

PURE PROFESSIONAL



It was inspirational, it was riveting, it was motivational, it was the sport/art of dressage at its finest - it was Lingen 2004!

The last big CDI before the Olympic Games in Athens took place in Lingen, Germany, August 5 - 8. For a dressage lover like myself, it was totally perfect. The weather was hot, the competition - hotter! As in previous years the venue was as good as it gets - wonderful exhibits, great food, an appreciative audience, a highly professional management team, lots of good sponsors and a lively program from morning til night.

I decided to skip the biggest show of the year, Aachen, because of the five and one half hour drive (each way) and because I knew Lingen would be great and it is only three hours from my home base in Hamburg. I already knew that the Americans, the Danes, the Spanish and some of the best riders from Germany and Holland would be there so I was really looking forward to a good show, but the experience was far better than I could have hoped for. We have a saying in America, 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. but one can be the beholder from a seat 100 meters from the performers, or one can have a seat 'front row-center stage', which is what

happened on Saturday in Lingen for me and my two working students. I knew we would get to see all the Americans because the Special, (the Grand Prix for that tour was won by Lisa Wilcox on Friday) would start at 1:30 and the Grand Prix for the Kur on Sunday started right after that. After a quick check-in with show secretary, Martina Jennisen, we took our seats on the 'fifty yard line' and waited for the 'kick-off'. If I described every ride it would take too long and lose the theme of this letter, so I will refer readers to the attached result list for a detailed account of the two classes on Saturday August 7th.

I must first of all say how very proud we can be of our American riders. No matter how long Lisa lives in Germany she is still very much an American girl, and her American dream just happens to have been played out here in the "old country". Robert amazes me with his ability to comeback again and again, with the benefit of even more experience and expertise. Gunther and Stefan are as good as our professionals get and they did us proud, once again. Leslie has hung onto her dreams since she was a Junior and only gets better with age. They all did their best - and we can all be grateful to their sponsors and their coach, Klaus Balkenhol, for their fine performance not only at Lingen, but all the shows leading up to the Games.

So patriotism aside, what made Lingen so special for me was the up-close and personal view of some of the best riders in the world trying to win. What makes Lingen exceptionally challenging for the riders is exactly what makes it so good for the spectators - the audience is only a few yards from the ring! The stands were so close to the judges boxes, I could almost see the test sheets. If I had gone down a few rows, I could have heard the scores for the movements. The audience at Lingen usually includes unruly children blowing whistles, dropping bottles and stomping up and down the isles. This kind of environment produces some very interesting moments, some of which riders would rather forget, and fortunately or unfortunately, judges tend to overlook.

Everyone knows that horses have a mind of their own, and despite our careful planning and preparation, tend to revert to their "horseness" under pressure, meaning, whatever problems they present when they feel pressured is going to be amplified in a show situation like Lingen. Having ridden there I can feel sympathy for the riders, but from my perspective as a rider and the luxury of being a spectator, I have to say it was fascinating. Horses got spooky, balky, strong, goofy, stiff and stupid; they lost impulsion, bend, activity, throughness and correctness of gait. When that happens to a medium level horse, it is sometimes hard to see, when it happens to a Grand Prix horse, it is very obvious. They piaffe 12 to 15 steps on the spot , or they don't. They do the zig-zag with the correct count, or they don't. They do 15 one-tempis, or they don't. What was clear in Lingen is that even the best, even the Olympic best, have to cope

with mistakes and problems. To me, Lingen will be unforgettable because I was able to see how some very top experts handled mistakes and problems.

I was most interested to see how Relevant would perform in his second outing in almost six months, and had all my fingers and toes crossed as they approached the piaffe out of the walk. Relevant started out a little hesitant in his rhythm and proceeded to get lower and lower behind with every step and when he started to back up slightly, I stopped breathing - but Lisa being the pro that she has become, gave him just the right amount of encouragement and he settled back down and finished the piaffe and passage tour without a hitch. Her last piaffe on the center-line was wonderful and she ended up with a good score and placed 6th.

It was announced before her ride with Royal Diamond in the Grand Prix for the Kur that it had been decided that she would be on the American squad for Athens, we can all be thankful that this young woman with nerves of steel and the heart of a champion is on our side! However, her day was not over and RD decided he didn't really like the party and he just might not want to play. Well, Lisa dug deep and gave him a ride full of determination and power, it was an admirable performance and it earned her a 7th place in the Kur tour.

Another horse who didn't seem as willing as I've seen him in the past was G.Crack, Anky van Grunsven's second horse. He had a resistant moment in the first piaffe that happened so fast that had you blinked, you would have missed it. He pushed his neck and head up like he was trying to take the rein out of her hand but she reacted so fast with such a strong, subtle leg aid that he never even lost his rhythm. The rest of her go was the most forward I have ever see her ride. She never let him think about anything but her leg, her seat and get ready for the next thing because it's coming right up!

And then there was the elegant and effective German, Hubertus Schmidt, who had already had a lovely, polished performance on Pretender in the Special, placing second, (and should have won but that's another story) who then presented his horse for the Kur, Alcatraz. Whoever named this horse must have had some insight into his temperament because he was definitely different.

He was so strong that I think Hubertus must have longer arms after riding him. It was the end of a long, hot day and this man had an F14 between his legs! I have gotten used to his effortless performances on his mare, Wansuela Suerte, and seeing him on Alcatraz was a fantastic example of a great professional rider doing his job, which means he can ride all types of horses and get the absolute best out of each one. Hubertus took all the power that horse was bursting with and channeled into a 68+% and 6th place - amazing!

The list of riders at Lingen included many famous and for me, some new names. I had only heard about the Danish team Rudolf Zeilinger has developed but what he has accomplished is truly astonishing. We will be hard pressed to beat them in Athens.

Even though I won't be going to Greece, I feel that I know many of the competitors personally after the Lingen Show. Now that I have seen so many of the pairs that will be competing in there, I will be checking my computer anxiously to see what happens.

It is fun recalling my experience at Lingen. I'm sure many people wonder why I moved to Germany 3 year ago and why I am still here...hopefully this letter expresses one of the reasons.

So Good Luck America - we've got a chance for a medal, but it won't be easy!

Kamila