

The Friesian Horse is Ready For Grand Prix Dressage

by Barend van der Veen

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Translated by Tina Thissen

Breeding is for the most part, a matter of common sense and a thorough knowledge of bloodlines. But for many people it is also a matter of feelings and emotions, as we can read in the poem by Tsjebbe Hettinga. And when the Friesian horse and the art of dressage are brought together, these emotions can easily escalate for some of us. Not everybody has the same feelings. Sometimes common sense prevails over emotions. When we discuss breeding and dressage that common sense is exactly what we need. The opinions about the Friesian horse in dressage are diverse and at times biased. Sometimes this is caused by ignorance. In this article we will try to give a more balanced picture of the Friesian horse as a dressage horse.

Dressage at a high level is very well possible for a Friesian horse. By now a number of Friesian horses are on their way to reach the highest possible goal in dressage (Adel, the Ludse-son, who is already active in Prix St. George, or Wilbert fan de Koarndyk, sire Jillis, with Ellen van Gastel, or Frizo van de Oostwal, sire Rummelt, with Saskia Meinema in the saddle, and Ielke, sire Nykle, ridden by Esther Liano). These horses are all "Zz-zwaar" (fourth level). Yet many people, both inside as well as outside our Studbook, share the opinion that the Friesian is not suitable as a dressage horse. But isn't it true that the Friesian hasn't had a chance to prove himself at the highest level? Isn't it true that the Friesian is at a disadvantage compared to other breeds, because it took so much longer before it was discovered as a dressage horse?

We Are Breeding Pedigree Horses, Not Sport Horses

Approximately 20 years ago the Friesian horse started to conquer the dressage ring. The FPS stallions Lammert 260, Naen 264 and Tamme 276 stood at the cradle of success of the Friesian in the white fenced dressage ring. At the present, black is virtually all you see at the many regional shows and competitions. And not without success, as we can see in the results of the Friesians at the Friesian Championship and the Levade in Ermelo. More and more the Friesians get high scores, and they sometimes even win. In the last twenty years the Friesians are claiming back their lost ground. But we're not quite there yet at that highest level, although it seems only a matter of time...

The use of the Friesian has boomed enormously. With specialized training, the sky is the limit. But breeding is at the basis of every performance in the sport. After all, the better the body, the better the performances. Besides a perfect body is a solid base to become a healthy sport horse. If a horse has a solid build, all his bones, muscles and joints will be able to carry an equal load and injuries will be kept to a minimum.

What do We Want? Riding Dressage with a Friesian Horse, or a Friesian Dressage Horse?

The Friesian Horse Studbook has specified her breeding goal in the "Rules and Regulations of the Royal Association the Friesian Horse Studbook (2001)." The Studbook wants: "...horses with a good exterior (while maintaining the breed-typical characteristics) with an ongoing effort to decrease the inbreeding within the breed; horses that will be able to perform in the sport (show-driving, driving, dressage under saddle, combined driving events), but also as recreational horses. All this must be accomplished by selection within the breed itself."

If we want to determine if a horse is indeed suitable as a dressage horse, we will have to judge all the different parts of the horse. In the breeding goal described by the FPS, these are itemized. The breeding goal for the various parts of the horse concurs for a significant part with the ideal dressage horse as described here. Breed typical charac-

teristics could especially raise the Friesian as a dressage horse above all other breeds: the proud neck, the crest, the full tail, the elevated and ground covering gaits, the temperament and the willingness to work.

The Important breed-typical characteristics are defined as follows:

A horse that is well balanced with good proportions, with a noble head and clear, intelligent eyes. Small ears that are alert and point slightly towards each other. A neck that is not too short, with a light curve, a sufficiently strong back, ending in a not too short croup that may not be sloping too much. A powerful, sufficiently long and sloping shoulder. Sufficiently long ribbed with a good curve, strong legs and feet, a well developed under arm and good formation of the legs. Brisk, square, elegant, sustained and elevated gaits that are even more accentuated by sufficient fetlocks, a nice mane and a nice long tail. In short: a horse with a luxurious and proud appearance, with energy and eagerness to work, and an honest personality. A size at the withers of about 1.60 m (15.3h) at the age of 3 is considered the ideal height. The preferred color is jet black.

The ideal build of a dressage horse:

The perfect dressage horse has a sufficiently long neck and sufficient room in the head/neck connection, which allows the horse to bend at the poll and flex without difficulty. The withers must be at least well pronounced, and make a long and fluent transition to the back. The entire topline must have sufficient muscles, which allow the horse to make himself round in his movements. The shoulder must be sufficiently long and sloping, with a smooth connection to the neck and back. The horse may not be overbuilt, but - on the contrary - must have a 'climbing' topline. This is the only way a dressage horse can move his balance from his forehead to his hindquarters. The loins are very important: they must transfer the power of the hindquarters fluently forward. Therefore, they must be sufficiently developed and firm. The croup must have a sufficient slant, but not too much. The croup must also be sufficiently long. A good length of the croup will give sufficient leverage in the hindquarters, which allows an optimum use of power. The front legs (forearm) and hind legs (thighs) must have sufficient length.

cont....



A-X Enter In Collected Trot

How does this theory, as described above, work in reality? In other words - what do people "in the field" think about the Friesian as a dressage horse? To get an answer to that question, the participants of a dressage show for Friesian horses as well as a number of dressage experts were asked for their opinion.

The Contestants

At a dressage show for Friesian horses in Utrecht in March, participants were each asked eight questions about their opinion about the Friesian as a dressage horse. They were also presented with the thesis. 29 of the approximate 40 contestants took the trouble to fill out the survey form. The contestants had a positive answer to the question of how they were doing in dressage with their Friesians. Only one of them wasn't completely sure of himself or his horse yet, considering his answer: "I'll let you know after the show..." The answers of the other participants varied from "rather well" to "super."

"They Look Great, But the Quality of Their Movements is Insufficient"

More than 40% of the interviewees said that they made a deliberate choice to ride dressage with a Friesian. This was mostly because of the appearance (black, elegant, tall) and the disposition (honest, obedient, sweet) of the Friesian horse. The movements (elegant) were only mentioned a few times as the most important reason. One of the contestants is very enthusiastic about the Friesian horse as a dressage horse: "...I always thought it was a beautiful horse. Most of all I like their special movements, they are obedient and listen well. I also thought it was a special challenge to ride dressage on a Friesian!"

A minority of the participants (35%) are actively involved in the breeding. Almost all of them deliberately select stallions who can improve important dressage issues in their mares. The majority mentions the movements, and especially the hindquarters need improvement. Only a few times is disposition a target for improvement, and specifically as to sensitivity.

Strength - Weakness Analysis

What are the positive and negative sides of dressage on a Friesian? The negative points are identified as: the majority of riders are concerned that the Friesian doesn't have sufficient length of stride in the movements. Also mentioned are the difficulty in lateral bending, the stamina and the, sometimes, extremely composed temperament. The positive points: the presence (front, power, appearance) scores highest (more than 48%). Many also mention the honest and composed character. Other remarks vary from: "dressage with shocks", "...they don't freak out easily," to "...you feel like you're in a rocking chair."

The Thesis

What do the participants think about the thesis of the Friesian horse as a Grand Prix horse? Do people agree that the Friesian is ready? Only 5 out of 29 answers are negative. The rest agree with the thesis, but some still have some doubt. Below are some of the most important pros and cons.

CONS:

- No, the average Friesian is much too weak. We won't be OK until we stop using the same bloodlines over and over again, and we start breeding for power and stamina.
- No, not yet, but gradually their movements are getting better.
- No, you would have to gear towards a lighter type, more dressage

typical horse. But then you would lose the baroque type. And maybe the Friesian is ready, but is the jury?

- No, we should accept the Friesian as he is, and not try to change him into a KWPN Warmblood. But that is what is happening in some cases, and that is too bad. Let's please hold on to the Friesian type.
- No, but there are some exceptions. They are not built for that. Especially the canter is a big problem for our Friesians.

PRO'S

- Yes, just like any other breed. It's all a question of training.
- Yes, the Friesians are getting better all the time, and there are more and more professional riders who have the courage to ride a Friesian.
- Yes, a Friesian can have the same amount of qualities as a KWPN Warmblood, so why not!
- Yes, we're getting more and more modern breeding products, more riding type horses, more possibilities.
- Yes, the breed shouldn't be of consequence in the dressage.
- Yes, a certain number of horses are, but not all; but that is true for Warmbloods also. But unfortunately, it is also a jury sport...
- Yes, the new type of Friesian is, but it won't be easy.
- Yes, finally beautiful horses at the highest level.
- Yes, because if the basic gaits are correct, they can do it.
- Yes, the Friesian has lots of talent for the high collection.
- Yes, just do your best and don't give up.

Cry From The Heart

The last question of the survey provides our participants with an open space, which many of them have used for a cry from the heart about dressage with a Friesian horse. From simple words as "top, great, super" to well-turned sentences as "we have to stay positive and involve lots of people, ranging from people at the basis to the jury members. We must see the Friesian as a 'horse' and the jury must judge them as a 'horse' and not as a Friesian."

The Experts

The thesis has been put to a number of dressage experts. It not only elicits a discussion about breeding, but also about the way of thinking about, and handling of the Friesian horse as a dressage horse.

ESTER LIANO, Wirdum (Friesland), Dressage Rider.

She owns and manages her own dressage equestrian center. She rides Warmbloods as well as Friesians for other people. She is well known for her performance with the FPS stallion, Ielke, owned by the Veenstra's in Swichum. She is also a dressage jury member and a licensed instructor.

She thinks the thesis could have a bit more nuance.

She would prefer: "...a select group of Friesian horses is ready for dressage on a higher level." As an active dressage rider and dressage jury member, it is her opinion that the average Friesian doesn't have sufficient quality so far to score big in the dressage ring.

SYBREN MINKEMA, Frieschepalen (Friesland), All-round user of the Friesian horse.

He had great results under the saddle with the FPS stallions Tjomme and Otte. He is also a successful driver in the show driving competitions, and his name is linked directly to the stallion Heinse. He is also an FPS jury member, gives many clinics at the Friesian Horse Center and has recently been appointed Chairman of the Breeding Club 'It Greidhynder.'

His first reaction about the thesis is an unreserved YES. But then he

makes the following distinction: "...However, it isn't just as simple as YES. To bring a Friesian horse to Grand Prix level, there are several other factors that will play a role apart from the horse himself."

HERMAN SMIT, Middenmeer (Noord-Holland), Highly respected jury member at regional, national and international level Light Tour.

He is also a member of the jury at the Central Inspection, the IBOP and ABFP tests, and a clinician and examiner at the ORUN Institute.

He has his own thesis: "The Friesian horse is NOT ready for the Grand Prix Dressage." He continues, "...the Friesian falls short of a number of essential characteristics of the perfectly built and moving dressage horse." According to Smit, that will be difficult to change, if we have to change it at all. He ponders the following question: "What do we want: ride dressage with a Friesian, or a Friesian dressage horse?" A horse that we use to ride dressage isn't necessarily a dressage horse, according to Herman Smit.

JENNY VEENSTRA, Lichtaart, Belgium, Breeder of Time (Champion of the 2003 Stallion Show)

She is a dressage rider (with her own breeding products, Aise V, Jitske V. and Wolter V) and also a FPS jury member. She recently published a highly successful 'crash' course on dressage in the Phryso.

It is her opinion that the thesis "The Friesian horse is ready for the Grand Prix Dressage" lacks a bit of finesse. "THE Friesian doesn't exist. Fortunately, there are all kinds of shapes and sizes. We know that some Friesians have been successful in the Grand Prix (USA and Germany). But there is only a small number of Friesians with sufficient talent to reach Grand Prix level, although that is about the same with the Warmbloods."

Breeding Goal

According to Sybren Minkema, theoretically the FPS breeding goal meets the criteria to successfully breed a horse that could reach Grand Prix level. But he also thinks that this hypothetical breeding goal should be put into practice more noticeably. And that is exactly what Esther Liano misses in the breeding goal. "The breeding goal is not specific enough to be able to breed a good dressage horse." And she asks if in fact the Friesian horse community wants to breed a dressage horse. "Why can't we just specialize within the breeding?"

Jenny Veenstra agrees with her that the breeding goal is rather broad, and thinks that for that reason the Friesian horse will probably never be extremely successful in one specific discipline. "It still comes to breeding a chance hit. But then we are breeding pedigree horses and not sport horses, which would make it much easier to add specific characteristics by crossbreeding." She adds a few critical comments about the breeding goal: "...it is not clear enough because of the frequent use of 'not too...' " She would also like to see an ideal size at the withers of 1.65 m (16.1 hands). In show driving, as well as in dressage, a long foreleg and a bit more size would be preferred. "I think 1.60m (15.3 hands) is sufficient for broodmares. So I am clearly making a distinction between sport horses and broodmares." Esther Liano adds: "...a horse of 1.60m doesn't impress much in the dressage ring; a horse of 1.66 or higher does."

Performance Friesian Horses

Several factors are important for a good (Friesian) dressage horse.

ESTHER LIANO: "...the three basic gaits. Walk, trot and especially the canter must have sufficient length of stride. Suppleness, strength, spaciousness of movement, ability to shift gear, a powerful use of the hind leg and the willingness to work." It is especially in the three gaits that the Friesian horse needs some improvement, according to Esther.

HERMAN SMIT has his own comments on the movements: "...the gaits don't need to be extremely roomy, as long as they have sufficient power, elasticity and energy." He then enters at length into the exterior breed typical characteristics that make the Friesian less suitable as a Grand Prix dressage horse. "The front leg is frequently too short. The shoulder tends to be too straight and the angle with the upper arm is too small. That is why the trot so often doesn't come from the shoulder." He also mentions the back-loins-croup connection as a weak point: "...the back is often too deep and the loins tend to be tipped forward, which will prevent the hind leg coming far enough under the mass of the body. Therefore, the hind leg of the Friesian is rather pushing than carrying. The hind leg is also too slow to manage the more difficult exercises."

The natural way the neck comes from the chest may easily give the wrong picture regarding the "climbing of the forehead," which can only come from "sitting down" in the hindquarters. Only when that happens correctly, can the horse become light and supple in the front. He also wonders if the Friesian has sufficient fighting spirit and basic condition to be able to perform at such a high level. And finally, Smit make a connection between the modern Friesian and his movements. In his opinion, the dressage type horses, unfortunately, don't seem to move better than the more classic type Friesians. "They look great, but the quality of their movements is insufficient." The walk worries him the most, but "...the trot is good to very good and the canter gets better all the time."

FPS Encouragement Policy

JENNY VEENSTRA: "They often have a lot of enthusiasm in the beginning, but in the end they go out like a candle."

ESTHER LIANO: "Several times a plan to encourage dressage has been called to life, but nothing ever comes from it. What has been achieved so far, the few combinations that ride at a higher level, should be accredited to the perseverance of riders and owners."

The Way We Think of Friesians As Dressage Horses

SYBREN MINKEMA takes us back in time. "The history of the Friesian horse has been the opposing factor in a fast breakthrough of the Friesian in the higher level dressage circuit. The Friesian used to be a recreational driving horse and was not really considered a riding horse. Changing the breeding goal, and thus breeding a more modern type Friesian, increasingly brought the Friesian into the limelight as a dressage horse. But there is still some resistance to the idea of the Friesian as a dressage horse, especially among the older breeders and owners. We agree that it is important to compete our Friesians in dressage, but we still select mainly on the basis of his performance in hand." Minkema thinks this is also because the breeder can't judge the different dressage exercises at face value. "There is still too much ignorance in that field. That is why it's almost not worth it to compete in dressage for a lot of people; it's not appreciated enough."

JENNY VEENSTRA: "in the Warmblood world it is perfectly normal to put a talented horse in training with Grand Prix rider, who can train the young horse correctly and to reap the benefits of this training after 5 or 6 years. But how different this is with the Friesians!" She mentions the (in her eyes, poignant) example of Tineke Bartels who has been indicating for 2 years that, after Reyert, she would love to ride another Friesian. "You would think there would be long lines of excited people at her door...but you're wrong!" She mentions that Mr. Haytema played a pioneering role when he brought Reyert to Tineke Bartels. That is why we no have more top riders who don't feel "ashamed" anymore when they ride a Friesian in dressage. "Before the Reyert era, it was unthinkable to put a Friesian in training with a top-level rider, but now it is OK, but it still isn't often enough!"



Ready For Grand Prix Dressage, cont.

It's Up To The Breeders, The Users And The Studbook To Turn The Tide

Esther Liano also emphasizes the old fashioned mentality among the Inspection, the public and the breeders. "The Friesian is taking a big leap forward, but the FPS is really not up-to-date. "When breeders, Inspection and the public don't recognize the Friesian as a dressage horse, what can you expect from outsiders and skeptics?" She thinks that people still treat the accomplishments of the Friesian horse as a dressage horse with a bit of contempt. Herman Smit states, "The dressage successes of the Friesian horses are mainly based on show and carrousel, and less on technique." Smit also thinks that competitions exclusively for Friesian horses can lead to the wrong conclusions, because there is no comparison with other breeds. "If the Friesian would really have so much potential, many more top dressage riders would have chosen a Friesian horse." It's Smit's opinion, however, that at present a Friesian horse and his rider are judged as any other combination. "Doing a good job on a Friesian horse is the same as doing a good job on any other breed. The emphasis is on the riding and not on the horse."

What Can We Do Differently?

Everybody agrees that things need to change, but the experts have different ways in mind to achieve the same goal.

SYBREN MINKEMA: We must do our best to find talented horses faster.

JENNY VEENSTRA: Above all, we need to match the horses with the right people.

ESTHER LIANO: The way we think about the Friesian as a dressage horse needs some improvement.

All three approaches have valuable elements, and together they could provide the successful formula!

HERMAN SMIT: The Friesian Studbook is a closed studbook. Our top horses are not the result of a determined effort to breed a dressage horse, but they have more or less been "chance" products. Therefore, it is doubtful that we can reproduce them with a degree of certainty.

SYBREN MINKEMA: We need horses that are able to meet the requirements of the Grand Prix. We need a better selection, to sift the wheat from the chaff. He thinks about a dressage competition for 3, 4 and 5 year old horses. That way a horse can be evaluated for his talent as a dressage horse much sooner than at the moment. He also thinks the stallion competition (4 to 7 year old horses) is of the utmost importance. "The successes of a stallion in dressage will tell you much more about that stallion than a few rounds in hand at the stallion show." "We have to invest, if we want to reach the highest level. That is true in every branch. People are willing to invest if they can reap the benefits." It takes years to train a horse for Grand Prix level, many years with many obstacles. If you want people to take that course, encouragement is essential. "You have to get something back in the end; be it fame/appreciation and awards, financial gain from the sale of descendants, more breeding services from a stallion, possible approval as a stud, etc., etc."

JENNY VEENSTRA: Top level dressage can be achieved by finding the right trainers for talented horses. She mentions Adel as an example. Owner Vanderlocht had two choices after Adel's rider stopped riding. He could give Adel to his daughter, who is a very good rider and who would ride him for free, or find a rider at Grand Prix level to take full advantage of Adel's qualities. "He chose the second, much more expensive option. How many people would have done that?" Improvement in the breeding program means an ongoing attention to

the use of the hind leg (an energetic and swift hind leg that will reach far under the body). The willingness to work is another point of interest. "How many horses are scored 8 or higher for the willingness to work? Not many; most of the horses barely get a six."

There Are Still Anti-Dressage Feelings

JENNY VEENSTRA: But we need to make sure that we preserve the breed typical characteristics. Of course then our biggest problem will be that these energetic, eager horses (who are very suitable for dressage) will be less suitable for the recreational rider - and this group is our biggest market. It is the task of breeders, sellers and Studbook to make sure that the right horse gets to the right person. The Studbook could play a clear, advising role in promoting the Friesian as a dressage horse.


HERMAN SMIT: It is important that a horse with sufficient talent as a dressage horse goes to a good rider. A super, 'chance product' might well be able to reach a high dressage level, when he is in the hands of a good rider and gets the correct training.

ESTHER LIANO emphasizes the ambiance in which the Friesian performs in the dressage ring. She feels that better circumstances must be created, in which riders and owners of Friesian horses want to invest in dressage performances. According to Liano, the Friesian will eventually be able to perform above average in the dressage ring. "But the people should be willing to see the Friesian horse as a dressage horse, and value and respect him as such." She adds, "It is the job of breeders, users and the Studbook to turn the tide." According to Esther Liano, there is a lively future in dressage for baroque horses, as we can see in the performances of the PRE (the Pura Raza Español), better known as the Andalusian horse. "At the World Equine Games in Jerez de la Frontera they ended high, due to effort, motivation and perseverance, and they definitively made some noise in the horse world." HERMAN SMIT doesn't agree with the criticism about the current breeding policies of the FPS. "The Friesian horse has changed into a more modern type over the years. And supply and demand have certainly been a point of concern, but it can't be at the cost of the quality of the breed. That quality makes it especially vulnerable. We can't sacrifice all the good qualities of the breed to the objective of a small group of 'specialists.'"

According to Smit, we should be realistic about the possibilities we have within a closed studbook.

Halt And Salute

It seems we will have to send out scouts all over the country who will go and 'discover' those talented horses. Then we have to try and match these horses with the right rider, and create an atmosphere of encouragement to convince people that dressage with a Friesian horse is absolutely possible.

But we have to be aware of the specific (im)possibilities of the Friesian horse as a dressage horse, and keep asking ourselves Herman Smit's question: what do we want - ride dressage with a Friesian, or a Friesian dressage horse? After all, as Jenny Veenstra already mentioned, we are breeding pedigree horses, not sport horses. And maybe some of the talented riders in this pedigree studbook will be able to boost the image of the Friesian as a dressage horse. 

Barend van der Veen writes articles for the Phryso, primarily regarding dressage. He rides a 7 year old stallion (Jochem x Naen) and seeks to stimulate the discussion of Friesians in the dressage world.