

Christoph Hess Esq.  
Thies Kaspareit Esq.  
German Equestrian Federation  
D – 48229 Warendorf  
Germany

23.07.2009

Reply to the letter dated 15.06.2009 from Christoph Hess and Thies Kaspareit

Dear Sirs,

Apparently it required the publication of my letter in “Dressur-Studien“ magazine as well as the creation of a petition in its support for the German Equestrian Federation to decide to respond to it. For this reply, which was crafted by two hands and has taken close to three months, I thank you all the same.

A thorough review of your text would be going too far. My most recent book presents all that is necessary for anyone to evaluate your letter – but have you ever read it? As we all know, in the competition world equestrian culture gets a bad press or finds itself cast aside in favour of heartbreaking self-absorption.

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You say that the ‘LPO’ (regulations for tests) are reviewed every four years by a committee of experts. It is clear then that this is the cause of the current situation.

But let’s come to the point. You write that the official equitation now in force is ‘classical’, governed by the ‘official guidelines’, based themselves upon the ‘1912 Handbook of the German Cavalry’ and its principles still seek the welfare of the horse.



*Ecole de Légèreté*

Philippe Karl  
Hameau Le Mallein  
Route du vieux Moulin  
38630 Corbellin  
France

[www.philippe-karl.com](http://www.philippe-karl.com)

There lies the very foundation of the problem. In the first place, and with all due respect to the German Cavalry, I don't know who decreed that the Manual from 1912 should be adopted as the be all and end all of equestrian culture. That said, however, it did recommend the practice of flexions and showed no tolerance whatsoever for rollkur, so even these regulations have become somewhat distorted. One cannot help but ask what Otto Loerke and Isabell Werth have left in common, to name but two.

To recap: modern dressage training clings to certain dogmas such as:

- low hands with the horse driven onto the bit
- systematic use of auxiliary reins
- a 'bringing to hand' through a flexion of the poll that is unilaterally imposed upon the horse
- the simultaneous use of all the aids; seat, legs and hands
- limited bending of the neck in favour of an overall bend of the entire spine
- engagement of the hind limbs under the centre of gravity by half-halts during forward motion
- use of weight-aids (the rider's seat) always to the inside of the bend instead of in the direction of motion

All of which, when taken together, are supposed to guarantee the development of 'happy athletes'!

Unfortunately, all these nice ideas are fundamentally contradicted by basic principles of physiology, biomechanics, physics, kinetics and ethology. Numerous masters, such as the irreproachable La Guérinière, intuitively understood this long before these modern sciences took their first teetering steps. Unless we revel in obscurantism we have absolutely no excuse today for going down such blind alleys. The Church may have condemned Galileo, but the Earth still goes round the Sun nonetheless.

One would have to be deaf and blind, or an official of any equestrian federation, to ignore the unspeakable practices that result from these dogmas yet are now regarded as normal, not to mention the devastation they produce.

Extraordinary standards of breeding serve only to promote a disastrous form of equitation whose primary – and unfortunately silent – victims are the horses themselves. This massacre does not go unnoticed by either the breeders or the general public. These 'equine athletes' are so 'happy' that the number of doping cases is steadily growing at what is known as the 'top' level.

This discrepancy between official statements and the daily reality on the ground borders on fraudulent. But it is well known that in politics cynicism often becomes second nature.



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Now we come to another point. You rashly attempt to pull the wool over the reader's eyes by indicting my practices and my teaching. To this end you use a photograph taken at the Equitana horse fair while I was in the process of attempting to correct a poor horse, a pure product of your sacrosanct system, in a mere half an hour. In the interests of intellectual honesty and fairness at the very least you ought surely to have presented two photographs; before and after... along with the evaluation of the rider on remounting her horse. Unfortunately, however, the dressage world displays a universal solidarity towards me, based on ostracism and bad faith.

I am indifferent to such treatment, as I crave no post in any official authority – this will surely reassure you. On the other hand, I am greatly interested in the preservation of the best of European equestrian culture and by consequence the protection of the horse. Let us also note in passing that our great institutions charged with the preservation of Academic Equitation maintain a deafening silence in this regard.

You assert that “such horse riding is almost always to the detriment of the activity of the back of the horse and thereby also to the suppleness and the health of the horse”.

Let's be serious for a moment. First of all you stigmatize an entire equestrian philosophy of which you have no experience whatsoever. The facts are that, without pretending to be perfect in what I'm doing, I help students bring all sorts of horses (including some very mediocre ones) to all the classical airs without auxiliary reins, without resorting to force, without hidden practices and without illicit products. And all this in the space of twelve days teaching per year. What is it then that prevents you from doing as much?

I must add that among these horses are some animals of the very highest quality, made unrideable, ruined morally as well as physically and from dressage yards so famous it is better not to name them.

Moreover, I have among my pupils an ever growing number of riders who, although already successful at the 'S' level, are weary of that kind of riding and are searching for an alternative that not only makes sense but also shows respect for the horse. They also fully understand that by so doing they leave themselves open to reprisals.

Fortunately, there remain some honest men who take the trouble to come and see first hand before forming an opinion. Among these, I must name Dr. Gerd Heuschmann. I would like to quote briefly what he said and wrote, having followed one day of my lessons and spent two days in my stables.



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“I was lucky, the top four or five trainers of his system were there, riding, and I didn’t trust my eyes, this was dressage, unbelievable – the whole day long. They can’t show me a fake for a whole day. They came in long rein, piaffe, but a real piaffe on the hindlegs, this was perfect dressage.”

“He is very special, he is the guy with these high hands but I went there for two days to study him, he has some very interesting ideas, if you could use some of his ideas then you could stop people from pulling. There is no need to pull – his way the horse starts chewing and is relaxed and the back is up.”  
(The Horse Magazine, Australia, July 2009)

“During the time I spent watching his training, I had the honour of witnessing something that corresponds absolutely to the ideal picture of dressage riding which I have in my mind. A soft and flexible poll, the finest contact, horses always ready to stretch, and of paces full of 'schwung' and always with an exquisite relationship between the hand of the rider and the mouth of the horse.

The foundations of Mr Karl’s work correspond exactly to the philosophies of good horse riding of the last century. I simply cannot understand why Mr Karl is not held in the highest regard, especially at the top competition level. This visit has demonstrated to me yet again what a dead-end street competition dressage is navigating.

There is truly much over which to despair and resign. But since it is the horses who are tortured every day, we do not have the right to abandon them or to retreat into our shells. We must think of the future and try to bring the culture of dressage riding in all its aspects back into human conscience. In only a few days I have become convinced that Mr Karl has a decisive role to play in this context.”  
(Piaffe magazine, Germany, September 2008).

As a specialist equine veterinarian, Gerd Heuschmann is held in very high regard and, what’s more, he is also a man of integrity and courage.

Must I remind you of the disparaging conclusions he draws in his book, his DVD and his conferences of the riding methods of which you are the cheerleaders and guardians? As a veterinarian in Warendorf he has, of course, a front row seat from which to form his judgements. Weary of prolonging and supporting the ‘massacre of the innocents’ and, among other things, of having to inject the backs of horses as young as three years old, he resolved to break the silence. That is to his eternal credit.

I am sorry, then, to have to contradict you but the horses for which I am responsible don’t have such problems. People who live in glass houses should perhaps think more carefully before throwing stones.



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When all is said and done, you persist in avoiding the real issue and procrastinating under the pretence of convoluted technical considerations. It is obvious that you remain hostile to any amendments that could be simply and clearly implemented because that would call your whole system into question:

- The introduction of objective criteria would foster dispassionate and independent judging instead of this distasteful complicity which drives certain judges to despair (some of them are known to me).
- Ordinary but well trained horses would displace the current phenomenon of crude exploitation of excellent horses. Many of the stars would tumble from their pedestals.
- The emperor would find himself without any clothes since the inanity of the current dogmas could no longer be hidden, just like the tragically inadequate education of riding teachers. Everything would have to be completely thought through again from the beginning.
- All in all, these measures would protect the horses and restore the educational virtues of horse riding... but they would also threaten some powerful interests.

As functionaries who are anxious first of all to keep their posts you retreat again and again from principles to tolerance, from tolerance to tacit approval and, in the end, from approval to concessions and foul compromises.

I urge you to take note of the growing aversion to this type of horse riding. Among those who support me are doctors, veterinarians, osteopaths, ethologists, researchers ... and the German Association of Leisure Riders (letter of H. Hartmann and V. Letzas from the 05.06.09).

You cannot continue to promote the unacceptable in the name of archaic dogmas and sacrosanct 'business'. Competition performance, whose value is arguable by the way, cannot be used to justify everything because in equestrianism, as in all good education, the means are just as important as the ends.

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It is critical that dressage worldwide reacts in good faith and without weakness before animal welfare organizations begin to get involved – for that is surely the direction in which we are heading. I remain convinced that the German Equestrian Federation has the position and the weight to be the leader of a genuine renovation.

However disappointing your answer might be, it will not discourage me. I remain ready to show you the proof, in theory and in practice, whenever you wish.



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I wonder, does your sportsmanlike attitude stretch so far that you might publish this clarification in your members' magazine, 'PM forum'?

Sincerely and cordially,

Philippe Karl

PS: Rule No. 10:

The judges in the warm-up arena will be endowed with true powers. They will punish heavily any abuses such as 'Rollkur'.

Knowing that a 'happy athlete' does not need to be subjected to one and a half to two hours of systematic wearing down, access to the warm-up area will be strictly limited to 45 minutes preceding the entrance to the competition arena.

(To be continued)



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