

Handling!?

By Dagmar Trodler

After the heavily criticized spectacles at last year's competitions, this year's focus at the German National Championships in Lingen was naturally on the rider's rein contact. After tölt-icon Runa Einarsdóttir-Zingsheim openly turned her back on the Horse Wrestling she practiced in the past, whilst giving a presentation last spring, more and more riders are following her on her way towards light-handed riding.

At least, that was what spectators could see during the preliminary tests. Sadly towards the finals, the rider's greed for winning affected their hands. Speed and pressure increased, reins were shortened again and the curb bit's shanks stayed under constant pressure.

The harsh half-halts which were applied to regulate the horse's speed and to maximize the Leg lift, displayed the real problems of these success- and score-oriented riders with the Classical Training Scale, which is as valid and important for the Icelandic horse as it is for any other ridden animal.

The horses aren't using their backs and they aren't supple – all prerequisites for the other aspects of a well trained horse.

- Lack of suppleness prevents acceptance of the bit. This has to be forced by "hauling the horse into an outline" by pulling the reins.
- Missing suppleness and missing acceptance of the bit prevent the flow of the horse's movements through its body – no impulsion will build up and the horse can't be ridden straight.



Adjusted clearly behind the vertical, this DIM candidate is developing high action in the forehand, with a tense back and an obviously less active rear end.

- Because of the lack of suppleness and the lack of bit acceptance the horse won't be able to reach the correct state of collection which is necessary for correct tölt with the hindquarters carrying the weight.

Clearly behind the vertical, this DIM candidate is developing high action in the forehand, with a tense back and obviously less active hindquarters.

The rider, by his actions in the front, inhibits the activation of the horse's hindquarters. The horse pushes forward, inactively, on the forehand and that causes the rider to pull even more at the front – a bad spiral that creates a horse that is ridden from the front to the back.

However the effect of these actions on the scores is quite on the contrary: The tense back (which is acceptable according to some judges' statements) enhances the foreleg-action. Critics are of the opinion that the foreleg-action is weighted too heavily in judging – “action at any cost!”

Injuries are a price horses might pay for this.

Among other things this year's DIM rider, Martin Gueldner, got penalized with a red card for the injuries in his horse's mouth...

Also, Jolly Schrenk was reprimanded because of the misuse of a noseband, which was applied too tightly.

Stymir Arnason even managed to pull the bit right through his horse's mouth and was reprimanded by the judges.

A more and more popular combination to be seen: The

Icelandic bit in combination with a Flash Noseband which is kept under constant pressure

Misused bridles on a competition of a grade as high as this one are an open display of the riders lack of skills.



A more and more popular combination to be seen: The Icelandic bit in combination with a Flash Noseband, that is kept under constant pressure

The bit, when used as a weapon against the horse, has a very multifaceted impact on the Neck and head carriage. When a leverage bit – like the Icelandic bit – is used to pull a horse's head behind the vertical, the bit's mouth piece will be forcefully pressed against the tongue and the bars. The tongue will be bruised and at the bars, a bony part of the

horse's mouth which is only protected by a layer of skin, the periosteum, can be irritated or bruised. The corners of the mouth which are pulled far back are the least tortured part thanks to their elasticity. The horse surrenders to the pressure on its tongue and bars and lowers its head – to its chest if it has to. During the process of hyperflexion (Rollkur) the pulling of the horse's head to the chest is happening slowly, and according to the theory it should be sustained to stretch the crest. Pressure points during the application of this method are the neck and the area around the lumbar vertebrae.

Additionally – wanted or tolerated – the horse, a flight animal, is exposed to psychological helplessness: The rider's hand, by forcing the head behind the vertical, is affecting the horse's ability to see, and the rider is then driving the horse forward. A horse with its head strapped to its chest can't see anything else than its own feet. This mental terror is something a rider has to actively choose to do.

Still Icelandic horse riders like using this technique to loosen the horse's neck. However, it is questionable what value a loose neck can offer if the horse behind it is getting tenser.

World Champion Jóhann Skúlason wasn't afraid to correct his horse Höfði frá Snjallsteinshöfða using hyperflexion while waiting in line for the flying pace section of the 5-gaited test – a behavior which was scorned by the audience, but was overlooked by the judges. But Skúlason was just following a tradition, which didn't seem to bother any judges.



Spectators at this year's DIM did capture the intensive use of hyperflexion on video and shared it on youtube

Even in Brunnadern, during the WC, a violently hyperflexing participant in the

Collecting Ring wasn't punished for his deed, doing this right before a test.

While Rollkur is establishing itself slowly and secretly as a misunderstood training-technique the so called "Insterburger", the quick pulling onto the bit, does not deserve the term "training method" at all:

By quickly pulling the horse behind the vertical, the rider is risking cracks and micro traumata

in the crest's muscles. The horse will react to the pressure with the following reflex: it will try

to shorten its neck to reduce the pressure. The spine in the neck area, which is already bent downwards, will be twisted even more in that direction and the muscles of the lower neck will be under tension. So, the sharp pull will train the neck muscle and will create the feared bulging lower-neck muscle, even if the horse's head is behind the vertical. It also scares the horse. The horse is losing its trust into the rider's hands because it won't know when another feared and painful pull will happen.

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The thoughtless variation of this technique is "sawing". One can see "sawing" during any gait at any speed. Sometimes used "softly", sometimes practiced with the fist.

The purpose of "sawing" is to stimulate the horse, by alternating one sided pulling of the rein, to chew and to loosen the neck. It might be accomplished by a soft "playing" with the reins – which requires a correctly ridden horse that is ridden from the back to the front (not the other way around) and that the horse accepts the bit – one sided pulling won't cause the desired effect.



Forceful brake maneuvers like this were already to be seen at the DIM in 2007. The horse can't escape the bit, the Flash Noseband is tying its mouth shut.

The only thing the horse will do, which can be seen by the spectators, is that it lets its head be pulled from the right to the left. For that the neck muscles have to stiffen – if not the horse wouldn't be able to keep going forward in a straight line.

A tense neck spreads through the whole body, the hindquarters can't work correctly and so the back gets tense.

And here we are again: A tense back creates high action of the forelegs.

FEIF really has to reflect how they will manage the issue between scoring and the Art of Riding/ Welfare of the horse in the coming years, without losing its professional foundation.

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