

▶ BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

JEREMY STEINBERG

The Best And Worst Of The Year Gone By

Our columnist looks back at the things that inspired and discouraged him over the past year.

When I think about the state of affairs for dressage, I see many things I love and many I don't. Here's what was trending in my mind in regard to last year's national and global sport:

2014 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games – Pet Peeve

After working the 2010 WEG in Kentucky and knowing many of the volunteers and organizers I would have to put WEG in the pet peeve category.

The championship has reached a point of no return in regard to its size. The FEI has created a monster, too big of a championship to have any romance left.

The transportation and accommodation systems of the last two host cities couldn't handle the burden. The huge crowds and lines make things like bathroom breaks or finding food an arduous task, and the overall experience suffers.

The costs and time away doesn't seem to be worth the fuss. Gone are the days of the one-discipline World Championships where you could tour the city, enjoy the sites, have a vacation and enjoy the horses.

I'd really like to see the clock turned back to the time when being at a WEG was intimate, when you could enjoy yourself and take a vacation and spend

a few fantastic days immersed in your favorite discipline. WEG is becoming too much work to see as a spectator in an age where instant streaming allows us to watch from our own living rooms, without the crowds or lines, and save our money for real vacations. FEI, it's time to rethink the size of the WEG and bring back the romance.

The FEI Rule Book – Pet Peeve

I don't understand why such a document is written but then not adhered to. I also don't understand why more people don't actually read it. You wouldn't believe how many people I ask about a rule, and they have no idea. Not

just little things either; we're sometimes talking big-ticket items.

Right at the beginning of the dressage rule book for example, article 416 "Impulsion and Submission" states in section 2:

Submission does not mean subordination, but an obedience revealing its presence by a constant attention, willingness and confidence in the whole behavior of the Horse as well as by the harmony, lightness and ease it is displaying in the execution of the different movements.

The degree of the submission is also demonstrated by the way the Horse accepts the bit, with light and soft contact and a supple poll. Resistance to or evasion of the Athlete's hand, being either "above the



Jeremy Steinberg declared Damon Hill's passage "far surpasses anything else on the world stage. [He] does it with his nose in front of the vertical and his poll the highest point—and on top of it all, he makes it look easy." LISA SLADE PHOTO

bit” or “behind the bit” demonstrate lack of submission. The main contact with the Horse’s mouth must be through the snaffle bit.

The degree of submission is also demonstrated by the way the horse accepts contact with the bit? How many international-level horses do you see getting high scores who, under the rule of needing to show light and soft contact and a supple poll, actually do so? How many show evasion above or behind the bit? And I also have to ask you, how many riders in Olympic Games or World Championships do you see ride with the main contact on the horse’s mouth through the snaffle? How many open or overactive mouths do you see? How many curb bits rotated beyond 45 degrees with a tension on them equal to the snaffle rein? Are these faults getting marked down?

I’m going to take exception as well to people saying that it’s OK when the horses go behind the vertical for a “moment in time.” Nowhere in the rule book can I find acceptance of that idea. In Article 417 “Collection” it states:

At the moment the Athlete applies his aids to obtain a momentary and passing collecting effect, the head may become more or less vertical.

Meaning that the horse’s nose may meet the vertical line, but it doesn’t say anything about going behind the vertical. In every movement description in the rule book, the FEI makes note to say the horse should be “on the bit,” which is described in Article 401 section 5 and goes on to say:

In all the work, even at the halt, the Horse must be “on the bit”. A Horse is said to be “on the bit” when the neck is more or less raised and arched according to the stage of training and the extension or collection of the pace, accepting the bridle with a light and consistent soft submissive contact. The head should remain in a steady position, as a rule slightly in front of the vertical, with a supple poll as the highest point of the neck, and no resistance should be offered to the Athlete.

I wish more people would either read the rulebook, or if not, we should just toss it aside. It seems silly in the world of ever growing transparency, instant streaming and re-playable video that we aren’t adhering to a defined set of rules

“Is it possible that the old idea of needing to be ‘known’ by the judges could be a thing of the past? I hope it is.”

that govern the movements. Don’t even get me started on what it says about riders’ use and effect of the aids, as there are so few riders today who actually sit as well as the rule describes, yet get scores stating otherwise.

Laura Graves – Like

I’m really enjoying Laura’s success. I enjoy seeing someone come in and prove that you don’t have to be “known” to be scored well. She came into WEG as a relative unknown and beat many world-class, well-known combinations in her first international team event. The judges judged what they saw, and I have to say to them, *thank you*. Both you and Laura have given the world a spark of inspiration that these things are imaginable.

Is it possible that the old idea of needing to be “known” by the judges could be a thing of the past? I hope it is. In the meantime, Laura, thank you for riding well. Thank you for sitting quietly. Thank you for presenting a picture of elegance and grace as well as harmony and togetherness. You have done a greater good for your sport, and it has been noticed!

Charlotte Dujardin’s Mistakes At Aachen – Pet Peeve

I heard a lot of negatives about her rides from Aachen (Germany) and a lot of people saying, “She’s beatable.” One bad weekend does not make or break a champion. She had a bad show. Everyone does eventually. These horses and riders are not gods or machines. Be respectful and forgiving of the good and the bad days. You will have them as well.

Valegro – Like...mostly

I’m going to probably get flack for saying this, but something just does not sit well with me in regard to his frame.

I think he lacks longitudinal difference in regard to expanding and contracting throughout his work, and I sometimes think his poll is too low to keep in accordance to the FEI rules throughout some of his movements. That being said, it is my only negative, and it does not at all outweigh the good. The rest is all positive.

I love that he keeps getting better and better. I love that he looks easy and fun to ride. I love that he looks *safe*. He enjoys his work, he doesn’t stress, and he brings such a joy to the spectator that you want to ride him yourself.

Jaap Pot said once, “When you are judging, you have to ask yourself if you yourself would like to sit on that horse. When the horse looks enjoyable to ride, you have achieved the goal.” Valegro looks enjoyable to ride. Not all horses at that level look fun to ride.

I think the FEI’s wording in article 410 section 1 of the rule book under “Objects and General Principles of Dressage” is absolutely one of the dumbest things I’ve ever heard. Sorry FEI, but it is. I have always taken exception to the phrase “Happy Athlete.” I find it silly that an organization as respectable as the FEI would use terminology in its rule book to define the object and principles of dressage with a word that conveys an emotion that we’re unable to prove either exists in horses or if it does, is neither tangible, palpable or definable. It’s an emotion that we can feel, but not one we can easily define in a horse. I know very few riders who would say their horses are not happy, but many people who would disagree about that point. How do we agree on a “Happy Athlete”?

Needless to say, if ever there was a horse to show what a happy athlete is, Valegro would define the ideal. Every few years one comes up that gets the whole world cheering for it, and Valegro has done that.

Damon Hill – Like

I don't want to get involved in the discussion about Helen Langehanenberg losing the ride on the horse or that Ingrid Klimke actually trained him. I just want to point out that Damon Hill has done for me with passage, what Margit Otto Crepin's Corlandus did for me with canter pirouettes.

I think Damon Hill has a passage that stands out among a world of out-behind, hollow-backed grand passages. He far surpasses anything else on the world stage and does it with his nose in front of the vertical and his poll the highest point—and on top of it all, he makes it look easy. I know he has other flaws and bobbles, I'm just talking

about the one specific movement. I don't understand why this textbook ideal does not get pointed out more often. Damon Hill has a fan in me!

Canter Pirouettes – Pet Peeve

Article 413 section 6, tells us:

Aims of the pirouette and half-pirouette in canter: To demonstrate the willingness of the Horse to turn around the inside hind leg on a small radius, slightly bent in the direction of the turn while maintaining the activity and the clarity of the canter, the straightness and the balance before and after the figure and clear canter strides during the turn. In the pirouette or half-pirouette in canter, the Judges should be able to recognize a real canter

stride although the feet of the diagonal – inside hind leg, outside front leg – are not touching the ground simultaneously.

I take exception to the wording: “The judges should be able to recognize a real canter stride.” The wording does go on to say, “Although the feet of the diagonal are not touching the ground simultaneously.”

It's funny how it took slow motion video to prove what everyone suspected. Canter pirouettes are four beat. We have known this for years, and I don't think anyone thinks otherwise. The hard part for me to swallow is if you say that we should be able to recognize a real canter stride, and the FEI defines a real canter stride as a “three-beat pace” in article 405 section 1, why is it OK that so many international horses are showing canter pirouettes that are extreme four-beat? These slow and lurching pirouettes where there is no appearance of a real canter are getting high scores. Does the rule book say circus canter of forehand lurching up and down with a four-beat canter is acceptable and should be scored high as long as they are small?

If it's in the rules that they should show an appearance of a real canter, wouldn't that mean they would need to stay as close to three beats as possible? Wouldn't that mean that you would need a very good eye or even slow motion video to prove that it's not three beats? What does the appearance of a three-beat canter mean? Can we get more definition on this one, please?

I've seen many horses over the years show beautiful pirouettes with the appearance of a three-beat canter. Why are we accepting the ones that are so four beat as OK? If we're going to accept those, can the FEI please change the rules to help with my confusion?

If the goal of our work is to improve the quality of our horses' gaits, then why are smaller four-beat pirouettes better than slightly larger pirouettes that keep the appearance of a three-beat canter? I guess in this case, size does matter to the judges or FEI.

Isabell Werth And Bella Rose– Like

I find inspiration in Isabell. I've watched her work at home, at shows and seen her teach. She's accomplished so much



“She has a system that works and proves horses to the level time and time again,” said Jeremy Steinberg of Isabell Werth, shown aboard Bella Rose. “She still finds the love for what she is doing.” LISA SLADE PHOTO

on horses she's trained herself, and she loves what she does. I've seen her mature over the years and have really come to respect her above and beyond the rest of the dressage world.

I know she was brought up on drug charges a few times, and I have no tolerance for that, but honestly, at that level, she is not alone. She just got caught. I hate to say that about my own sport, but it's true. The track stars, the swimmers, the baseball players, the jumpers, the bicyclists, they all do it. There are very few who do it without some kind of enhancement, and even the ones who say they never do anything, I find it hard to believe. The pressure is too high, and the glory for winning is too much. That aside, Isabell has something I don't see in any other riders in her peer group. She keeps training horse after horse to that level. She keeps competing and keeps enjoying it.

I was living in Germany back in the mid-1990s, when Reiner Klimke wanted to make a bid for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics on Biotop and was looking to challenge the German Olympic Committee's ban on athletes over the age of 60. The riders in Germany were divided for him and against him, and it was a bit of a controversy. It didn't make sense to me to keep him from riding as he had done so much for the sport. Isabell said at a press conference, "If he gets the scores, why not let him ride?" It seemed like such a simple statement, but at the time they were challenging each other over the way she rode and worked her horses. She was respectful enough of his seniority that she made a point to say, "Even if he is old, if he scores better than the rest of us, why would you hold him back?" I remember the press room laughing nervously when she called him old, but she respected his riding.

Her tact has gotten more refined when it comes to being a spokesperson for international sport, and she's earned the respect of her peers. She has trained more horses than anyone else out there today, and she keeps doing it.

She deserves to be back on the map on a star horse again and be on the medal podium once again as an advocate for training. She has a system that

works and proves horses to the level time and time again. She's on her 12th or so horse at this level of competition, and I've seen Bella Rose bring tears of appreciation and astonishment to her eyes.

After all this time and after all those horses, all the controversy and all the joy, she still finds the love for what she's doing and is simply amazed by her horses still to this day. I'm happy for Isabell and excited to see Bella Rose in the future.

Shortening The Grand Prix – Pet Peeve

I remember the day and have ridden the test where the Grand Prix took more than 10 minutes, and there were two separate walk tours. There was a flying change in medium canter, and the zig zag had a whole other half-pass in it. The test was a test of training, endurance and submission as well as not leaving one stone unturned in regard to your horse's throughness and otherwise.

I understand the demand to make the sport more attractive, but it's hard to see something I love so much come to such a slow and seemingly painful demise. Hearing the FEI talk about removing the reinback from the Grand Prix is hard to take. They've already removed enough and seem to weigh flash and spectacular over submission and throughness. I'm stunned that if we want to shorten the test that we remove something that is the ultimate throughness and submission test and leave extensions.

I agree wholeheartedly with an editorial I read on *EuroDressage.com* last month about this exact thing. If there are three trot extensions and three piaffes in the Grand Prix and only one reinback, can't we remove one of those other things instead of the reinback? It does not take a science degree to know that repetitive trot extensions are harmful to your horse's overall soundness. Extended paces take their toll on our partners, and although they should be included as part of the package, they shouldn't be exploited.

Why would we remove a movement that has no detrimental effect on our horses' soundness and keep the ones that do? Why remove a movement that

proves good training and keep the ones that prove good genetics?

I guess again, I just don't understand the FEI. Maybe my place in the dressage world is better suited to living in my own self-imposed dressage exile where I don't mind or care what happens in the sport. It's getting harder and harder to agree with the decisions that are made for the greater good that keep encouraging the wrong ideals or principles.

Needless to say 2014 was full of good and bad. It's a year that has made me think. There have been fantastic ideas thrown around and ones that make me cringe. I love so many things about our sport, but there are also things that turn me off. I look to the Lauras, the Isabells, the Charlottes and the Valegros to keep me going.

Looking at 2015, I hope the FEI focuses more on the people who train and the horses that work and less on the money they can make. I hope they remember that we ride a competitive art form, and if they take away the art, all they are left with is another competitive venue where money, doping and power always rule. If the art or love of horses and training is lost, all is lost.

This year will bring its own successes and controversies, grand shows and disasters, and I look forward to all of them. Maybe we will see more happy athletes, more fresh faces, and more riders with a new joy and love for the sport that will renew the faith in all of us. 🐾

JEREMY STEINBERG

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