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CHIEF RIDER KLAUS KRZISCH: "The Rollkur is a problem!"

An Interview with a former First Chief Rider of the Spanish Riding School

Former First Chief Rider, Klaus Krzisch is known to be a staunch opponent of the new System and sees the standards of the Spanish Riding School facing high risk.

In the Interview with ProPferd, Krzisch explains why overtaxing the horses undermines the Classical System.



r3.jpg: Ungünstige Momentaufnahme – oder schleichende Gefahr? Wird an der Spanischen Hofreitschule tatsächlich mit der Rollkur ProPferd.at - Österreichs unabhängiges Pferde-Portal (3/4) |

ProPferd: Mr. Krzisch, you are regarded as being vehemently opposed to the management of Mrs. Elizabeth Gürtler, who has been the director of the Hofreitschule since 2007 and who has changed this Institution outrightly. What exactly do you have against Mrs. Gürtler?

Krzisch: I do not have anything personally against Frau Gürtler or against my former colleagues and riding staff, despite a circulating rumor. The riders know their job, I would like to emphasize. What I criticize is the System Mrs. Gürtler has introduced, which I believe is

contrary to the cause of this Institution's existence: the fostering and preservation of Classical Horsemanship. Many things I see now are no longer "classical".

ProPferd: What for example?

Krzisch: I could mention many things, things that would not be apparent to most laymen, from holding the reins correctly to sitting correctly and a growing weakness in producing Airs above the Ground horses. What was it that made the School world-wide famous and respected? It was precision of lines and ring figures and the seat of the rider. All that is gone today. More and more experts are becoming aware of that situation and wonder what is going on.



ir Klaus Krzisch ist die Rollkur unakzeptabel: „Die Rollkur ist gegen die Natur des Pferdes und hat daher auch in der klassischen F
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ProPferd: And what is it that is going on?

Krzisch: In the last few years, centuries of an old proven System has been destroyed and replaced by a new one which can never work. Mrs. Gürtler supported this by immediately launching the Spanish Riding School into a money making enterprise by doubling the number of performances and creating a second touring team. That leads ultimately to an overtaxing of the horses, making Classical Riding and Training impossible.

ProPferd: Mrs. Gürtler categorically denies that the horses are overworked. She argues that a healthy, trained horse can cope with a few minutes of supreme performance stress without harm to its health.

Krzisch: The seven or eight minutes of a show segment do not overtax the horses; here Mrs. Gürtler is right. However, to perform on that high level, many years of intensive training are necessary and this, Mrs. Gürtler seems to forget in her calculation. If I have a talented horse, I still need four years to bring that horse to Grand Prix level and an additional two years to work on the finer details. It's not the eight minutes of showing but the many years of training that put a considerable strain on the horses. This reality is ignored and pushed aside in public discussions. For example, how many years of work and how much sweat did it cost a downhill ski racer to achieve a level enabling him to finish a race in two or three minutes? The number of performances has doubled and with it the entire scope of the training has increased. In the past we had 170 training days per year, now that number is 250. We tried that road already under Brigadier Kurt Albrecht. The number of performances was increased to 70. Soon it was found to have adverse effects on the wellbeing of the horses and

detrimental to the quality of the performances. In those days we still had experienced *horse people* and this experiment was quickly abandoned.

ProPferd: Are the Bereiters not encouraged to protest against overtaxing the horses and can't they say that this or that horse is not ready yet to be shown in performances?

Krzisch: The present lay-out of the program takes away all responsibility from the riders who are caught in this treadmill; having to work under pressure without any SAY whatsoever about the *modus operandi*. It used to be part of our tradition that we, the riders, could determine how much or how long we needed to train the horses that were entrusted to us. For example: when I knew a few hot days were in the forecast or if I had an older horse in my string, I rode my horses lightly to have them fresh for the Sunday performance. The young horses needed to be worked a little more intensively so they could burn up excess energy in order to be quieter on Sundays. As trainers, we knew how to handle our horses simply because we were ONE with them.

ProPferd: You mentioned a while ago the Second Team. What do you think of this plan that Mrs. Gürtler revealed?

Krzisch: In my opinion a second team does not make much sense and is impossible to create. From the point of view of content, it is a misconception. This idea is not new at all. Colonel Alois Podhajsky had this to say: “ *A second team? Let's be content with one excellent team that functions and is respected.* ” Later, when Dr. Oulehla was our director, he told us that we had to make more money. He asked: “ *What would you all think if we continue with the training at home and let the other team go on tour?* ”

That was OK with us, training could be done with the remaining horses and riders but *good Heavens*, never performances! When I go to the Opera, I want to hear the best singers for my money and not the second or third best cast. Can there be two best teams of a successful Soccer Team? Hardly. Charging high entrance fees when only 2 horses are shown in work-in-hand during a performance, as it actually happened instead of presenting the best riders and the best horses, I consider a rip-off and the height of impertinence. The Spanish Riding School was known to have the best riders and the best trained horses and so it should be.

ProPferd: As long as such performances are well attended and nobody seems to complain, who can blame Mrs. Gürtler for charging high entrance fees?

Krzisch: If the audience is pleased with the level that is shown then more power to it. A tourist who has no clue about horses and Classical Horsemanship will like what he/she sees. The white horses, the uniforms, the arena, all that is tremendously attractive. Tourists, for example, will not notice when a Spaniard rides a half-pass in the Passage on the Heldenplatz or that half of our Bereiter staff doesn't even know how to ride a Passage simply because the layman-tourist does not know what a Passage really is. For the average citizen, all seems to be fine. However, the School's reputation was not built on the opinion of the non-expert but from establishing a world-wide reputation over many generations. The visitors who came to see the performances in the Hofburg consisted of 90% tourists but when on tour, we were

seen by 90% of experts, trainers, riders, coaches and Judges. The Spanish Riding School acquired a respectable reputation in the world of experts from which this current management still benefits. Mrs. Gürtler cannot take credit for that unless she wants to strut in borrowed plumes. Generations of Riders and Chief Riders worked hard to make this Institute the world's best riding school but this credit balance will soon be used up and the signs are getting more and more numerous that this day is not too far away.

ProPferd: To be fair, one has to mention that Mrs. Gürtler received explicit instruction to balance the budget for which an increase in performances is seen as the best approach. Do you, Mr. Krzisch have a better solution?

Krzisch: A measure that would lower the costs to a considerable degree would simply be a reduction of the number of horses. Why do we need 75 horses in the Hofburg and 40 more horses on the Heldenberg? That makes 115 horses and every one of them costs money. In the past, we had 72 horses in the Hofburg and we managed to get by perfectly. With 72 horses, we went to Lainz in the summer and in the fall they were fully rested and we could ride performances and go on tour without any problems. It is all a question of management. And when Mrs. Gürtler insists that the young horses must be worked, she displays a great lack of understanding because even the young horses need rest to get physically and mentally ready for their work from February to the end of June.



ProPferd: In reply to that, it was opined that the horses only work 30 minutes a day which could not possibly be strenuous.

Klaus Krzisch: This answer too, if meant in earnest, proves naivety or is plain cynical. In the past, every rider could decide how long he wanted to work with a horse because he was the only person who could seriously estimate that. If I needed more time with a horse, then I planned it in such a way that I rode one hour or even more. When the workload became too burdensome for the horse, I shortened the training session. A horse is known to have a concentration span of approximately 40 minutes, during which it can mentally follow the rider. A young horse's attention span is much shorter and young remounts when started, are



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worked no longer than 15 to 20 minutes. After that, they can no longer concentrate. That is one reason young horses also need peace and quiet.

ProfPferd: How are the Bereiters handling all those problems? In what mood are they?

Krzisch: Judging from what I hear from my former colleagues, the situation is catastrophic and different camps have developed. The young riders no longer have proper guidance and must help each other, which might work only for a while. During my time when we sat on the bench in the riding hall watching the young riders, we could help them by giving advice but today, this hardly exists anymore.

ProfPferd: How come? Is there no time, a lack of motivation? Where does it come from?

Krzisch: There is a group which opposes Mrs. Gürtler's System but can't do anything against it except to boycott it. Another group has made a successful career for themselves under Mrs. Gürtler and have been promoted to positions which they never would have reached under different circumstances. They are more than content with the status quo and have no interest in changing anything. Then there are the young riders who have to look after themselves and often become victims of wrong methods such as the Rollkur. It is for me no surprise to see more and more pictures and videos that show the Lipizzan horses in the Rollkur position. Sporadic guidance and time pressure are the main reasons that the horses and the riders can no longer be trained as they should be.

ProfPferd: Does the Spanish Riding School really have a Rollkur problem?

Krzisch: The Rollkur is a problem in several ways. First and foremost it goes against the nature of the horse and has no place in Classical Horsemanship. The Classical Art of Riding should bring out the natural talent of the equine student to the highest possible level. When

you watch the young stallions in Piber on the pasture, you will see flying changes, Passage, half pirouettes and the beginning of air movements. All that is *classical*, providing the trainer with enough *material* to cultivate and improve those natural movements. A horse that is forced to make eight or ten jumps in the Courbette, has to sit down or lie down, is a product of Circus training that has nothing to do with Classical training. In the Rollkur System, the horse's head and neck is over-flexed and the horse's nose is pulled down to his chest. A completely unnatural way of going after one has learned that the head and the neck serve the horse as balancing beams. The Classical School discovered that the horse is best balanced when it carries its head two finger's width in front of the vertical. Fortunately, this fact seems to have been re-discovered in the competition world but seems to be forgotten at the Spanish Riding School.

There can be exceptions to the rules, for example, when a horse has the tendency to lift his head up in a pirouette or during a transition from Piaffe to Passage or on a lower level from trot to canter or from a standstill to walk. When the horse lifts his head, then it drops the back and can no longer step under. As a trainer, I would try to bring the horse slightly behind the vertical but only in that moment for an instant so that the horse learns it can move forward without lifting the head. That way the horse will use his back that should swing and help the hind legs to step under. Only under those circumstances can I accept bringing the horse's head slightly behind the vertical.

What I cannot accept is the kind of Rollkur where the horse is constrained in an unnatural frame that not only looks ugly but borders on cruelty. Unfortunately, this punishing practice had made its entrance into the Spanish Riding School. This disgrace has been confirmed by many photos and videos. If Mrs. Gürtler calls those photos "*snap shots*" and Mr. Dobretsberger calls them "*stretching exercises*", then I consider this to be such a lie which leaves me speechless. You can say things like that to a layman but anybody who knows a little about riding and training knows what is going on and what is being done to the horses.



It is a fact that a few riders do practice with the Rollkur, which the younger riders witness and imitate. I looked at a few pictures of a horse jumping the Capriole consistently above the

bit, so the Bereiter forced the horse way behind the vertical in the hopes of fixing the problem. Right there one can detect the inexperience of the Bereiter, because his actions will lead to nothing. If I train a horse today and ride a half-pass in which the horse is constantly above the bit, I am confronted with the same problem but elect to make a transition to the WALK, get the horse on the bit and move on,. That shows that a trainer must be able to fix a problem within the movement in order to be successful. It is a vicious circle.

It becomes apparent that none of the more experienced riders would say to a younger rider: *"What you are doing here leads to nothing. There is another solution."*

This type of help evidently no longer exists and if it does, then not often enough. In the past we always sat down together after a performance and discussed what was good and what was not so good and how things could be improved. We had an exercise evaluation, we were ONE TEAM. All that is gone today and I hear over and over again that most of the Bereiters miss those times. Today, after a performance everybody changes and rushes away, the team spirit is missing. And that I blame on Mrs. Gürtler who destroyed the team spirit and who demotivated the staff. In the past, for example, if somebody knew something a little better than another guy, like how to teach well, he could take the load off of others who might be better at training. We always helped each other, we all were equal. Because I rode the Solo, I was not better than the others, I just was lucky to have a super horse. If somebody made fun about one of us, he made fun of all of us.

ProPferd: So One for All and All for ONE.

Krzisch: It really was like that. There was an unwritten code and every one of the Bereiters identified himself with the School. It hurt me deeply what happened to the Institute, today I am handling it better. You can imagine how I felt when I was called into the office to be told *"Krzisch, you are terminated"* and this after 45 years of Service, like turning off a light. I had to leave all my horses behind in an instant, horses that had been my partners for over 10, 15 and sometimes 20 years; they were my family.

One was forced to watch the School going down the drain. What bothers me quite a bit is the fact that none of the politicians in charge found it worth the trouble to listen to a second opinion. They all had only one ear for Mrs. Gürtler who stressed how wonderful and super everything was. We the riders who worked for 40 years in the School were never heard.

The uniqueness of the Institute was having 70 superbly trained horses, the best riders, a place where one could learn how to ride. The entire world could profit from our knowledge and many came looking for help with certain training problems.

I owe the School everything, all that I know, all that I can do, and actually my job should be to pass all that on to a new Bereiter generation within the school and not to outsiders. Unfortunately I do not have that possibility any more. If I can't help the School from the inside, I will not stop trying to do something for the School from the outside.

ProPferd: Thank you very much for the Interview.

THE PERSON

Klaus Krzisch was born July 23, 1950 in Wiener Neustadt. He entered the Spanish Riding School in September of 1964 as ELEVE and went through the hierarchy of that traditional Institute. He was promoted to Assistant Rider in 1970, to Bereiter in 1980 and to Chief Rider in 1990. His Solo Performances on his favorite horse, Siglavy Mantua remain unforgettable. Klaus trained the stallion and rode him for 15 years, from 1990 to 2005 in the performances. During a 2005 visit to the USA, Mantua showed his last Solo Performance at the age of 27 years in the best of health. After Arthur Kotta's retirement in March of 2003, Klaus was put in charge of the training with the two other Chief Riders, Johann Riegler and Wolfgang Eder. In March of 2006, Klaus Krzisch was officially promoted to First Chief Rider. It was the crowning of his career which, only a few years later, came to an abrupt end. On October 2009 under the pretext of being disobedient, disciplinary actions were taken against Klaus who was fired from his post by Elisabeth Gürtler, the new manager of the School. After numerous Court appearances and thorough investigations, Klaus was found not guilty but was nevertheless forced into retirement in 2013. Klaus again went to Court and won his case and had to be put back on the payroll of the Spanish Riding School but was not allowed to work. On July 2015 Klaus reached his legal retirement age and is today one of the most sought-after international Dressage trainers.

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