



How They Trot High

Why we breed for trot. Why we judge the trot. Why we train the trot: Part Two

By Stephen Kinney

“Throughout the whole training of the horse...the trot plays the most important role in the work.”

Col. Alois Podhajsky

The Complete Training of Horse and Rider

Classical Horsemanship. Col. Alois Podhajsky was the one-time head rider of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna and his classic book was an effort to write down and codify the training methods of that institution which, unlike any other, preserved the high school traditions of classical (as opposed to Olympic) dressage.

As mentioned in the last article in this series, we do not have an

objective measure of athletic prowess in some equine disciplines, the way we do in jumping and racing. Being clear over jumps or first across the finish line brooks no argument of who’s the best! Secretariat’s 32-horse length finish of the 1973 Preakness will remain a bellwether for the Thoroughbred breed and the racing sport.

In dressage and in the disciplines of the modern day show ring, “the best” must be evaluated through a subjective standard, much as is the case with figure skating or ballroom dancing. There are traditions. There are rights and wrongs. There is good form and bad form. And, over the generations, barriers are smashed as new extremes become the norm. But all this is only observed by the trained eye of a judge, a trainer, or a breeder—not evaluated by an objective measure.

Podhajsky gives a rather interesting standard for sub-jjective judging: Athleticism in performance horse, he suggests, is defined as a

horse’s ability to use all joints and all muscles of its body equally.

What does this mean for those of us who champion the park, English pleasure, fine harness disciplines?

If we go back to the last issue, part one discussion (“Channeling Gladys Brown Edwards,” *View From The Ingate*, August 2012) we learned that “efficiency” in trotting horses means that animals bend their knees and fold their joints when trotting.

We know that Secretariat was more athletic than other race horses. He finished a race with more than 30 lengths between him and the next fastest runner. His record has never been broken. It is an objective standard.

The recent summer Olympic games were filled with commentary on whether Michael Phelps was the “greatest” Olympian of all times with his 20-plus medals. His victories were in timed events and he is, on many levels, a record breaker, an extreme physical being providing an obvious objective and measurable standard of athleticism.

So how do we, in the subjective sports, quantify athleticism? In the 1990s Elvis Stojko became the first figure skater to successfully land in competition quadruple combination jumps. Was that “more athletic” than the heretofore traditional triple jumps? I think so.

Let’s note that more is not always better. It is only an advancement over what came before when it is achieved with adherence to form and function, to efficiency in use of muscles and limbs, and to a rational standard of athleticism.

So how do we categorize athleticism in equine disciplines from park saddle to dressage?

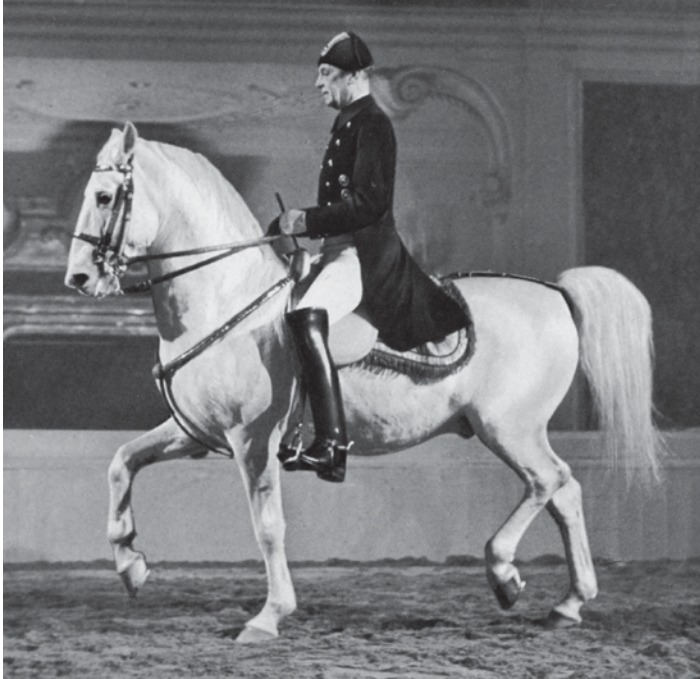
As a young equine enthusiast with aspirations to being a horse trainer, the one book that influenced me the most was Podhajsky’s *The Complete Training Of Horse And Rider in the Principles of*



Above: In the 1990s the Canadian skater Elvis Stojko became the first to land a quadruple combination jump in competition, which suggests that with the aid of genetics, nutrition, medicine and determination athletic prowess advances through the generations. Hence we invoke an Elvis Stojko rule: In athletics more is more! Photo provided by Skate Canada Archives.



View from the Ingate



Does one of these horses, both shown in the slow, hesitant, collected trot know as passage, seem more athletic than the other? One shows Podhajsky himself on a Lipizzaner in the 1960s; the other shows the extreme motion of the dressage horse of the moment, Moorlands Totilas, ridden by Edward Gal. More is more!

And the Morgan is a trotting breed and the saddle seat, fine harness traditions, developed in America around these breeds, place weighted emphasis on trotting ability. So, in these disciplines we want to see horses trot with greatest efficiency (following Gladys Brown Edward's illustrations) and we would tend to award points toward athleticism to horses who use all their joints and all their muscles equally (following Podhajsky).

And I'd like to posit that, without ever consciously referencing either of these authors, this is what the best and most knowledgeable of saddle seat trainers, show ring judges, and show horse breeders are doing subjectively as they practice their respective arts.

When you go to a judge and say, "Why didn't you pin my horse, he trotted so high above level?" and the judge rightly responds, "Because he hits his elbows with his heels," that judge is using a fairly standardized criticism of a trotting horse. The same if the judge were to say, "Because the horse landed on its heels." Again a fair, rightful, and standardized assessment.

Why "fair, rightful, and standardized"? Because, as you will have discerned by now the judge is describing an inefficiency, in the words of Gladys Brown Edward, or a failure of athleticism, as defined by Podhajsky. The horse that lands on its heel is a goosestepper and we've already discussed how this is an inefficient way for a trotting horse to cover ground.

The same can be said of the horse that is hitting its elbows with its heels. It is an extreme of motion that is wasted and aberrant. Why? Because the horse's flight of hoof is limiting its efficiency

in covering ground. And it is an unequal use of musculature and skeleton, an extreme of flexion and a failure of extension. It's labored and ground-pounding, rather than light and easy.

But let's, for the moment, go back to an earlier question. Was Elvis Stojko, in landing a quadruple combination (which have now become a gold standard of figure skating world competition) doing something more athletic than earlier skaters who could merely land a triple? I believe so, don't you? He stretched his body to a higher demand and accomplished something that had never been done in the history of his sport. It was and is an extreme use of all the muscles and joints of his body. He was a figure skating Secretariat. Wasn't he?

So is a horse that trots higher more athletic than one that doesn't? I think so, too. As long as form is correct, and the muscles and joints are not taxed in an aberrant way, then setting new extremes is... well, setting new extremes of athleticism.

This is demonstrable in the sport of Olympic dressage where extremes of extension at the trot and elevation at the passage have now surpassed what was ever thought possible a few generations ago. Training, breeding, feeding, conditioning and veterinary care have all conspired to heighten the art and increase athleticism. (Like the extreme of the park horse, the new dressage horse has its detractors, too, by the way. But that doesn't stop athletes from trying to achieve more and crowds from going wild over these accomplishments.)

It is also demonstrable in our Morgan breed that park and



View from the Ingate



The range of motion on these three contemporary park horses was unthinkable to Morgan judges, trainers and breeders in, let's say, the 1960s & '70s. But, as the "Elvis Stojko Rule" suggests, extremes of athleticism progress through the generations. Horsemen never stop breeding and training for heights of action and animation never before accomplished. Represented are Dragonsmeade Icon and Iann Fu Longenecker; Stand And Deliver and Tara Good; Queen's Soul Mate and David Rand. Photos © Howard Schatzberg & Shane Shiflet.

pleasure horses have moved forward over the generations to a new extreme. We illustrate this article with three contemporary park saddle horses whose extremes of motion could not have been equaled by horses of, say, the 1960s. But their abilities are the stuff of dreams of trainers, and judges, and breeders, and exhibitors—all of whom aspire to extremes in the all-important gait: the trot.

I am going to dare to say it here that more is not only more, but, provided form is taken into account, more can also be better." ■

In future articles in this series we will examine flight of hoof, flexion of hind leg joints and suspension and how these all contribute to the magnificence of the trot that we witness in the contemporary Morgan breed.

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