

The dream of flying - What's so difficult about the tölt?

By Dagmar Trodler

Effervescent motion, a cheerfully nodding head – freedom and elation. This is what we envisioned, as we fulfilled our dream of having our very own Icelandic horse. However, the reality turns out to be quite different. The lively Tölt transforms into an unsightly two-stroke, contemptuously called „piggy-pace". The horse resists all attempts of correction using boots with weights, leverage reins and imaginative bits. Even high-ranking trainers only seldom accomplish regaining a long-term four-stroke again. What once begins with the dream of flying often ends in a nightmare of utilities, tricks and never-ending months of horse-training. So, what's the catch with the easy gait?

„It's a difficult task for a horse to carry its rider" says Tóti Eymundsson, instructor at the Icelandic equestrian university Hólar. „And the least of horses tölt just like that. Most of them



Fantastic tölt with fine support needs time: Týr frá Thingeyrum. The rider is Helga Thorodssen.

find their balance rather in the fundamental gaits“. Horses have to simply learn to tölt, and for that, their riders need specific competencies. For example, they need to be able to make the horse aware of the difference between active and direct aids, to impart them clearly to the horse and to coordinate them in an

understandable fashion. He continues: „The horse is simply not used to the tölt. Hence, the balance in tölt is extremely sensitive and easily lost“.

So, Saddle-up and off we go on the whirlwind turns out to be a misconception. Is the easy-

to-go tölt for everybody just a commercial gimmick then? On all accounts, it's a learning process which cannot simply be bought in three months (still the average horse-training period in the Icelandic horse scene). Moreover, this training process does not solely apply to the horse.

„Most riders have to work in parallel on their own talents“, says Maike Morbach, IPZV B-trainer from Bevern in Westfalia, who instructs riding scholars of all categories. For her, the training of body-awareness and self-perception is, indeed, an important supplement to riding tuition. „Our Icelandic horses are extremely challenging“, she says. „They demand a lot from the rider in order to be able to exploit all gaits in an optimal fashion within the realms of their own possibilities“. For the tölt, this equates to a certain rider maturity; in other words: it needs time. The feeling of a pure, flowing tölt, which carries the rider as if on a surf wave, uniting and enveloping both horse and rider to the extent that one has the feeling that it is impossible to ever be separated, also has to be first experienced – and then memorised, in order to recognise what it is one seeks when riding. Good training horses are rare - a fact well known to Maike Morbach. There is a significant danger of being imparted with the wrong tölt feeling, sitting on cramped, unclearly-tölting training horses.

Moreover, according to her observations, many riders are more cerebrally involved than physically and are therefore too tense, which blocks the flow of motion. A disadvantageous seating ultimately leads to gait irregularities which, in turn, exert a negative influence on the riders seating. This incorrectly-learned pattern of motion invokes a vicious circle for both the horse and the rider which is then extremely difficult to break.



Important: To have the chance to memorise balanced tölt so that we know where the route is taking us

Thorough training is therefore necessary from the beginning, upfront of the tölt, claims Tóti Eymundsson. A rider who has not really understood what „on the bit“ really means, in other

words "riding forwards and offering the hand for light contact", says Tóti, will not know how to sponsor suppleness. Tóti advocates an extended top-line, enabling the backbone to be free so the horse can move without tension. Riders on constricted horses with visible folds on the shoulders are mercilessly up a blind alley, no matter how accentuated the gait may be in the respective category. Steinbrechts doctrine „Ride your horse forwards and set it straight" also applies to Icelandic horses says Tóti. „There is absolutely no difference between our horses and others“. The new bad custom of pulling the horse's nose into an extreme vertical position i.e. "in shape", he sharply criticises. „The reins must grant the horse neck movement and allow it to stretch forward-down so that the hind legs and body are free, enabling the horse to stride forwards“. Rein freedom is, above all, applicable for the tölt - but so often does one observe the opposite: riding via the hand, administered by impatient riders. Tóti sees the biggest problem in inadequate training. Incorrect practices lead to assumed success which, however, inevitably leads into the dead-end of permanent tension, invariably at the cost of the horse's health.



Is often forgotten when riding - having fun instead of searching for perfection

The interaction between horse and rider is, according to Uwe Brenner, IPZV-Trainer B from Nördlingen in Ries, decisive for the cause study. Sometimes the horse simply does not have the talent. Sometimes the rider does not have the necessary ability and experience. For him, the secret of success (or failure) of the horse-work lies in the combination of the pair. Experience can only be derived from riding and he too, sees the problem that there are not enough skilled training horses with a clear and good tölt, to teach the pupil the right tölt feeling in order to acquire experience in the first place.

In his opinion, the young horses are additionally not allowed enough time to train their own basic balance which is ultimately necessary for tact clarity and relaxed suppleness.

„The sport notion assumes too much weight too early" the trainer finds. „Sport sets standards to which end, however, the sequence of training has to be appropriate. The fundamental gaits must first be firmly established before one may even begin to think about performance". According to Brenner, it takes a horse no less than two years before it is in a position to be deemed "finished". Only then can a presentable tölt be developed in an equestrian-appropriate manner for tournaments.

This appraisal only confirms what was once common riders knowledge.

According to Helga Thorodsson, trainer at the Icelandic equestrian university Hólar, the time factor is much too frequently neglected.

„The most difficult fact that a rider has to accept is that it takes years for a horse to develop balance and strength before it can be presented well“, she notes.

Excessive demands on a horse overrun its physical abilities at the cost of agility and suppleness. The result is a stiff, tense motion and the tölt is lost.

The impatience of customers and the lack of will to pay an adequate sum for a respectable, appropriate equestrian training are not insignificantly to blame for this misery.

The pressure is, perhaps, not yet great enough.

On the other hand, however, the pressure of wanting to tölt is all the greater, for in the end, this is why we purchased a gaited horse in the first place. For Brenner, this is exactly the crux of the matter. "Tölt may not be the prime idea" he warns. "The more I want tölt, the more goes wrong. My focus must be drawn away from this gait and directed towards suppleness and towards having fun working together with the horse". Light-hearted riding is something the trainer (who likes to relax by riding bareback) indeed misses with many of his pupils. Moreover, many over-estimate their abilities. "Success in sport by far doesn't equate to able to ride well", he notes provocatively.

Time is money. Especially in horse breeding. To shorten the time needed to train horses and bring them to where they are now in an equestrian training sense, has been a long journey. An even longer march stands before us when we set to work to turn back the clock and, at least in short steps, give the horses - and ourselves - the time a good training simply needs. This will cost, but bad tölt costs too. And in the end, it's the horse's health which suffers.

Helga finds, by the way, that stunning tölt sights can, indeed, be observed. "But the riders who can demonstrate this are not to be found at tournaments, where the photographers are sitting to capture them".

Hasn't the time come to change this?

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