



Hugin, Bent's famous blind Knabstrupper stallion, in an extended trot.

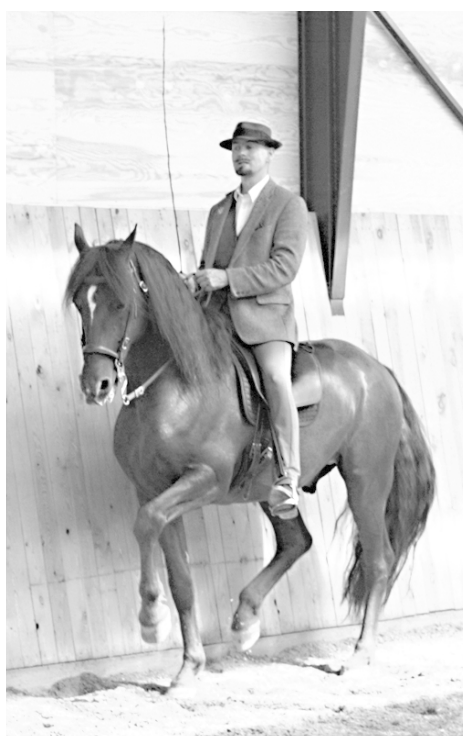
Riding Equestrian Art

A look at the enduring values of classical equitation with Bent Branderup.

Today's dressage world is waking to controversy and confusion about values. Until quite recently, in the broad scope of time, the principles of mastery of "dressage" were agreed upon. Being "dressed" meant that a horse was physically and mentally prepared to offer and sustain full collection in self-carriage, with hocks underneath, poll raised and head carried in the vertical. No European royal, noble, high-ranking military officer, gentleman or lady rider prior to the 19th century would consider taking exercise on a horse which could not be easily collected in this way. Not only did the very look of the beautifully-balanced horse confer majesty upon the rider, but a horse schooled to suppleness with his haunches under him was powerfully ready to move in any direction at any time, in war, work or sport.

Today the opposite seems to be true, particularly in competition. Rarely does the horse seem to be light in the rider's hand; sometimes it even appears the horse pulls hard on the reins while the rider appears to support exaggerated forward movement

by Kip Mistral



Bent's Frederiksborger stallion Zarif Lykkesager in piaffe.

with arms, shoulders and back. Although this image has for some time been evaluated positively based on notions of precision and measurement, questions have arisen recently about rules, judging, scores and training and ultimately about the well-being of horses seen all too often overbent in the bridle and overwrought from tension in order to win for their riders. Such a sight lacks the spirit of equestrian art even though it may be labeled equestrian art, nor is its general prevalence and acceptance supported by the long traditions of true equestrian art.

How did the timeless qualities of lightness, suppleness, balance and harmony – sought for thousands of years as the goal and reward of long, careful education of both horse and rider for work and war and later in high equitation – lose their value? When did the enduring standards of excellence change? Where is the heart and spirit – the art – of equitation today?

European rider and trainer Bent Branderup, whose deep scholarship in the classical traditions of equitation and in histo-

ry provides a broad perspective on the struggle in dressage society that we experience today, offers insight.

Searching the Heart of History

"The idea of having different riding schools in European history is very recent," Branderup begins. "You are speaking about a newer time, after Napoleon, when you speak of the French school, the Austrian school, the German school, and so on. My work represents an older school when the training of a horse and rider was a cultural heritage that was the same for all Europe."

Shockingly, the old European school Branderup refers to so casually is truly old – it predates Christ. He cites as due course the celebrated Greek general Xenophon who wrote detailed instructions about teaching classically balanced equitation in 400 BC, but all over Europe, Branderup comments, "we have images showing riders riding this style. From Spain, for example, we have a beautiful little image of a horse and rider; the rider is riding one-handed, with his sword in the other hand, the horse is in perfect collection, they are in perfect balance. This image is 2,500 years old."

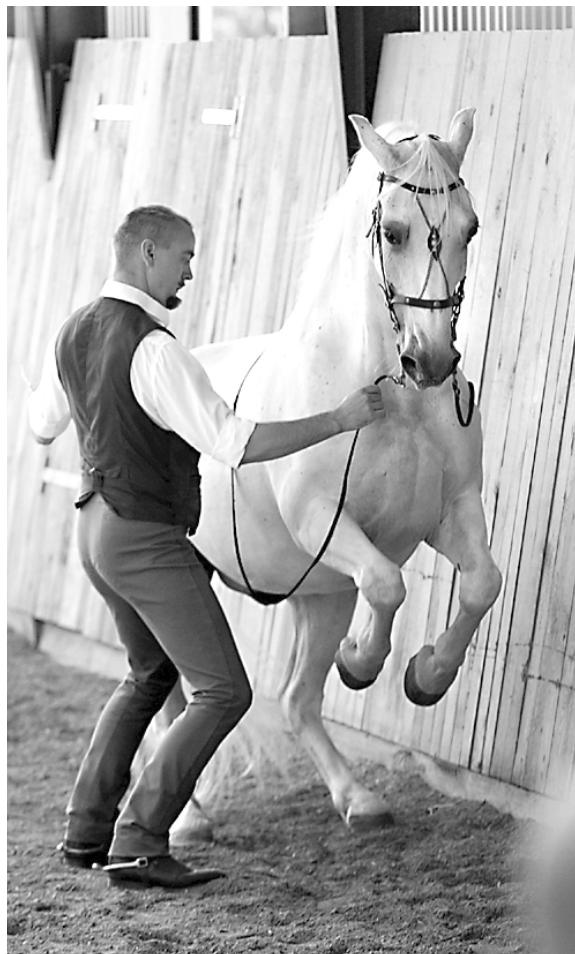
Tales come to mind of warriors across the world and through time who on horseback fought two-handed with dropped reins. For instance the Knights of Templar, the society of knights also known as caballeros who were organized within Christian monastic orders between the 11th and 14th centuries, employed extraordinary skill in training horses. They rode into battle with a sword in the right hand and a shield in the left, and some rode without a bridle, as depicted on a fresco from the Templar Chapel at Cressac, France. These horses, as in the 2,500-year-old image of the warrior Branderup mentions, display suppleness, impulsion and maneuverability derived from powerfully collected haunches. Clearly their trust in their riders had to be complete in the face of the incredible pressures and distractions of battle.

But surrounded today as one is by different schools of thought regarding the fine points of equitation, how could the "old-world, pan-European school" that predated the split-off modern schools be recreated? Even if it could be imagined, how could this style of riding be learned since there was no one to teach it? Could it be learned from old books?

"I grew up riding and training horses, and this is the reason why I originally studied history, to better understand horse culture," explains Branderup "I went around Europe and experienced great riding with the masters of the recent decades. That was why I went to Germany to study with Egon Von Neindorff and also to teach at his school, to Portugal to study with Nuno Oliveira, and to Spain to ride at the Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Equestre, to experience with my body what I read in the books.

In Branderup's book *Akademische Reitkunst (Academic Art of Riding)*, he has written "It is important in life to have ideals, which in turn lead you to your goals. I was so lucky to have great teachers who were my example. But my biggest example was a rider who never taught me directly, but who by his presence during my study at the school of Jerez de la Frontera (Real Escuela) influenced me the deepest. It was Don Alvaro Domecq Diaz."

When asked now about the original goal of the old equitation, Branderup replies, "Simply, the goal was that you could ride one-handed, you had your weapon or tool free in the other hand, and you also and most importantly had the horse perfectly between your aids. This way you could lead the horse very beautifully between the reins, between your legs, in the front of your seat towards the hand, and have the horse in perfect collection. As you progressed in schooling from the walk to trot to canter, to piaffe and passage, you could learn to keep this contact and collection even in the school jumps [airs above the ground]. So when



Pluto Palmito, a Lipizzan of Bent's wife, in the levade.

you come to a real situation – war, for instance – the horse would be perfectly a part of your own body.

"And I found the riding of the old pan-European school that I was looking for among the vaqueros of Spain. This was the basic riding practiced by the common people. Even in America, it was practiced by the vaqueros in the early California ranches of the Spanish nobility who were granted land by the Spanish king. The working equitation was the style upon which the art was built. If you take a common working equitation like that of the vaquero, and you practice it with the herd bulls, it is simple. If you practice it with the fighting bulls, then it must become more delicate. And if you then practice the same movements for war, they must become even finer. And out of that the riding becomes art. The kings of the Old World had to lead in battle and they fought themselves, so they had to practice. They had to be good at riding for war. So they practiced among fighting bulls, and made an art of it at the same time."

After the Napoleonic period wrought dramatic changes in the European culture, equestrian training began changing. With the advent of artillery and astronomical numbers of horses killed in the wars across Europe, mounted warfare became outmoded for the most part and instead corps of very different horses were bred and trained to pull artillery conveyances. The courts of Europe lost their 17th and early 18th century frivolity as the serious business of putting countries back together commenced. What academic equitation being practiced began diverging from its original goal, the practical and progressive preparation of war horses. In losing that purpose, many centuries of tradition began to lose integrity.

The day of a long training that would span six to eight years to produce a finished horse was over. Historically, trainers or riders had ridden in a manege to educate the horse, if they had access to and could afford to educate the horse in a riding arena. "If you couldn't," Branderup offers, "you got onto the horse as soon as you could and educated your horse while you were riding your horse forward.

"And that is what [Gustav] Steinbrecht is about. Steinbrecht lived in a time [1808-1885] when it was no longer possible to afford to have a perfectly-educated horse that had been educated in an arena by a master," he continues. "By the time the zenith of court and academic equitation had passed, it was given to the cavalry officers to train horses, and they had to move with the army. As they rode forward, they educated their horses in bending, shoulder-in and quarter-in, in order to refine the reaction of the horse between the aids. And this is exactly what the Spanish vaqueros did to train their horses, except they were not riding with the army, they were riding with the cattle."

Perspective on Equitation Today

"Even today, if you study the different styles – the Baucherism style, the riding of Oliveira, the Steinbrecht culture and the teaching of Von Neindorff – you realize these masters had different voices, but the goals were the same," says Branderup. "If we have the same goals we are interested in the same thing, basically, aside from small differences. But we find today that the goal has become very different, and the moment you discover that the goal has changed, the way to get there becomes a problem."

What Steinbrecht wrote about riding forward and working with the horse until it achieves straight movement (equal on both sides) has been used to evolve into a type of trot that looks like a runaway train where there is no bending. The "big" high-scoring trot is lately becoming a center of dispute.

"Today, what you see in competition style that is represented as the 'German school' is not the true German style," asserts Branderup. "People want to see spectacular gaits; they teach the horse to push with the hind leg against the hand, and the moment you get the horse to push against your hand you get the horse very tense. From this tension you get an enormous push of the hind leg. And when the hind foot presses against your hand, the front foot on the same side that is in the air 'kicks' when it presses out.

"You can see the muscles rigid in the shoulder from which the front leg is kicking out," he continues. "If the horse were relaxed then the muscle would be a smooth movement as the foot is put forward. This is the reason horses are so hard to sit on when they are ridden that way. They are landing on a stiff front leg and they give you a hit in the seat with each stride that is very difficult to sit on. Actually, the German school wants you to ride toward your hand, and the moment the hind foot steps toward the point of balance, the horse gets light in your hand. This is different from forward and fast!

"Essentially horses in competition now are forced to have artificial gaits that they don't have when they are relaxed. It has everything to do with winning," he says. "What you are seeing in this tense way of trotting is actually not allowed by the competition rules. If you go back to the 1950s, famous riders didn't impose this artificial gait; it first started in the 1960s because riders discovered they could win that way. Plus, it is easier to force on a horse an artificial gait than to develop his real gaits.

"For example, if you have your balance in your stomach and your seat, as in the old equitation, it is easier to destroy the balance with horse and rider, so if you make a transition from piaffe to passage, for instance, you may have a moment where it can be easy for the horse to lose its balance, and it may lose rhythm," Branderup explains. "It may take a step with a different length. If you carry your horse in the hand, you can control its balance, although the horse is not really putting its leg below itself in the piaffe, it is just stepping in the place. And as you go forward with your hand, the horse is just lengthening the stride without changing the rhythm. And you will not put the balance on the hindquarter in the piaffe, you keep it more to



A 1683 painting of King Christian V on the Frederiksborg stallion Recompense (Copenhagen in the background). Zarif has this stallion over 1,000 times in his pedigree.

the front in the extension, so when you keep the balance on the hand you will not have all these little steps in between that would be considered a transition between truly good gaits, which would pull you down in score. So it is easier to get high scores in this way although the horse's spine is stiffened and compressed.

"Actually the true trot is being destroyed by compression and this effect can be seen even in the walk. There are very few horses left who can even move in a true walk, because when you make the horse's spine tense, most horses will pace in the walk instead of offering a true walk. Today 80 percent of competition horses perform a pace instead of a walk. Competition today sacrifices the true walk to execute this extreme trot."

**Combining the Best of
the Past and the Present:
The Royal Danish Riding School**

True gaits and the art of riding will not die out in Denmark in Bent Branderup's lifetime.

Plans are underway to create a riding academy, the Royal Danish Riding School, at the Frederiksborg Castle. The ambitious program will effectively keep the old arts alive while infusing new practices: not only will the academy educate young riders in the old style and prepare them to teach it, at the same time it will support the revival of the ancient and rare Frederiksborg horse breed which carries the name of the castle. The academy equine corps will be Frederiksborg stallions, in the tradition of the great European riding academies that have traditionally employed stallions as their school horses.

"I am now educating three Frederiksborg stallions. One of them does all the schools on the ground and is starting the courbette. He has the highest level of training of any Frederiksborg now living. The Frederiksborg mare line belongs to our Danish Royal Family and in Denmark we have had the same Royal Family for 1,000 years. These horses have pedigrees from the 1600s. We even have paintings of them; I can take any Frederiksborg stallion in my stable and show you paintings of his ancestors in the 1600s. We hope to establish them as the national breed, and at the academy we will create a museum about the horse.

"It is unfortunate that we will not be able to use the old stables at Frederiksborg Castle built in the 14th century," he continues. "They are too low, with tie-in stalls typical of that day, and it is not possible to adapt them to the modern way of keeping stallions. I want the stallions to go out every day. So we will build a new stable and academy next to the castle. I will keep my own stallions there, who are also a part of our family, and I want to keep them the best way I can keep stallions. In this stable every box will have its own paddock to give each stallion the opportunity to get onto grass every day. I could also use the old stables in the middle of Copenhagen with a beautiful big riding manege like the one in Vienna, the stables more beautiful than the stables in Vienna, and a big outdoor riding arena constructed in 1732 by the Royal Family, but I will not keep a stallion that way. It is important to me that when we are creating the riding academy to keep the tradition alive, that we integrate the ethical way of treating horses that we understand today."

The Quest of the Equestrian Artist

From the perspective of classicists who are thinking of the horse's true balance, the rider's true balance and the balance of the two together, these are old values, and how can we give up on standards so tried and so true that they go back thousands of years? Our

modern equitation questions an ancient philosophy supporting the relationship of the rider and the horse, their mutual trust and respect, and in the long run, the good health and the happiness of the horse who depends on us for care. And a critical part of the art is the bonding of the rider and the horse, over time.

"A whole lifetime is required to learn real riding," says Branderup. "Modern people think that the art of riding is something they can buy from McDonald's – they can buy an expensive horse, drive in to McDonald's and take an understanding of equitation out in a paper bag. And that is the beautiful thing about real art; you cannot get it in a bag, you cannot buy it. Never mind how rich you are, you can never buy the art of riding. You can buy a painting that an artist has made that you can hang on your wall, but even if you buy a completely educated horse, art is only in the moment that it is moved, and you cannot make the horse move that way, not even if you bought the training with the horse. Only an artist can make the horse move like a living sculpture.

"The art of riding is the melting together of two spirits and two bodies moving in harmony with each other. Melting together are your seat and the back of the horse. Melting together are your hands and the mouth of the horse. You might physically be able to melt together, but we have even a higher plan; you must mentally come together with your horse. Then you can have an expression together. Most riders show an exhibition of art. Making the horse move its leg, for instance, is considered to be an 'art.' But the real art is impressionistic art. Art is showing a feeling. If you are painting a feeling, if you are doing a sculpture of a feeling, then you are showing an intimacy, you are bringing to life something that you feel. That's the feeling between the horse and the man, and the horse must express that feeling.

"You must also be able to afford art in that you must have so much freedom of your spirit that you are able to deal with art," continues Branderup. "If you are just working to survive, there is no space for art. Life is not just work, riding is not just work, life and riding must be something more. Although I do have pupils competing at Grand Prix level, if you are looking for riding as an art, you must not look for it out in competitions. It is not out in the world, it is inside yourself you must search. That is what an artist will find." ■

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