

From Knight's Horse to Grand Prix

by Jelly Veltman

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It used to be a Utopian dream, but finally we did it: Friesian horses perform at Grand Prix level. In Belgium we have our favorite, Adel. In America the public loves Goffert. During our Anniversary show we'll see them in action. About 25 years ago, Jos Hofer and Drys and Wil Gerritsen with Feycko were a true revelation in ZZ level dressage.

The Friesian horse has been going through a high speed development in the dressage sport lately, and the end is not yet in sight. At the KFPS championships we saw Friesian horses in all levels, from training level through Grand Prix. This is unique and that it happened in the Anniversary year of the Studbook absolutely marvelous.

History was written in Kootwijk. Marc-Peter Spahn and Adel showed the Grand Prix, Saskia Meinema with Frizo van de Oostwal, and Esther Liano with Ielke rode the Prix St. George. There were five combinations in the ZZ-light level.

The Knight's Horse is a Riding Horse

But all this is less surprising if we look beyond the 125 years of breeding purebred Friesians. The Friesian horse originates

from the common West-European horse (the knight's horse or destrier). The West-European horse was mostly a riding horse, used in battle. William the Conqueror (Battle at Hastings, 1066) used stallions that looked very much like Friesians. The Hungarian King Louis II rode a black Friesian stallion in the battle against the Turks. Friesian stallions were imported by William of Prussia in 1624 because of their good characteristics. Paintings of the old masters show horses with a great resemblance to our current Friesians. They have a baroque type with beautiful long crested necks, long fetlocks, small heads and ears and round, strong hindquarters with a low-set tail.

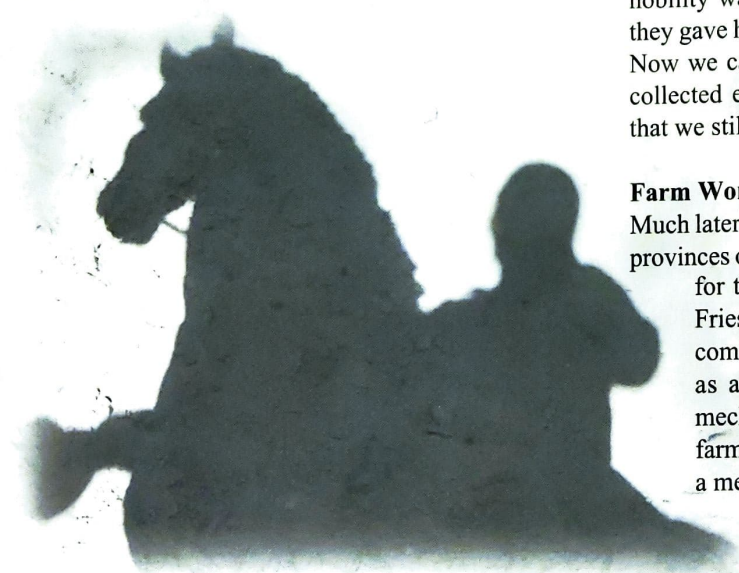
The etching of the Friesian stallion, Phryso (Jan van der Straat, 1568) from Don Juan of Austria in Napels, is famous. Our own magazine (first issue in 1950) is named after this stallion. The nobility was keen to have and breed this type of horse, and they gave him a thorough training in the classical art of riding. Now we call it High School Dressage. The selection for the collected exercises such as piaffe and passage is something that we still profit from at this time.

Farm Work Horse

Much later, when the breed could only be found in the northern provinces of the Netherlands, the Friesian became a workhorse for the farmers. As of 1920, the public interest for the Friesian as a luxury carriage horse or riding horse had come to an end. Until 1960 the Friesian was very popular as a working horse, but with the beginning of the mechanization the Friesian soon disappeared from the farms. In 1976 the Studbook even considered becoming a member of the "Rare Pets Association."

At the moment, we're still dealing with the legacy from this period, in the positive as well as in the negative sense.

Continued....





From Knight's Horse...

Thanks to farmers (mostly milk cattle) who kept their belief in the breed, the Friesian horse still exists.

One of the positive influences is, no doubt, their extremely great willingness to work. The selection was hard and simple: horses that didn't want to work went to the slaughterhouse.

But some of the negative influence also remains: a succinct horse with poorly developed withers, heavy necks, insufficient room behind the jaws, movements that are short and not well sustained, short front legs and hind legs positioned behind the body mass.

A Slow Start

In 1936, the renowned Strassburger Circus purchased four Friesian stallions for their High School Dressage act. Othello (sire: Danillo), who was bred by Mrs. Hiltje Algra from Sumar, became the most famous of the four. The FPS board went to see a show in 1939. It was a revelation and they were deeply impressed. The Regional Riding Association "De Oorsprong" (the Beginning), established in 1937, has been very important for the promotion of the Friesian as a riding horse. After World War II many regional riding associations were established and the children of the farmers took the farm horses to riding lessons. The inspired chairman of the Breeding Association "Het Friese Paard Wolvega e.o." (the Friesian Horse in Wolvega), Arnoldus Groot, stated as early as 1957 that its members should become a member of a riding club to get the Friesians under saddle. In the 1950's, troop captain dr. H.L.M. van der Schalk was very successful in dressage with Wopke (sire: Peter). The well known journalist, Polly Kamphuis, wrote in "de Hoefslag" (magazine 'The Track'), "Furthermore, the Friesian horse turns out to be an excellent dressage horse, as we can see in the results of Van Schaik with the Friesian stallion Wopke in the high level dressage, and it thus competes with the best of the horses from Eastern origin."

Farm Riding Horse

In the 1970's, the Friesian horse was slowly discovered, or rather rediscovered, as a riding horse. Former Head Inspector Hendrik Draaijer, at the time a board member of the Breeding Association Ta it Bihâld, remembers that the members asked to organize something for horses under saddle. "The children of the members rode the horses under saddle, and there weren't that many people who still owned a carriage or cart." At the Breeding Day in Wolvega in 1984 the category "best moving riding horse" was still called "best moving farm riding horse." Who doesn't remember those beginning days of riders dressed in jeans, green rubber work boots and wool sweaters. "We were happy if the rider wore at least a hard hat." The canters were just fast, that was all. But the development couldn't be stopped. Better instructors and better riders discovered the Friesian. Draaijer admits that the Studbook didn't give the Friesian under saddle too much attention at the time.

"We were focused on the breeding," says Draaijer. "We couldn't foresee this development. Although we understood that we needed to go in the direction of a lighter type horse, with more spacious movements. The short fat ones had to go."

Lammart Z Dressage

Not until 1978 do we find a board memo that expresses the importance of a performance under saddle. The stallions that were approved for the studbook in 1978 had to show a test under saddle at L-level and a driving test at M-level. Dagho was one of the first studbook stallions to do the test under saddle. A provisional mare could also do a test under saddle at L-level or a driving test at M-level. In 1980, the performance test (now the Central Examination) for the young studbook stallions was introduced. Oege, Oepke and Peke were the first three stallions that were sent to Ermelo. The riding test was part of the examination and the stallions received a score for the canter. Lammert (born in 1978) was the first Friesian stallion that started in ZZ-level. Alex van Silfhout was the rider of this Bjinse son in the early 1980's.

Naen - The Beginning of the Modernization

The approval of the stallion Naen (Ferdinand x Kerst) in 1979 was in fact the first hesitant step to modernization. Naen was approved by the late inspector, Cees Faber, who liked saddle horses. At the time it wasn't a popular decision, but it initiated a discussion. The studbook started to understand the signals. They also understood that good instruction was the key to success. In 1990 the "Dressuur Stimulerings Plan" (Dressage Stimulation Plan) was created. Grand Prix rider, Anneke Oostra, was the instructor. No less than four riders rode descendants of Naen - Fopkje B. model, Gerckje star, Elske B. star, and Wietse). Machteld Wisselink rode Elske B. to "ZZ-zwaar." All in all, it was a big success, in Faber's way of thinking. In 2000, Hylke (Nykle x Tsjalling) was appointed for the Central Examination on the basis of his performance in the dressage sport. Hylke was riding Z1 at the time and became fourth at the Levade. The Inspection, with head inspector Harm Mulder, had the courage to try a stallion that wasn't all that spectacular at the Stallion Show. The next year Hylke was approved for the studbook with a new name, Ielke. Esther Liano now rides him in the Prix St. George.

Attention for the Canter

It is a bit strange that the stallion selection didn't have more focus on the canter until recently. For the first time in the history of the stallion selection the stallions had to show all three gaits at the first viewing in Ermelo at the end of 2004 - walk, trot, and canter. Earlier, they didn't have to show their canter until they were at the Central Examination. Every rider knows how important a good canter is. The higher the dressage level, the more canter exercises are required. The Friesian studbook has never made a selection based on canter before. Top riders think that a good walk and a good canter are more important than a superior trot. A trot can be improved, but that is much harder

From Knight's Horse...
with walk and/or canter.

We need to start using absolute top riders and trainers in the performance test, for instance, those who rode their horses to Intermediaire II or Grand Prix level. We can't be satisfied with less in our selection of the studbook stallions. We have to stay focused and we need to make sure that the Friesian horse can compete as a sport horse at national and international levels. At international levels, this is only possible in the sports of dressage and combined driving. The beginning has been made. The studbook serves the users; let's not forget that.

Sport Predicate?

To appreciate the practical use of the horse, the predicate of "Performance Mother" was established in 1991. Three direct descendants of a mare must perform at a certain level in sport. For dressage under saddle, this is at least M2 with one winning point. At this moment, there are 20 Performance Mothers, but only a few earned the entire predicate in dressage alone. It would be interesting for the studbook to establish a sport predicate as well, like the KWPN does. For riding horses this is at least Z2 dressage with one winning point (in a higher level category, at least one winning point must be scored). It would be interesting to find which studbook stallions can give a sport predicate to their descendants.

What does the Dressage Rider Want?

We need a correctly built, well balanced horse with a correct position of the legs and good basic gaits. Dressage horses reach their peak when they are between 10 and 15 years old, and that is why we need a healthy horse with sufficient suppleness and quality bone structure. The horse must be able to perform for a long time. The position of the hind leg is very important - straight under the mass of the body and under no circumstances behind the body. A hind leg that comes from way behind and sits behind the body mass is the heritage of the farm work horse, when the horse had to pull the plow. Top rider, Christa Laarakkers, showed that clearly during her clinic in Kootwijk (KFPS Championships). A horse with a hind leg that is behind the body mass cannot sustain, only push. In the end, a well trained dressage horse will shift his weight to the hind quarters and rise in front. Therefore, we need a horse that can bring his hind leg far under his body, and also has a 'quick hind leg,' a 'snel achterbeen,' as the Dutch like to call it. The horse must have room in his movements, but he also needs to be able to make transitions and close, or come back on the hind leg. But above all, we need horses with the correct character, horses that want to work and want to cooperate. A nice horse with excellent gaits, that fails in the exercises over and over again, will never go far. Dressage rider, Hans-Peter Minderhoud, became world champion twice with Rubels (Rafurstinels) in Verden (competition for young dressage horses). In an article in "De Hoefslag," he says that exterior is not decisive. "My best horse, Rubels, really doesn't have a long front leg, is a bit weak in the back and his neck is not extremely long. His

movements and his character all make up for that. Users have a different outlook than breeders!"

Win!

The dressage sport has developed to a higher level rather quickly in The Netherlands, and its popularity hits the roof due to the "Anky van Grunsven effect." Top rider Tineke Bartels has a new Friesian stallion in training; she is very excited and has high expectations. It is funny that the Dutch do not have more affiliation with their own native horse. In Spain it is quite the opposite - it's their national pride. They have baroque horses (Andalusians and Lusitanos) on the Spanish Dressage Team. Rafael Soto became a phenomenon with 15-year old Invador (Andalusian). The Spanish know how to use the strong points of their horses - the team won silver at the Olympics. Let that be an example for all of us. We don't have anything to lose, only to gain, and then maybe, soon, our Friesian horse will canter in the Olympic Dressage ring!

Sources:

"The Friesian Horse," 1979 by G.J.A. Bouma
"The Horse in Little Pieces," by Gert van der Veen
Studbook Guidelines KWPN; De Hoefslag; Phryso



Seelchen Feibush and her 6 year old gelding, Ulkje, had a median score of 70.000 at Training Level in their first year of competition in the USDF, 2004. They finished 14th overall in Adult Amateur and 4th overall in Vintage Cup. They were first in Vintage Cup and second in Adult Amateur for FHANA All-Breed Awards. They started 2005 at second level.