

EXPLORING



the Mecca of Dressage



Four lucky Young Riders traveled through Europe on The Dressage Foundation's annual Olympic Dream Program trip.

By Katie Alms, Vanessa Simon, Jordan Meadows and Emily Tears with Beth Baumert

Photos by Eliza Sydnor and Jordan Meadows

On July 17, 2008, four of us embarked on what turned out to be 10 days of any dressage rider's dream. We left our hectic lives on American soil and immersed ourselves in European dressage culture. We hailed from different locations—Katie Alms lives in Connecticut, Vanessa Simon is from Colorado, Emily Tears came from California and Jordan Meadows from Illinois. Although we didn't know each other, we shared a passion for our sport and a willingness to learn. We were chaperoned by the mother-daughter team of Cindy and Eliza Sydnor from North Carolina as we traveled to the European Junior and Young Rider Dressage Championships in Portugal, to German trainers Hubertus Schmidt and Michael Klimke, to Warendorf's equine veterinarian, Dr. Gerd Heuschmann, to Dutch trainers Marlies and Coby van Baalen and, finally, to breeder/young horse trainer Madeleine Witte-Vrees.

European Junior and Young Rider Championships

At the European Young Rider Championships, the riders were like "mini professionals." It was clear they were serious and hard working. Here is what we learned:

Transitions, transitions. What set the best riders apart from others was the use of clear and fluid transitions between each movement. There was a distinct collected trot before and after medium or extended movements. Seeing this made us want to go home and school the same movements to perfection.

Accuracy is huge. We are always told not to lose points because of accuracy. The standard for accuracy in this competition was high. They rode nearly perfect circles and perfect lines.

Corners. Those Young Riders knew about corners. They never missed the opportunity to use one in such a way that built the horse up off the forehand and helped improve the next movement.

The seat. The maturity of the riders was different from much of what we see at home. These Young Riders had secure seats, making only a few noticeable mistakes. Our favorite rider of the weekend, Diedrick von Silfhout (photo above), had a beautiful seat and his mare, Rose,

soared around the arena as if she was programmed to do the Prix St. Georges.

Talented horses. All of the horses were talented. Some were young and brilliant, and many have been to the Young Rider Championships repeatedly with new riders each year. For example, Eliza Sydnor remembered seeing Mix, a German team horse, when she came on this trip in 2003. Some of these horses are “passed down” each year to a new rider. We’re sure this doesn’t come without a large price, but it must be helpful to ride down the centerline on a seasoned horse that the judges recognize.

Dr. Heuschmann’s Clinic

During our visit with equine veterinarian Dr. Gerhard Heuschmann, we learned that the rider’s equitation directly affects the horse’s health and soundness. Dr.

Heuschmann is known for speaking against hyperflexion (*Rollkur*) and for his devotion to classical training. He spoke to us regarding the principles of his book, *Tug of War: Classical versus “Modern” Dressage*. He showed us a preview of the video that will accompany his book. It clearly shows how the muscles work when the horse is ridden in a classical frame as opposed to in hyperflexion. We could see how the horse’s back becomes looser when he reaches forward and downward. The hind legs really start working with articulating joints.

We accepted Dr. Heuschmann’s challenge to keep correct riding alive in the next generation of riders. He feels that the hyperflexion fad needs to be abolished for our sport to progress and return to the classical sport it is supposed to be. But, he says it is difficult to

change a way of riding that scores well in the show ring, even though it is not healthy for the horse.

Relaxing at Fleyenhof

At Hubertus Schmidt’s Fleyenhof in Paderborn, Germany, the major feeling in the air was one of relaxation. The horses were never hectic. Here is how they worked: Many of the horses were hand-walked for five or 10 minutes. Before mounting, Mr. Schmidt greeted each horse with a warm “hello” and lots of pats from the ground. It was no surprise that all of his horses looked excited to see him and seemed to look forward to their training sessions. Once under saddle, the horses were walked again on a long rein for an additional 10 minutes before going to work.

Mr. Schmidt is a true master at mak-

Set High Standards Every Day

By Eliza Sydnor

If I had to sum up in one word what I took away from this year’s Olympic Dream adventure, it would be: standards. These top riders and trainers all had incredibly high standards in many areas, but I always felt that their skill level is attainable. The only difference was that they kept their standards so high and maintained that quality on a daily basis.

At Fleyenhof, for example, Hubertus Schmidt would not move on to the “meat” of the training session until the throughness, suppleness and reactions of the horse were near perfect in the warm-up. The half passes were ridden again and again (very quietly, very encouragingly) until the balance, bend and expression were just the way he wanted. As I watched him, I thought to myself, *I would have been more than happy with half pass number one, and I probably wouldn’t have done another one.* But the improvements he made were fantastic. He wanted a *great* half pass, not a good one.

The competitors we watched, both at the European Young Rider Championships and the young horse competition, also held themselves to the highest standard. While

some of the Young Riders were better than others, all their tests were impressive because they were clean and accurate. Some horses had more expressive, uphill flying changes than others, for example, but we hardly saw any real mistakes. I know I have often been guilty of going into a show hoping that I will be able to get through the movements. These riders would not go to a show until they *knew* the movements would go off without a hitch.

The top riders we watched all rode horses of the highest quality. The top Young Riders all competed on horses that would have been welcomed on our Pan Am team or at the top of our Intermediaire I championships—incredibly talented horses with phenomenal movement as well as super training. Any less would not be acceptable.

Lastly, the European work ethic is of the highest standard. Hard work is the norm. Having a light day or taking a day off because they didn’t feel like working that hard seemed inconceivable. To make it to the top requires hard work, daily hard work. This was evident in watching the pony riders all the way up to the Olympians.

Now that I have been home for a few months, I try to remind myself of these standards every morning when I get up to work with my horses. I envision those beautiful riders and horses, and I know if I keep my standards high and work just as hard, I, too, can ride like that one day.



**From left: Emily Tears, Katie Alms, Jordan Meadows and Vanessa Simon
Inset: The 2008 European Junior Champion was Sanneke Rothenberger on Paso Doble.**

ing the horses soft and supple in the warm-up phase. No horse would progress to the work phase until he was completely honest through the body. In the warm-up, the horses looked completely average—not spectacular but very correct. “In the beginning, I only ask for a good rhythm—no cadence, *Schwung* or collection yet,” he said. The horses started in a long frame and should be on the outside rein, willing to stretch forward with that rein in the warm-up. We watched as each horse went in a clock-like rhythm.

After the warm-up, Mr. Schmidt picked up a collected trot, and the horses were immediately active and expressive. Each one pumped up like a little transformer and gave it his all. He did half passes in both trot and canter until the horse was completely supple. He explained that he didn’t do test movements unless there was a show coming up. During regular training, he did basic work,

such as half passes and working pirouettes. The work we saw there was truly ideal. Even when the difficulty increased, the horses stayed relaxed in the work.

When schooling, Mr. Schmidt did not mix the movements up. For example, he worked on the canter pirouettes until they were perfect, and then he moved on to something else. This probably makes much more sense to the horse rather than going from movement to movement. When there was a mistake, he just kept sitting with his ideal connection, enabling the horse to correct himself. The riding stayed the same, and so the principles stayed the same. When there was a problem with a flying change, he came to a walk and went immediately off the line and back to the beginning to repeat the line. Corrections were quiet. Each horse had

amazing cadence and expression and obviously enjoyed the work, as if the work was his own idea.

Young Horse Show

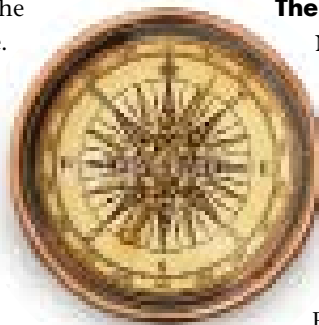
Michael Klimke in Muenster, Germany, spends about half his day in the office and the rest at the barn, as his father, the late Dr. Reiner Klimke, did. Klimke also works as an equine lawyer. The indoor arena was full of cases upon cases of ribbons won by Michael, his sister, Ingrid, and their father. We took lots of time absorbing what kind of greatness had passed through the halls of that very farm.

We followed Michael and his wife, Mani, to a competition for young horses. We were quite impressed with their showmanship, and we were surprised to see that three horses were judged at the same time. We thought it was very horse-friendly and comforting that the horses weren’t alone, especially for those who were at their first show. This system was also a great time saver, allowing the judges to see more horses. After the tests were finished, each horse was unsaddled and evaluated for conformation, before the scores and placings were announced to the crowd.

The Netherlands

Not so far away in the Netherlands was Dressuurstal van Baalen, where we were able to see how a sophisticated business in the horse industry is run (see “School for Young Riders,” p. 38). We were

impressed by their presentation. They handed out programs that outlined the day’s activities! We started with a tour of the grounds and introductions to all the horses. The barns were full of Young Riders, Juniors and pony riders. It is not often that we see so





Michael Klimke

many young kids in a barn focused on dressage.

All of the Young Riders at Dressuurstal van Baalen had correct seats and fit their horses and ponies well. A few of them demonstrated their freestyles, some rode in lessons without stirrups to improve the seats and Marlies demonstrated the Grand Prix movements—including brilliant piaffe and passage—on BMC Ojay, a horse her mother, Coby, had trained (see photo p 41.).

From there we moved on to a fabulous breeding farm where Madeleine Witte-Vrees stands some of the finest stallions in Europe. She was training youngsters in preparation for the World Young Horse Championships. This was yet another look at the sophisticated horse industry in Europe.

The standard was high wherever we went and, as we flew home, we felt anxious to get back on our horses and try to retain that high quality on our own turf. 🇺🇸

To find out more about The Dressage Foundation and how you can apply for next year's Olympic Dream trip, go to the Web site DressageFoundation.org.

