

Totilas and Rath in the warm up arena at Hagen, Germany.
Photo: Julia Rau



TOTO, TOO?

Recovering the Sense of Tact in Today's Dressage

By Kip Mistral



As if there was not already an ongoing maelstrom of controversy regarding the schism between FEI regulations and performance that is actually being not only tolerated but rewarded in high level international competition, on April 24, 2012, a “shot went around the world.”



"Toto" ridden by Matthias Alexander Rath. Photo: Julia Rau

Photographs by German equestrian photographer Julia Rau and a private video circulating widely throughout social media depict the charismatic black Grand Prix dressage stallion with whom the world has fallen in love—proud, spirited Totilas—being ridden by Matthias Alexander Rath in a very strong position of rollkur/hyperflexion/low deep round (LDR). A veritable inferno of public concern for his welfare and that of other performance horses is now ignited.

Rollkur and its other forms are used across the disciplines, though connected most prominently with dressage. Leveraging the bit, the rollkur rider physically and forcefully pulls the horse's chin behind the vertical plane, often right to the chest, and holds it there, often for long periods of time. It is claimed by proponents that the purpose of overbending the head/neck axis, in

training and pre-competition warmup, serves to supple the horse's neck and stretch the back. Once in the show ring, the head/neck axis is raised but still compressed in the bridle, resulting in a hollow back, hind legs trailing, and symptoms of stress such as drooling, teeth-grinding, tail-wringing and overprofuse sweating.

Chin pulled to chest, the horse can

see only the ground in front of him. With a sensitive horse reactive to show ring clamor, this posture may be advantageous since he may be less distracted by movement or objects that would appear in his normal visual field. So, it is frequently claimed by opponents to rollkur that this method is a means of dominating the horse mentally as well as physically.

So not to single out Rath...it's just that Totilas is the most recent in the long line of competition dressage horses who go on to win ridden hyperflexed to varying degrees, often showing stress, when they should be tension-free and the very picture of the "happy athlete." Or so say the FEI Dressage Event Rules for 2012.¹

The much-discussed FEI Article 401 which defines the "Object and General Principles of Dressage" begins with criteria Number 1, central to this discussion:

"The Perfect Dressage-Horse" of tomorrow

(... or maybe today?)??

permanent state
of submission

excellent,
strong rolled up
neck
with integrated
LDR-factor!!!

elevated,
wide paces!!!

passionate eye!!!

reduced circulation of blood
in the mouth,
avoids eyesores!!!

Specific feature:
minimum durability: 2 Years!!!

a wonderful numb horsemouth and
a solid hollow horseback will enable
the ambitious equestrian
to get a bodybuilder-shape
without extra training-lessons!!!

genetical wonder and beautiful look:
the caudal vertebra and tail muscles
stiffened to stop unaesthetic tail switching!!!

stronger skin with a
reduced circulation and
less sensibility in the
belly tissue enables a
dynamic use of spurs!!!

hindlegs tending
good prevention against
the front

backward -
pulling-off
shoes!!!

©C.B. Heatherway

Copyright Chrissie Brickwedde

The object of Dressage is the development of the Horse into a happy Athlete through harmonious education. As a result, it makes the Horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with the Athlete.

These qualities are demonstrated by:

- The freedom and regularity of the paces.
- The harmony, lightness and ease of the movements.
- The lightness of the forehand and the engagement of the hindquarters, originating from a lively impulsion.
- The acceptance of the bit, with submissiveness/throughness (Durchlässigkeit) without any tension or resistance.

These words create a pretty picture in the mind, but the sad fact is, the performance that often actually wins

is not a pretty picture, and is far from harmonious.

Lampooning is a time-honored way to make a point with ironic humor, and German Chrissie Brickwedde succeeds brilliantly with her cartoon "The Perfect Dressage Horse of Tomorrow," being shared enthusiastically all over the same social media.

Brickwedde writes "The inspiration to draw this cartoon was a discussion about the breeding of perfect dressage horses. So the question of what can be bred and what needs to be trained—I thought about the marketing of such a super-horse, and how an advertising slogan for just such a perfect dressage horse could look.

"It isn't easy to draw a lost sense of [equestrian] tact, and many people have criticized this depiction of a "show trot," because a trot cannot biomechanically be as exaggerated as the way it was drawn—but this

exaggeration was by pure intention. If it doesn't bother anyone that nowadays dressage horses are running like carriage horses with high front action but dangling hind legs, then this cartoon shouldn't really bother anyone either.

"Some people didn't understand the meaning of the cartoon and thought it was intended to be totally realistic. I hope that something like this will never be realistic! But our reality is, unfortunately, sometimes too close to this picture."²

But, lampooning aside, compare the cartoon with the horse's foreleg lowered to near-horizontal in your mind's eye, with the photographs of Totilas and Rath. And what is equestrian tact, anyway?

Czech-born Walter Zettl, or WAZ as he is affectionately known, spent his formative riding and competition years in Germany. As an accomplished master of classical dressage, a clinician, coach, and Olympic-level dressage trainer, WAZ

"Where force is used, there is force being awoken."

—Karl Jasper

Photo: Julia Rau



has no doubt about the definition of equestrian tact.

“Try to feel his mouth and follow it all the time. The horse will like your hands, and go confidently to the bit. The horse who gets tense and tight, perhaps backing away, is telling you he doesn’t trust your hands when you take up the reins. That is why you pick them up very slowly and quietly. [My teacher] Colonel Aust suggested that we put a pencil in our mouth and have one of our friends take the pencil in his hands and direct us with it. If you do this, then you will understand how invasive and frightening it may feel for a horse to have a bit inside his mouth. And the poor horses can get claustrophobic from the pressure of the saddle and girth.

“Remember how horses are by nature flight animals. When I shut the door for him to go forward, when I put him behind the vertical and behind the bit, when I pull his nose to his chest [rollkur], can you imagine how this flight animal must feel, whose instinct is to flee? He must feel that his soul is taken away from him.

“Horses are born with beautiful natural gaits, in wonderful balance between hind and front leg. But what people want to see is spectacular movement, with the front leg reaching out far beyond the plane of the face. And this means his hind legs have to stay behind to support him, or he will fall on his face. I call this a “leg-

mover”; this horse cannot be collected because his back is not a bridge between his front and back legs. Some people like this ‘spectacular’ movement, but I prefer to make the horse spectacular in the collection.”³

Well, OK...then by WAZ’s description both the cartoon horse and Totilas are “leg-movers”! This seems to be a bad thing in the view of classically trained equestrian professionals.

German Klaus Balkenhol, Olympic Gold Medalist, past trainer of the U.S. Dressage team, has been an outspoken critic of the rollkur method and petitioner against it.

In an open letter to the FEI before the FEI Round Table Conference held on February 9, 2010, during which a formal position for the FEI handling of rollkur/hyperflexion/LDR would be established, Balkenhol published a petition signed by many international dressage IL luminaries: [excerpt]⁴

“Those of us who have signed this letter wish to point out sharply that new or amended rules with regard to the accepted classical precepts of riding, which are contained in the guidelines written down in your Handbook, are absolutely superfluous and therefore unnecessary. These precepts, which the FEI has up until now felt obliged to uphold, are already fully developed, tried and tested! They are already recognized world-wide as authoritative, and as fair to the horse. Based on centuries of experience, they offer a stable and secure foundation even for today’s riding.

“No changes may be made that constitute a burden to the well-being of the horse, either physically or mentally. If you accept riding in hyperflexion as a permissible training method, you legitimize aggressive riding. We protest that in the strongest possible terms!”

Interestingly, two of those open letter signators in 2010 were Totilas’ current rider, Matthias Alexander Rath (German Champion 2009), and his father, Klaus-

Balancing Act: The Horse in Sport—An Irreconcilable Conflict?⁶

“Seldom seen is the rider who is thinking forward with her upper body and a ‘give’ of the hands. Instead, the desire to make a spectacle causes the rider to grip the reins tightly, with the horse’s neck raised in absolute elevation and a tense back with the front legs ‘thrashing’ out as a result. With these horses, the back is usually dropped and the activity of the hind end is completely lost. Dropping of the back behind the withers, or tightness in the lower neck region, builds up so much negative tension that the front legs fly out almost horizontally.

“It is almost inexplicable how such a development could occur with the FEI rules as the foundation, and it happens right in front of our very eyes! Where are the officials that should be standing against such developments that are so bad for the horse? The goal is to develop a correctly trained, happily moving horse that presents himself in his natural beauty and in



“What people want to see is spectacular movement, with the front leg reaching out far beyond the plane of the face. And this means his hind legs have to stay behind to support him, or he will fall on his face.”

— W.A. Zettl



Martin Rath (Trainer, member of the Dressage Committee of the German Olympic Committee).

Balkenhol holds this same position today, commenting simply, *“I don’t accept the rollkur or LDR method. This way of training damages the physical and mental health of the horse. This is my opinion after discussing this issue with different veterinarian professors. I am extremely concerned that often, people prefer the spectacular gaits instead of the nice, swinging [natural] movements. Fortunately, there are also some positive examples in the top sport—for example the top British dressage riders and horses. I am convinced that we will overcome this way of training that we see nowadays so often and which is really not suitable to the horse.”⁵*

German veterinarian Gerd Heuschmann has also long been known for his crusade against the practice of rollkur in horse training. He details the deleterious physiological effects of rollkur in his book

harmony with his rider. It contradicts every principal of classical teachings that horses should receive the highest scores despite being obviously tense with a swishing tail, grinding teeth, open mouth, resistant facial expression, and exhibiting hover trot steps.”

Heuschmann comments by email; *“It is hard to give a short comment of this incredible big issue. Totilas, in my eyes, is just a symptom of the whole sickness of the dressage world. In the last 30 years our competition system, produced by the organization, became almost perfect. The big problem of this is that now, there is a new generation of riders who just train to compete.*

“It should be the other way around. You should train your horse because you love your horse, and you love to ride, and you should compete when you have reached a certain next level to get a proof of your work. But if the lesson is the goal of your training, you end up mechanizing your horse. Totilas is just one of the most famous representatives of a new form

of a 'leg-mover' who never was allowed to find and stabilize a natural balance, which is an absolute necessity for correct training. And we have another wrong balance, which is the 'tense back-mover' who cannot swing through the back either. Both wrong types of balance build up incredible high negative tension and destroy the horses.

"The riders and trainers should not be named to be the 'bad' boys exclusively. Importantly, the federations and the judges all over the world who give the highest marks to these horses must also take responsibility. If we follow the classical literature, a horse in the wrong balance should not be able to earn the smallest prize, even if the technical performance is perfect."⁷

How strange that the potential damage done to horses using this training technique is so often questioned, when to the naked eye, most horses subjected to rollkur show obvious signs of stress.

A recent article in theHorse.com quotes Paul René van Weeren, DVM, PhD, Dipl. ECVS, professor in the department of equine sciences at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. [excerpt]

"Thus far, there is no compelling scientific evidence based on which using the hyperflexed position can be condemned," said van Weeren during his plenary lecture at the 2011 International Society for Equitation Science Conference, held Oct. 26–29 in Hooge Mierde, The Netherlands.

"The new research confirms that hyperflexion does cause slight airway obstruction; however, van Weeren reminded that all non-natural neck positions cause airway obstruction. Hyperflexion, he noted, does not appear to cause a more severe obstruction than any other unnatural head position. Also, the non-natural neck positions do not result in any difference in the oxygenation level of the horses' blood, he added."⁸

Au contraire? An article on cavallo.de empirically challenges the stance that hyperflexion causes only slight airway obstruction. German veterinarian Ulf-Michael Stump researches the medical consequences of hyperflexion in conjunction with the Graf Lehndorff Institute for Equine Science. Stump is pioneering a portable endoscope that wirelessly transmits real-time data to a laptop while the horse is lunged or ridden. He can explore the pharynx and larynx, and measure blood flow changes.

Using this method, he has evidence that rolling the neck constricts the airways. Its supply of oxygen blocked, the horse tries to widen its airway by escaping the fixed hand. Failing relief, tension is transmitted to the entire body and may result in building arterial pressure and contribute to bleeding in the pharynx. Other researchers at the Institute have tracked heart rate and tested saliva to measure the concentration of the stress hormone cortisol. Horses worked in hyperflexion consistently had higher stress levels. "In a humane education such non-physiological loads should have no place," comments



"It contradicts every principal of classical teachings that horses should receive the highest scores despite being obviously tense..."

— G. Heuschmann



Professor Christine Aurich, scientific director of the Institute.⁹

Concern for the welfare of performance horses motivated Claudia Sanders, editor of the German dressage magazine dressur-studien.de, to spearhead petition campaigns which successfully addressed the FEI concerning the issues of the "Progressive List" and the "Blood Rule." She has created a 16-language online petition at no-Rollkur.com. Claudia states, "We appeal to the International Equestrian Association (FEI) and all associated federations to comply with their own rules again and make sure that the horses' welfare is always paramount indeed! To achieve these goals, we are connected through social networks. Our Facebook group 'no-Rollkur'" has already brought together more than 7,000 people from many different countries.

"Until recently, rollkur was mainly debated in equestrian circles and the media. The 'miraculous stallion' Totilas changed this. In

the warm up area on April 24, they performed so much LDR that the German national coach of dressage riders, Johnny Hilberath, cautioned the rider. In the arena, however, the couple was rewarded with the highest marks and won two ribbons. As a result, the topic is now raised in general public as well."¹⁰

USDF "R" Judge and Bronze and Silver Medalist Bill Woods, based at Four Winds Farm in Ocala, Florida, has decades of experience in high level competition and judging in the U.S. He keeps the big picture in mind, unflustered by the drama surrounding the equine welfare concerns and the urgency of the petitions flying across social media.

In a recent interview, Bill commented, "As much as there shouldn't be, there are fashions, things that are tolerated because certain people are rewarded. The judges have been interested in the magnitude of the gaits, and they tolerate the rest. But little by little a general unease has begun filtering through the community, including the judges. And they say, this is edgy, this isn't pretty. This is too mechanical when it isn't supposed to be mechanical.

"The FEI is a bureaucracy. I have read the petitions and I understand where they're coming from. Yes, the FEI is nominally responsive to public opinion, but it is composed of many factions, each of which strenuously defends its constituents' interests. Unsurprisingly, the story starts with money and the campaign to make dressage more than a niche sport.

"And, yes, some of what we see internationally in the Grand Prix looks different than the way it used to. If you go back to the '50s and early '60s, you can see that the quality and athleticism of the horses has made a marked improvement since then. In the '80s when overflexed, deep and round hit the big time, first with Rembrandt and then with Gigolo, those horses won because they were better than the alternatives. Regardless of whatever they were asked to do in the warm up, once they got into the show ring, they were up in the poll and generally seemed to go about their work in a cheerful way. And the judges' job has always been to evaluate what they see in the test—not what happens in the schooling ring—for that matter, not even what the horses do going around the boards before they enter at A.

"And that's how the rollkur bandwagon gained momentum, culminating in Totilas—all that plus the fact that when a one-in-a-million

super horse comes along, despite some flaws, it's pretty hard not to be overwhelmed by the really good parts.

"I think the pendulum will be swinging back the other way. In an Emperor's New Clothes moment, a few years ago people noticed (and shuddered) at Anky's horse being rewarded even though it didn't seem to be able to make an honest halt or stand quietly.

"The coming Olympics is just another competition, and things will change by and by. The rising tide of awareness will lead trainers, riders, and judges back to a middle ground that's kinder to the horses and aesthetically more satisfying than what we've seen in the recent past. The lightness, the harmony, the de-mechanizing of the impression that many horses today give — these concepts are already coming back to the fore."¹¹

I hope you're right, Bill...I sure hope you are right.

Contact Kip Mistral at newhorsearts@hotmail.com

Photos permission of Julia Rau, www.rauphoto.de

1. FEI Dressage Event Rules for 2012, Article 401, page 10. http://www.fei.org/sites/default/files/file/DISCIPLINES/DRESSAGE/Rules/Dressage%20Rules_2012_FINAL_clean_30Nov11.pdf

2. Facebook message to K. Mistral from Chrissie Brickwedde, 5/25/12

3. Mistral, Kip (2007, July), Up In Heaven: The Language of Harmony with Walter Zettl. *Equine Journal*, 106–110

4. Open Letter by Klaus Balkenhol on FEI Rollkur Round Table Conference, *FEI Dressage News*, 02/06/2010, <http://www.eurodressage.com/equestrian/2010/02/06/open-letter-klaus-balkenhol-fei-rollkur-round-table-conference>

5. Email to K. Mistral from Klaus Balkenhol, 5/25/12

6. Heuschmann, Gerd. *Balancing Act: The Horse in Sport — An Irreconcilable Conflict?*, 92–94. Trafalgar Square Books, 2012. By permission of the publisher. www.horseandriderbooks.com

7. Email to K. Mistral from Gerd Heuschmann, 5/15/12

8. Lesté-Lasserre, Christa. Rollkur: Facts, Fiction, and Horse Health Implications. March 07 2012, Article # 19699, thehorse.com, Your Guide to Equine Health Care. www.thehorse.com/ViewArticle.aspx?ID=19699

9. Wehnert, Christiane. New Study Provides Rollkur Alarming Results, *Cavallo*, 2/10/12. www.cavallo.de/medizin/neue-studie-zur-rollkur-liefert-alarmierende-ergebnisse.386954.233219.htm

10. Sanders, Claudia. About, and A Short History of Rollkur. no-Rollkur.com

11. Woods, Bill. Telephone interview 5/20/12. Four Winds Farm, Ocala, FL. Website blog post 5/25/12.



"...free from the paralyzing effect of resistance, the Horse obeys willingly and without hesitation... displaying a natural and harmonious balance both physically and mentally."

— FEI Article 401.4

photo by Geoff Young

