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By *Larissa Pluta*

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As a 30-year veteran of the international show jumping circuit, Karsten Huck's career included numerous victories at the most prestigious shows throughout Europe, North America, and beyond, climaxing with his bronze-medal ride aboard Nepomuk in the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, Korea.

But when he retired from competition, Huck turned his focus from the glamour of the grand prix ring to his first love, the basic education of young horses. In February, the German Equestrian Federation conferred upon him the title of Reitmaster. In its history, only 14 horsemen have been so honored.

Young horse training has long been a highly respected profession within the larger framework of the German system. "Young horse training is a specialty," said Huck, 60. "It is not for everyone, professional or amateur.

"Even in Germany we have professionals who specialize in young horse training because of their special talents, like patience and love for horses. It is important that young horses are not pushed too soon or traumatized at an early age; it is this mistake that is

responsible for the loss of so many talented horses."

He added, "In Germany, before you become a jumper rider, you have to do lots of flatwork, which includes longeing and dressage. The strong, basic foundation of riding skills allows professionals and amateurs to school young horses much longer than elsewhere."

Additionally, the German federation strictly regulates advancement through the jumper levels. "Unlike the U.S., where any horse-and-rider combination can enter and try the grand prix, in Germany you can only get to the next level when you have achieved enough in the lower level, so everybody must advance step by step," Huck explained.

When riders reach a level that proves to be the limit of their own talent or of the horse's scope, they have "to stay in this level or when he has no success in this level over two years he has to go back in the next lower level," said Huck.

While American riders might balk at this decidedly undemocratic approach to competition, Huck observed, "These rules reinforce strong riding skills for the rider and a structured training system for the horse." They also, he said, allow young horses to progress technically as they mature, without overfacing them.

Take Time

Regardless of these integral institutional differences, the training principles Huck preaches are universal. "Always go slow and be patient, and never, never push a horse too hard or overwhelm it," he advised.

Huck's mantra is "take time."

Before beginning work over fences, Huck ensures that the young horse is thoroughly schooled on the flat. "It must be able to accept the aids of the rider," he said. The horse must also be forward and straight, a deceptively simple fundamental, which, in Huck's estimation, many horses lack.

A horse is ready to jump when it is "able to stay in balance under the rider," said Huck. Its introduction to obstacles is slow and gradual, beginning with a single ground pole, and progressing to cavaletti, a tool Huck uses at all levels of training.

"I like to trot fences with young horses until they are able to stay in balance in front, as well as on the landing side, of the jump," said Huck. When the muscles in the horse's back and hind legs are sufficiently developed, he can proceed to cantering jumps.

The correct execution of this early education is critical to the horse's later success. "My saddest moments are when I come across a talented horse that has not had the privilege of receiving appropriate education, and it is obvious that all of the talent is not able to overcome bad education," he said.

Relax, Then Stretch

In spite of her own youth, Chelsea Schaefer, 13, of Santa Rosa, Calif., has had plenty of experience with young horses. And she was excited to ride in a training session with Huck last September at American Canyon, Calif.

"I was really looking forward to having Karsten help me train my own horse, and he did really benefit me, because he showed me other ways of fixing problems," said Schaefer, a training level event rider.

For instance, "Before we started jumping we did a lot of relaxing the horse. We walked for 10 or 20 minutes, and then we did a lot of trotting and stretching down, and a lot of canter."

Schaefer has incorporated into her own training program this long, unhurried warm-up, which she said soothed her sometimes tense horse and allowed her to better control him. "I've been working on that, not just rushing into the jumping, but taking it by steps, like he showed us," she said.

"Stadium is all about cadence and smoothness, and approaching jumps with your horse sitting on his hindquarters--up, not down and flat--and the way that you can get your horse to be in that position is by sitting up," said Schaefer. "Karsten taught me how to use your position to tell your horse how to approach the jump."

Surprisingly, the combination of a green horse and young rider is quite common abroad.

"In Germany, a young rider typically starts off on a young horse, and they grow together within the system," said Sanjay Bagai, who works regularly with Huck and has brought him to the United States to teach.

"Our federation has worked very hard to create a system that encourages young riders, regardless of economic status, to be able to access professionals and facilities," added Huck.

Phoebe Lang, Bagai's wife, has been working with Huck for two years. She's enjoyed considerable success in the amateur jumper ranks, but she hasn't had much experience with young horses. One of her mounts in the September training session was a 6-year-old, Hanoverian gelding, under saddle a mere nine months, whom she'd ridden only once

before.

Lang's lesson with Huck reinforced the idea of training as entering into an equal partnership with the horse. Particularly with impressionable green horses, riders must honor their part of the bargain. "The responsibility of the rider is for your aids, consistency, and understanding of the young horse. Typically, the errors that a young horse makes reflects the errors of the rider--it's not the other way around," said Lang.

"There's no question that there's a great need for young horse clinics. People are hungry for the kind of expertise and knowledge that someone like Karsten has," Lang added. "He is one of the great living horsemen. It is an honor to be able to school with him."

Bagai has scheduled quarterly training sessions with Huck. Additionally, Bagai would like to have some of the Bereiters in Huck's employ, also young horse specialists, come to American Canyon between Huck's visits to administer informal "check-ups" on participating horses and trainers.

"I want these trainers to learn and keep learning. I want to sustain growth and education," said Bagai.

Bagai trains with Huck in Germany for half of each year. He has extensively studied the German system, and he's a passionate advocate for the creation of a certification program for young horse trainers.

"People are working so hard in America to breed phenomenal young horses. We have the talent for breeding, and a passion for it that's just unparalleled. But after we breed and the foal is on the ground, we don't know what to do," he said.

Bagai believes that the benefits of the institution of such a program would be widespread. "In America, we don't have much of a route for young horses," he said. "But if we were to see American-bred horses performing, the American buyer would start to look locally for horses. This would raise sale prices for breeders while lowering costs for buyers."

Agreed Huck, "Establishing a young horse training system will help spotlight horses that have higher-level potential, and that will allow future national-level riders to purchase locally, rather than from abroad."

Bagai notes that in Germany, the young jumper championships are restricted to German-bred horses. And he believes that such a system could improve the pool of riding talent in this country, while opening the door to top-tier competition to riders of modest means.

"When you bring the young horse along, you also learn how to ride, so you're not

restricted" to buying expensive made horses, he said.

How Many Refusals? Huck Weighs In

The rule governing number of refusals allowed in the show ring has gone through various permutations in the past few years. In 2004, a second disobedience incurred 4 faults at level 5 and below, elimination at the higher levels. The following year, a second refusal caused elimination at all levels.

The 2005 U.S. Hunter Jumper Association convention entertained a further alteration to the rule, permitting two refusals before elimination in young jumper classes to afford green horses a better opportunity for a positive experience in the ring.

Karsten Huck offered his perspective: "I would make the rules different between classes for young horses [4 to 6 years old] and classes for older horses [7 and up]. I recommend that we give the young horses one more time to look a little more at a new fence, so that two refusals are allowed.

"For a horse to be able to jump, it requires physical maturity, emotional maturity, and confidence. Horses must be able to jump fences without any fear, in a very relaxed manner. If the riders do not take enough time with horses, then the horses are overfaced and pushed beyond their developmental ability.

"Go slow so that both rider and horse trust each other, so that when things go wrong they do not become a traumatic experience.

"In the classes for older horses only one refusal should be allowed," he noted.

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