

The Tölt.Knoten Interjection to the World Championship for Icelandic Horses 2011

By Ulrike Amler

Every two years the best riders of Icelandic horses in the world meet. Every two years thousands of friends of Icelandic horses eagerly anticipate the sport competitions for the titles. Every two years the rank and file complain, speculate and make dire predictions. Every two years they rejoice, gush, complain and criticize after the event.

When you travel to see a WC for Icelandic horses and sit down by the oval or pace track, you don't expect to see a seminar with Dr. Heuschmann or the morning session of the Spanish Court Riding School. Icelandic horse fans come with the expectation to see the best riders on the best horses of their breed. They wish for a colourful lot of lively, happy ponies with bright eyes and flowing manes, whirling and clear-beat gaits. Their steps should be light as they carry their riders around the oval track or on the pace track with ease and suppleness. Ponies with over-abundant temperament that willingly react to invisible aids and make every rider's heart beat stronger. Fans wish for riders who glow from the inside in the knowledge that they belong to the best and that they bring their ponies to the top performances the spec-



Long reins and a treat – a fitting reward for the five-gaited sports partner.

tators want to see, with an elastic seat, finest aids and correct equipment. They wish for riders who thank their horses during individual parts of a test – with a releasing hand, maybe long reins or a pat on the neck. Unfortunately, these riders were rare. And they became rarer on the way to the top ten or even the title of world champion.

If you visit a WC you will still see horses that race around the oval track with the most severe bits in their gaping mouths and with their eyes closed. Horses that breathe heavily and pound loudly as they move in slow tolt against holding hands and unforgiving Icelandic curb bits. Horses that have bio-mechanical movements that do not seem to reflect true genetic potential.

You can see horses that have to be brought back to walk with the strength of a wrestler after a length of flying pace or fast tölt because they lack balance and even more, suppleness. You can still see saddle placements that would not be allowed in pony club, and riders in trot to whom one would like to give a few longe lessons as a gift. There are riders who still need a curve to get into canter and who need other test participants to get them back to walk. There are riders from nations with no equestrian tradition who chase their ponies apparently pain-



free across the track, and riders from nations with an equestrian tradition who shamelessly seem to ignore it. There are top riders who participated in bio-mechanical seminars and who rollkur their horses without hesitation in front of thousands of spectators, and who win titles with rein lame horses.

In the centre of the track are judges who don't want to see any of this, can't see it or are not allowed to see it. Judges who don't punish any of this because the guidelines are not clear enough in that respect. These guidelines support the spectacle, not the horses' needs. Training guidelines that are geared towards the horses' wellbeing – present in other equestrian cultures – are non-existent to this day. The guidelines lack a respect for the creature, for wonderful horses whose riders depended on them for their very

Many an old saga hero could only weep

survival not that long ago. Away from the oval track this largess of the small ponies is celebrated. Where the ambition to gain the title dominates, it is quickly forgotten.

In the centre of the oval track photographers compete for good pictures of fascinating horses but these pictures often capture a moment in time. The spectators cheer, some notice that the atmosphere does not match the photos, some feel badly.

We need role models – for us and for our young riders. We need true role models from our own ranks. Young riders who ride in a better style cannot yet handle that responsibility. They would not be able to withstand the pressure. They would not be able to handle the temptation to give up their previous riding principles to manage the big step onto the podium. For alas, for now it is almost impossible to become world champion in the Icelandic horse world with fine riding.

The WC in St. Radegund is history. The WC in our own country (Germany) is on deck. Germany is second only to Iceland in numbers within FEIF. Germany has a proven equestrian culture. The training guidelines for horses cannot be transferred 1:1 to the Icelandic horse, but they are a sensible starting point to develop training for horses and riders that are true to the horses' nature; a lot of things are supposed to be improved in Berlin.

The organisational chaos that existed during this WC in front of and behind the scenes that motivated helpers managed to skilfully dampen for day visitors, is juxtaposed with the highly professional presentation of the next WC. One can only hope that organizers don't just consider the perfect infrastructure and a commercial success, but also pretty pictures based on good riding. Otherwise they should remember the lava pit many a conscientious and always wanting to learn horse friend wants to sink into in shame when spectators come to Germany – as is to be expected – who know something about riding.

Text: Ulrike Amler / Fotos: Ulrike Amler

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