

Friesian Horses in the Dressage Arena

By Dorli Welp

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In the early 1980's Johan Hamminga was involved with the performance test for Friesian stallions as a rider. In late 2004 he was one of the judges at the stallion inspection. Hamminga, meanwhile a national judge and head inspector for the KNHS Royal Dutch Equestrian Sport League, speaks about the differences between then and now.

Hamminga: "Of the 24 stallions that are now present (*in the fall testing of 2005*), at least 8 have the potential to develop into good dressage horses. Compared to 20 years ago, Friesian horses have become more modern, lighter and long legged. We have stallions that want to work and have "go." This, and the fact that they have more stamina, makes them more suitable for dressage. The improved stamina is an advantage for the dressage rider. Even an amateur can't do anything with a horse that gives up after 20 minutes. I can still remember that 20 years ago we had trouble keeping the stallions in a canter. That's why we took them outside so they could get a nice canter on a long, straight pathway. This is most definitely different for this generation of stallions, and this is also one of the stallion selection points. In November 2004 the stallions were first judged at liberty. You can get a good impression of which horse

moves in balance and on all four legs naturally; which one canters with ease and when which one changes canter leads on his own. At liberty they are less tense and upright then in hand. At the 2004 stallion show I was asked as an outsider to take part in the stallion inspection committee, specifically to judge the movement at liberty. The two other judges turned out to have just as much of an eye for it. I did not know anything about the horses' pedigrees but the cooperation was excellent. I constantly agreed with my two co-judges and those who tracked the linear scores. We did give some horses the benefit of the doubt at that stallion inspection. We now say that we shouldn't have done that, but the work is done by humans and then there can be errors. On the other hand, it's now nine months later - some horses grow with you and others don't grow with you at all."

EXTERIOR

For a good dressage horse the head/neck connection is essential, says Hamminga. In terms of stance the Friesian has a neckset like a driving horse. This does not have to be a problem for a dressage horse as long as the horse wants to lower its neck under saddle. As the Friesian tends to have a somewhat sloping croup it is less easy for it to tilt its pelvis. This tilting of the pelvis is necessary to develop good use of the back. The use of the back muscles needs to, therefore, come more from this lowering of the neck with the Friesian. A well muscled back and loins is necessary for the freedom of movement of the hind leg. The hind leg has to have enough freedom of movement to be able to come under the body. A hind leg that comes under well carries more, versus pushing. The modern Friesians already have a better functioning (weight-carrying) hind leg. When asked if a horse with a relatively high neck connection is able to lower its neck, Hamminga says, "It will be easier for some horses then for others, depending on their build. Often a willingness to work is more important. In general, as a dressage rider, it's better to have a horse that wants to work for you then a horse that only wants to do things well that it finds easy."

Photo by Margo Farnsworth ©, taken at Dressage at Devon in 2005. Vreerk (aka Frits) is ridden by Linda Parmenter. His score this day - a record breaking 79.2% for Devon.



Continued...



In The Dressage Arena, Cont.

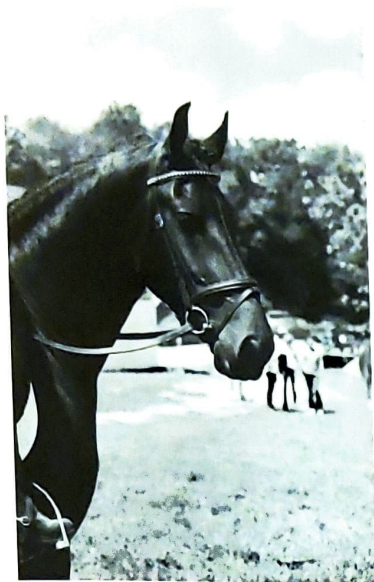


Photo by Ciara Mohan© of Classical Connection, Spring Lake, MI.

TRAINING

Where training is concerned, Hamminga says there is little difference between a Friesian and, for example, a KWPN Dutch Warmblood. "The first step is to ride your horse straight on two reins and follow your hands. Don't try to ask for a bend to the left or right in the beginning. That will prevent a horse from lowering its neck. The horse will keep its head high and will not use its back. As a rider you can

not sit the horse. The result is that you will start to pull in the longitudinal bend, and the consequence will be that the horse bends in the shoulder. It isn't right until he works with connection throughout the body. In other words, the horse needs to pass on the impulsion from the hind leg to the front. Whether the nose is a little in front of, or a little behind the vertical is not as important as long as there is a connection from the back to the front on both reins. For the Friesian horse this training phase can take a little longer than for a KWPN Warmblood. Not until the horse is straight and in balance can you work on longitudinal bend. Please note that the bend needs to always come from the weight bearing task of the inner hind leg. This inner hind leg needs to come under the body in all turns. Only then can the horse develop a correct longitudinal bend and maintain rhythm and regularity in the turns. A hind leg that steps under well is trained by riding the horse in turns with the inside leg into the outside hand that offers a light resistance. The more the horse gives on the inside hand the better the inside hind leg obtains the freedom to step under the body and thus carry weight instead of push." In contradiction to what is commonly said, driving can actually help muscle development, says Hamminga. "We always talk about pulling a cart, but really a horse is pushing the cart forward with its weight. In harness a horse is not unbalanced by a rider on its back. When he has to pull, both hind legs are equally called upon and that is good for an even muscle development."

JUDGING

Hamminga also judged many Friesian horses as a judge, but at open dressage shows where the Friesians would be shown among other breeds. He does not judge them any different. "It's often said that judges give Friesian horses lower marks because they don't like the breed's characteristics. That is



Photo by Kelli Vincent ©, "Caruso"

complete nonsense. Good is good and bad is bad. If your horse has, for example, a bad walk, then in a dressage test you will never score an 8 for the walk segments, even if you show the best you can during that test. How should a judge rate a horse that does have a very good walk and that shows what it can do at a show? In the new dressage tests that will be ridden as of April 2006, there will be much more attention to the correct way of moving, and for the feel of the rider for his/her horse. The rider will determine where between the letters a transition will be made at the moment the horse is ready for it. This manner of riding will no doubt also benefit the dressage training of the Friesian dressage horse."



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