There are plenty of KWPN horses in the show ring that are more limited in their movement than the Friesian horse, because also in the Friesian horse population there are talents that do very well. During the evaluation the hair of the Friesian horse is not always a plus. A lot of mane can change the image, especially in the side passes; the hair is flying every which way and a judge can have difficulty making the right evaluation. Full and very long mane and a heavy tail also distract from the overall picture. A heavy tail weighs much and can lead to a tight tail carriage, which influences the overall image negatively. •