

Tolt, Pace, Piaffe

By Tina Pantel

Icelandic horses don't need dressage; they need wind in their manes. "Sandbox riding" has been a "no go" for toltng horses for a long time. Now changing to a classical training system is being discussed even in the highest ranks of the association because riding well opens entirely new horizons especially for riders of gaited horses.



Karolin Streule and Alvitur (here in piaffe) won the Bilting Award in 2010 which is a privately funded award to honour good riding on Icelandic horses and which includes prize money of 650 Euros. The reason being: "Karolin managed to present her horses with much energy and fun. She thereby proved that training according to the training scale with lots of time and effort can be very fun indeed." (Photo: Neddens)

What is more, a lot of Icelandic Horses have a real talent for dressage. Michael Lausegger, former trainer of the Spanish Court Riding School in Vienna has honed that talent in the Icelandic stallion Fjólnir frá Efri-Raudalaek (13) up to Grand Prix level movements. The black horse and his rider Hannes Kirchmayr from Austria show correct piaffes for example. An exceptional talent among the horses of the Vikings? "I

met Hannes Kirchmayr and his horse four years ago. Fjólnir shows tolt and pace and has predominantly been ridden four gaited. It is my task to train them according to the classical rules. When the stallion was balanced and able to be collected in walk, we were able to start working on the piaffe. When Fjólnir could no longer perform the half steps in a walk cadence he changed his gait to a diagonal cadence. With this we had the first piaffe steps. The foundation was established and we could continue training using lots of praise" Lausegger explains.

But won't that harm the tolt, numerous fans of the fourth gait will ask? "The piaffe increases the horse's strength and pride so that tolt will shine even more", Lausegger describes. However,

Fjölñir has an ideal combination of talent, a conformation that is predestined for collection as well as the willingness to work hard and a noble and friendly disposition which all help a lot. "Icelandic horses which have a lot of thrust and less ability to carry can only be used for this type of work with reservations" he points out. A conformation that has backward pointing fore- and hind-quarters points to lots of thrust. According to Laussegger there are more Icelandic horses with a conformation made for further training than you think. "The Icelandic horse could be shown even more positively with the knowledge of classical teachings and better training for riders." Shoulder-in and haunches-in (travers) can be key movements for a supple, responsive horse with pace. "Fjölñir has only started to be really fast and powerful in pace a year ago. That is one of the greatest end results of the new way of training this horse" his rider raves. In a sense, Fjölñir is a poster child for good training but he is not an exception. Through correct riding every Icelandic horse can only become more beautiful.



FN trainer A, Berit Salchow, in shoulder-in on one of her Icelandic horses which she has trained herself from the ground up. The horse's nose is in the right vertical position and it shows the movement well bent on four tracks. (Photo: Stroscher)

For Hannes Kirchmayer (Trainer B and Icelandic horse riding instructor as well as – for 8 years - head of training for the FEIF International Federation of Icelandic Horse Associations, until 2008) meeting Laussegger gave him a new approach to riding: "I've been part of the Icelandic horse scene for 35 years but like so many riders of my generation, I have never learned the fundamentals of riding. Working with Michael Laussegger opened new horizons for my riding. Now I know what a truly rhythmically correct, loose walk feels like, what a swinging back feels like in trot which can become as much a fun factor as tolt and pace. Actually, it's really

addictive. Horses without the predisposition will also only become better and more beautiful through this type of riding. They will develop correct musculature on their backs for example. The multiple gaits of the Icelandic horses are far from helpful for training. Given the lateral tendencies the correct rhythm of trot is often broken without suspension and the canter is pacey and run. Currently we are training a six year old horse which when running free showed tense pace and no trot. He now tolt and trots in nice rhythm and regularity and will surely be a lot of fun for a sensitive leisure rider.”



Clear two beat in trot: The aids are flowing correctly through the horse. The tail is swinging loosely, the hindquarters are stepping towards the centre of gravity and the horse is chewing the bit contentedly. The nose is slightly behind the vertical. (Photo: Stroscher)

According to him lack of training and lack of ridability are often mistaken for the temperament that many riders like so much about the Nordic gaited horses.“ The horse is simply running away underneath his rider and tenses his back. Unfortunately you can still often see that on oval tracks; the horses are made to

trot at a speed they cannot possibly maintain at their current level of training. So they are running behind their centre of gravity. I don't ever want to ride this way again.”

“Bad conformation is often used as an excuse not to further train their horse in dressage in earnest. To me that's a lame excuse because warmblood horses with bad conformations can be trained up to a high level. A horse is a horse. Why shouldn't you be able to train an Icelandic horse up to a Grand-Prix level? Maybe it won't look like a highly talented warmblood but it is certainly possible to train correct movements if the foundation of the rider's seat is solid”, Berit Salchow (FN Trainer A) from Hamburg agrees with Laussegger. She has a few students with Icelandic horses who enthusiastically solidify their dressage foundations and thereby profit from a responsive and very rideable horse that hasn't learned tolt by “pulling in the

front, driving from behind” but with hindquarters that can carry and a well muscled back and that starts to dance in tolt.

Just like the grey Galdur (14) that has his rider Birgit Richter (25) rave about pure “lightness” in tolt. The Icelandic horse rider from around Chemnitz immediately attracts attention with her impressive white horse. He is a horse with a perfect top line that knows how to show off in every gait. At the same time she had taken him in as a poorly trained bolter nine years ago that only knew two gaits, the unwanted, tense ‘piggy pace’ and a running gallop. Even so she recognized his eagerness to learn once he understood what he was supposed to do and bought the Icelandic horse that was to be euthanized because he couldn't be used for children's lessons any longer. Birgit Richter used her classical training with warmbloods which

she had had regularly as a child and teenager during vacations, for Galdur's further training. Her very balanced seat and fine aids were the perfect foundation to patiently form an expressive riding horse over the years, even from the tense bolter.



This was done not by mono-tonously riding circles in the arena but through diversified training especially on trails.

With a lot of patience Birgit Richter “formed” a beautifully muscled four gaited horse from a badly ridden and pacey one with the help of classical training. Especially his strong hindquarters and well formed top line musculature make it easy for Galdur to canter in balance in a forward upward movement – here with light and story book contact. In this photo the rider's leg could be animating the horse more if it were positioned closer to the saddle strap and the rider should overall sit more soundly. (Photo: Stroscher)

In Icelandic horse competitions Galdur's speciality is the so-called “obedience” test next to the traditional four gait test. The misleading name “obedience” has nothing to do with agility but talks about dressage (see box). Even at the German Masters these tests are on the sidelines both in terms of spectators as well as participants. However, interest is increasing because well ridden Icelandic horses like Galdur can profit from that in gaited tests as well. “Many leisure riders who ride on a very high level very beautifully just for themselves have no interest in the current competition system,” Kirchmayr accounts.

FEIF even offered a judges seminar in April at whom Dr. Gerhard Heuschmann was a guest, and however tentatively is starting to occupy itself with topics like biomechanics and the training scale. Those among the Icelandic horse fans who like to expand their horizon beyond just tolt no longer get strange looks when they take classes – preferably classical or baroque - outside the gaited horse scene. More and more sought after are also the trainers of the German Icelandic horse sport and breeding association (IPZV) who have fun teaching solid dressage training and who have learned it themselves for years from the ground up, for example as certified groom . Also very welcome are double qualifications like Christine Weber-Jacobsen from Lower Saxony has (IPZV-Trainer C, FN-Trainer B and sports scientist). Over the last couple of years she has been gaining more and more students who don't want clinics solely focused on tolt where the warm-up phase consists of riding a couple of circles through the sand and checking whether acceleration, brake and reverse are in working order. The leg

yield has been the be-all and end-all proof for Icelandic horse riders for example that their horse is well ridden in dressage for a long time. The newest trend is to mechanically pull the neck “on the bit”, after all that’s what it means to ride dressage, or at least it is the ignorant and a little helpless interpretation of many Icelandic horse riders who would like to change something but don't



By positioning the saddle this far back the horse is supposed to better utilize its hindquarters and lift its shoulders. The pressure of the riders weight on the loin area that is unable to carry any load more likely has the opposite affect. (Photo: private)

know how. The “searching” students want a supple horse that can raise its back and doesn't run after its centre of gravity with its head in a counter position. Losing the monstrous ewe neck and training the not only more beautiful but for the ridden horse healthier top line musculature is the goal. This muscular system which can be honed through correct training carries the rider and allows a balanced horse to show the type of speed that enthral us, especially in tolt. “Unfortunately most people think this will happen very quickly. First signs of achievement won't appear in the first couple of weeks; you have to think months and years. This especially deters newcomers and people who have started riding later in life sooner or later. They lose interest in regular classes and prefer to cruise the trails like they did before. A lot of people lack the perseverance,” the 43 year old trainer reports.

It will be an uphill battle to develop the (as yet) missing riding culture from the Icelandic working equation. One or two (lava) roadblocks still have to be cleared like the extreme and manipulative backward positioning of the saddle which many professional riders especially in Iceland still justify vehemently.

Particularly in the German Icelandic horse scene the level of training as well as the competition system have been under fire and not just internally. Critical questions are no longer raised in Icelandic horse internet forums alone, but are also discussed in the specialized committees of Icelandic horse federations. During the above mentioned FEIF judges seminar a complete overhaul of the 30 year old competition system was considered. Einar Ragnason, world championship chief judge has been heard saying that classical riding should become the new foundation of Icelandic horse tests. "I was flabbergasted", said Kirchmayr who now hopes that these trains of thought will be put into practice soon. Changes in the competition system demand long overdue changes to the training

system of trainers and judges. "Thorgeir Gudlaugsson's lecture on the basics of judging and potential improvements has been an eye-opener for me. He illustrated a pyramid in which the foundation consists of "fair riding" as a starting point for a complete reorientation of judging. The next points up in importance are tempo, rhythm and regularity, the silhouette, movement and at the end expressiveness."

What are obedience tests (IPZV) - dressage tests for gaited horses?

According to the 2009 IPO (the official rules for Icelandic horse events), obedience tests in shows are grouped according to their degree of difficulty. At first sight it's a pretty complicated system. Old school dressage riders might dismiss the easiest test tiredly which could be equated to class E (obedience class C). The classes then range up to about L (obedience class A).

What is special: tolt is allowed instead of trot, but has to be consistently used throughout the class. In the obedience test freestyle (D1) the rider can ride in a variety of levels of difficulty. Theoretically, they could go all the way up to A** level and include lessons such as half-pass, pirouettes and flying lead changes.

Example lessons:

Obedience A (D2): half-pirouette, back-up, leg yielding on a zig-zag, all gaits in extended tempo, simple lead change.

Obedience B (D3): figure eight in walk, leg yielding, shallow loop, reverse, extended walk, otherwise working tempo in all gaits.

Obedience C (D4): shallow loop, reverse, extended walk, otherwise working tempo in all gaits.

All signs point to change. The FEIF judges tried to find answers to many questions. Kirchmayr summarizes: "Our professional competitions are riding tests but often times the horses' natural abilities are more highly valued than solid training and a beautiful presentation. Additionally, the structure of the test is questionable, especially high speeds for long distances. The trot part of the tests is being criticized because during finals it is being ridden for multiple rounds at a medium speed. Horses without loose working backs can be seen often, and place too often." To the question which aspects of a ride are being judged the least the judges often named looseness, mistakes in contact and suppleness. The results of the discussion rounds are to be the basis for the further work in the committees.

Leading with good example and starting with the youngest of the young Icelandic horse riders, Hannes Kirchmayr and his wife Barbara are already putting the idea into practice. For Austria's largest horse fair "Pferd Wels" they put on a classically ridden quadrille with their ten to twelve year old riding kids. After the appearances the show's team was addressed by visitors, who were pleased that Iceland horses were being presented without „force and heads pulled up“. They had not known at all that Icelandic horses could be ridden so beautifully.

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