

► BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

JEREMY STEINBERG

Combining Art, Tradition And Technical Form

*Our columnist
contemplates what
makes—and keeps—his
sport an expression of
art.*

I watched a documentary on the American Ballet Theatre the other day and was blown away. It should be required viewing for any dressage rider, as it was a history lesson about a physical art that nearly mimics that of dressage. The dancing in the documentary was used as a backdrop to keep you connected to the story being told, and, although beautiful in its own right, it only played a small role in the film relative to its historical points.

The historical evolution that has happened to the dance, the origins, the critics, the innovators and the time-tested tradition is so similar to dressage. Both are European-based and have been influenced by many other countries and many different people over time.

In order to help keep dressage part of our culture and in the limited mainstream that it is, these correlations in our day-to-day lives should be noted and studied.

One of the most interesting things brought up in the film is the use of repetitive form in regard to movements a ballet dancer makes. All movements have been performed more or less unchanged for nearly 500 years.

With each dancer, each new generation and with each change of style, the stance at the barre, the movements, the



Our columnist explores the similarities between dressage and ballet and how both are being preserved and re-interpreted. LAMBADA/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM PHOTO

leaps, have all been the same regardless of era, generation or style of the dancer. Much like dressage, year in and out, various styles of horses come and go; new body types and movers are created; new stylistic approaches are taken by new trainers or instructors, but in the end, the movements fundamentally remain the same. Or do they?

A Fleeting Pleasure

Dressage, like ballet, has a mostly ephemeral quality for the performer

and the spectator. It's only visually or physically enjoyed for a very short period of time, and then it's gone. The feeling that we get when something is performed well is gone almost as fast as it happens. We do have video to go back and watch, but in the video translation, much of the magic is lost.

Look at an old VHS tape and the grainy quality of the film. In 10 years, DVD quality will feel the same, as will high definition television, all replaced by a greater technology that

leaves the “old” videos or images outdated.

What we create in dressage, like in ballet, can't be physically captured or tangibly grasped, and therefore in its ephemeral and short-lived quality, the paradigm is continually shifting.

We have books and videos and ways of recording the traditions. But we also have a form of art that has outlasted its origins and has outlived its usefulness and the reasons for its existence.

Ballet was brought into the mainstream in the courts of King Louis XIV in France as entertainment. That court lifestyle no longer exists, but ballet remains in play around the world.

The art form of dressage, which came about after its initial military employ, is also dying off. It was mostly looked at as an imperialistic (and outdated) art form much like the ballet. Look at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, whose traditions hold close to those original grand and imperialistic traditions. Not only the dress and costume, but also the style of horse and movements performed look old-fashioned compared to that of the modern world.

Where would, or even how would, that style fit into today's modern riding and culture? Why keep alive such an old-fashioned system? Why is the pomp and circumstance of the production, along with the grandeur, almost as important as the performance itself?

Much like in dressage, the dancer is still wearing the same outfits and clothing as they did hundreds of years ago with little to no change except that of better quality fabrics. Why are both still dressed the same?

The living art requires as much focus on the traditional as possible in order to keep its roots pure, and the outfit is just one of those parts. The leaps, the movements, the dances themselves, much like a shoulder-in or half-pass, piaffe or flying change, are no different. We must hold onto the tradition of correctness as the shifts around us lend toward undesirable adaptations. If we're not careful, the face of the art may change if we do not keep true to the origins.

Passing The Art Along

These arts are passed down by any means necessary, which in most cases is verbal, as much of folklore and legend is, along with writings and whatever else can be used as a historical marker. The movements are hopefully performed in a way in which the audience is so caught up in the moment, enthralled by the art, that the recollection afterward becomes its own sort of mythology.

If a rider, as a ballet dancer, is educated, well-versed and well-schooled in his form, we know he's been handed down a verbal history of dressage based on that of his predecessors or educators. With each rider comes additional input and study, which in turn also changes its history. In a way, and to steal a line from the documentary, every time a rider rides, he is, in a sense, channeling the whole history of dressage. If done well, this is then passed down to another group of people who take it in and hold on to this ephemeral art as best they can until it has slipped through the cracks in their mind and becomes the legend and lore that is passed on to others.

Again, to quote the documentary, but use dressage terms, every time you watch a great ride, it mimics the arc of life. It has a beginning, it has a middle, and it has an end, and then it's gone. That's what a good ride does. It marks the passage of time. It defines time. I think part of what makes dressage so powerful is that you can't hold onto it the same way you can't hold onto life. You have no power to own it or contain it. It's here, and then it's gone.

The Americanization Of Dressage

The documentary points out that when first introduced in the United States, ballet, like dressage, was everything America hated. It had an aristocracy and etiquette that we as Americans have fought hard against; yet strangely, it was also everything America wanted.

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We yearned at the time for European culture, loved the sensual nature of the Europeans, and have always been intrigued by their history. As Americans often do, we embraced this new idea, this new dance so to speak, and we added our own flair and changed it; we did what Americans do best and Americanized it. We have added color, spark, a love for our horses as pets. We added dialogue to communication, talk of biomechanics and research and, in turn, have done our fair share in revolutionizing the dressage world.

Ballet was no exception to this Americanization. You had people like George Balanchine who came in with a European education and upbringing but an American style and revolutionized the dance through minimalism, simplicity and strictness to form and form alone. His process was about perfecting the dance and technique. He didn't want to see the dancers express themselves; he wanted to see less thinking, less ego and just dancing. In his eyes, dance had nothing to do with acting and everything to do with being. If you could get rid of yourself, your ego and your own ideas, and perfect the technique and become one with the dance, you became something greater.

Balanchine sounds like so many riding instructors from a gilded and somewhat forgotten age in our own riding culture. His European roots and training, combined with his Americanized life and freedom, created a perfect storm of genius during his tenure

“Are we being led by virtuosos, or are we being led by the masses?”

at the New York City Ballet. During that time, his impact on Americans, on ballet and the legacy he left behind is one that Americans to this day are still emulating.

Similarly, many riding instructors also have a very European base of training and have brought that to the United States. They've shared those traditions with Americans, and we in turn have incorporated that into what we do, used them and changed them to suit as needed. In doing that, we've had our own impact on the art.

Seeking The Magic

Through continual practice of the form, repetitive actions, striving for perfection, of ways of moving one's body or horse's body, we get lost in the technique and the dance and lose our egos to the practice. When it happens, the passage of time changes; we are lost in the moment, and we find ourselves yearning for another pass or attempt at that magical moment. Our daily work and rehearsing can become somewhat pedestrian to the outside observer with an untrained eye. They see the same movements and actions being taken and used, the same circles and figures being made and no direct or instant result, generally speaking.

To the trained eye, one sees the effortless nature of something that is extremely difficult. They see the months and years of practice that have gone into producing art that looks free and unencumbered.

Much like ballet, the untrained eye views it as boring, repetitive or unexciting. The trained eye looks at it with wonder and awe at how the human body can move in a way that seems to defy gravity. How many times have you seen a horse work in a way where you think the laws of nature are ceasing to exist? When you see the communication between horse and rider become so succinct that it becomes an invis-

ible dialogue? The crossing of that threshold is where the sport or the activity transforms to art.

It is much like when you see a dancer leap, and it looks as if he'll never touch the ground, or when you see a pas de deux in ballet where the dancers move so quickly and smoothly, communicating without visible actions or signals and working off the slightest touch of their partner in a way where they start to become one entity performing a dance for two. Ballet becomes artistic when the same borders are crossed. It's magic, and it is perfection.

In dressage we don't look at the individual movements themselves and grade them on a scale of not performed to "perfection." We say instead "excellent" for the highest mark, but in the end, there *is* the possibility for perfection. It's not in the individual movements themselves; it's in the performance as a whole.

Perfection in dressage happens when you take the observer to the world of art, and the performance as a whole leaves you breathless. When you can't find the delineation between where the horse ends and the rider begins. When you can't see the aids, and you think the laws of physics are being broken right in front of your eyes.

Identifying The Virtuosos

We talk often in the dressage community about masters, but instead, maybe we should be speaking of virtuosos: people who have seamlessly, time and time again, crossed that line and can turn the living, breathing horse into a fleeting art that lasts only for a moment but is reproduced by the individual time and time again on different canvasses and with different animals. These virtuosos shape the sport, and we should be looking to them for guidance as the future progresses around us.

When we look at the Fédération Equestre Internationale or to top trainers who rule and govern the sport we are in, do we look to their virtuosic nature, or do we look toward medals and credentials that are won for feats that don't take into account the art of the sport or their own individual nature as an artist? Are we being led by "master" horsemen who by any means necessary can train a horse to Grand Prix, or are we looking to the gifted who do it with a style that blends the tradition with the modern and the sport with the art? Are the critical basing their opinion on that of an artistic eye or that of a technical? Can the leaders of our sport work like a Balanchine at creating such technically correct pieces of work that the artist gets lost and the artistic threshold gets crossed? Are we forgetting the technical performance when focusing on the art and letting go of basic principles of form and physics that have guided the sport for hundreds of years?

Balanchine was a master at removing the ego from the work. By removing all the majesty with his focus on the dance, the technique and the correctness, he created art that was light-years different than anything else at the time. He looked beyond the art the heart feels or the eye sees and wanted the dancer to experience bodily movement perfection in a way where one could get lost in themselves during a performance because of their laser focus on technique; they'd stop thinking and lose the world around them. His idea was transcendence.

These days, I see so many horses and riders who have achieved an artistic quality about their work, but they often lose the technique to it. Others have the technical aspect so strongly running through their veins that they lose the artistic nature of the genre. The master or virtuoso can combine the two and make it look effortless and can do it again and again. The moment a horse and rider enters an arena, you have a story. What is the story they are telling? Are you enthralled by the narrative?

Ballet is a dying art if not an already dead one. It is kept alive by those who continue to perform and strive for that moment of ephemeral perfection.

We do the same in dressage. We need to look to those who can work while recognizing the roots, yet still reinvent the form. Ask yourself how you see dressage and what about it holds you breathlessly bound to its beauty. Ask yourself who in your world of riding brings that nature to life and who at our federations, in our clubs and within the FEI are holding to the standard of the artistic threshold being crossed by the technical perfection that makes it look effortless. Are we being led by virtuosos, or are we being led by the masses?

"Someone once said to me, 'Beauty can save the world.' What a great responsibility we have on our shoulders."

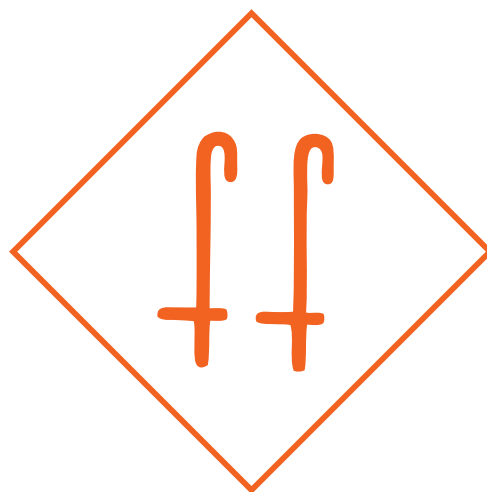
—Natalia Makarova



COURTESY FRASER PHOTO

JEREMY STEINBERG

Jeremy Steinberg was the U.S. Equestrian Federation Youth Coach from 2010-2014. He's a well-known rider, trainer and competitor based out of Del Mar, Calif. He's also a selector for the Developing Horse Program and one of five clinicians who works with the U.S. Dressage Federation in its Platinum Performance/USDF junior and young rider clinic series. He worked with longtime friend and mentor Dietrich von Hopffgarten extensively until his passing in 2004. Jeremy has trained and shown through the Grand Prix level. He now runs a small "boutique"-type training business and travels the country giving clinics. More information can be found at steinbergdressage.com.



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