

“Take the Time”

An interview with Arthur Kottas-Heldenberg by Ulrike Amler

The former senior rider of the Spanish Court Riding School in Vienna Arthur Kottas-Heldenberg (AKH), benefited from one of the most discerning riding educations possible. Even after leaving the most famous riding school in the world, in his (un)retirement he loves to learn more and often.

He passes on his knowledge of the classical riding methods that are still valid after hundreds of years, and his skills in clinics and seminars as a sought-after instructor. Despite a tight schedule he made himself available to Tölt.Knoten as a friendly and patient interview partner during a dressage clinic in Münchingen, Baden-Württemberg.

TK: What philosophy determines your instructions?

AKH: The horses have to be content. I always say that horse and rider have to understand it in their heads, and be prepared in their bodies. They both have to be challenged, but must not be overwhelmed.

TK: How did 42 years with the Spanish Riding School in Vienna shape you?

AKH: It was a wonderful time. I come from a riding family and my parents owned the oldest riding school in Vienna. I had my first pony when I was two and a half years old. I made my hobby into a profession and still love it because one can improve always and everywhere. I believe that it might require two life times to become a good rider: in the beginning we make a lot of mistakes, when we are old we have the routine. I read a lot and watch a lot of courses and clinics because we can learn everywhere. We can even learn from bad riders – not to do it this way – and still we learn something.



A perfect piaffe in lightness and harmony; unfortunately a rare sight in large sport competitions.



Arthur Kottas-Heldenberg sees the horses he works with as partners. Even while expecting top performance, he aims to support them according to their abilities, to challenge them, but not to overwhelm or exploit them.

TK: What rider was your idol?

AKH: I did not have one idol. When I joined the Spanish Riding School as a young man of 16, with the opportunity to watch those fabulous riders, I never had the goal to be as good as they were. I tried to find something in each of them that fit in with my own riding philosophy. One had his strengths here, another there. I cannot say that I have one equestrian idol; I am still trying to improve myself.

TK: Today, many young riders are very successful with top sport horses. Is it more sensible for the education of the rider to ride fully trained horses, or to learn together with a young horse?

AKH: The philosophy of the Spanish Riding

School has always been that a young rider – once he has developed an independent seat – is allowed to practice on a well-trained horse. The horse becomes the teacher and the rider may then later pass on this knowledge to a young horse. I do not believe it to be a great idea when an untrained rider rides an untrained horse. Often it works out o.k. but it is a more difficult path. It is easier when the rider can learn with a teacher who knows the aids because then learning can happen without fighting and with sensitivity instead.

TK: What are the most common deficiencies you find in riders at your clinics?

AKH: People don't take enough time to develop the correct independent seat which is the key to success and safety. Many brag that they were never on a longe line and started riding independently right away. To be honest one should say to them right away that that is only too obvious.

TK: Where do you see the need for correction in the horses?

AKH: I see this very rarely in horses. During the last 50 or 60 years horses have developed incredibly. In old pictures you can see trainers who struggled with the horses and worked them hard, and only got them going well with their own skill, their art. These days it is so much easier because breeding is fabulous. Where we need to help these days is with horses that were incorrectly trained, overwhelmed too early. We have to make sure to motivate these horses again and bring them back to a correct frame and schooling. This is one of my main concerns. I don't come to criticize, I come to help. When I work as a judge, I don't want to just criticize either; I always try to find the best thing first. Where can I start? Of course I write comments when scores are very low and why they may only be a five or six, and I may also add at the end that it's too bad, you have a lovely horse and cannot use it to its potential.

TK: What do you hate to see?

AKH: When a rider cannot control his emotions, blames the horse and gets rough. I cannot train a horse with sugar alone but I have to be sensible. My first question is always, 'why did the horse not do this?' I would say in 90% of all cases the answer would have to be, 'because my aids were not correct and the horse was not prepared well enough.'

TK: The stallions of the Spanish Riding School are used in shows and on tours up until they are twenty or thirty and they remain fresh, whereas sport horses are well past their prime at that point. What causes this in your opinion?

AKH: It has always been one of our rules that the horse determines the speed with which it can be trained. Take the time. Don't waste it while working with the horse, but also don't try to train horses in a pressure cooker system. This can unfortunately be seen very often in horse training but it causes physical and psychological damage. We always have time and if a horse has a problem, we take the time to deal with it. We have enough experts who can help if need be, and take a look at the horse. Or we say, 'please you get on the horse and tell me what I'm doing wrong.' Cooperation and sensible training according to the horses' needs are of great concern to me.

TK: How much weight do you place on how the horses are kept and ridden, when it comes to their health?

AKH: These are very important. Horses are not animals you can put in a stall for 23 hours and then take them out for maybe half an hour or an hour. At my private barn we have a treadmill. The horses are out in a paddock as long as they haven't needed stall rest due to an injury, or could hurt themselves while playing without control. A horse without a rider is a horse; a rider without a horse is not a rider. We have to watch over our horses as we would over our most precious possession. If somebody says today 'you are as healthy as a horse', I have to say then that you are quite sickly. Horses are more susceptible today. I believe that horses in the past were a bit hardier. Our advanced breeding programs have improved their looks and potential but I think they softened them overall. It matters where the horses were bred and where they are kept. A rider has to be involved and consider the timely shoeing, timely corrections, sensible training; all of this is important. A horse is an athlete and should be under regular veterinary care, and not just when I can't ride the horse any longer. If I sense a stiffness, I have to ask the question where does it come from, and when I feel a problem in the mouth, I have to ask why this is going on. An expert can then look at the horse and control what it going on before the problems get bigger. It is important to prepare the horse for any work, then work the horse, and afterwards return it to its stall relaxed and breathing quietly.



During his clinics with running commentaries the experienced horse trainer includes the audience in his classes. He wants to make sure that spectators experience why he has his students do a specific thing.

TK: What breeds of horses do you teach in your clinics?

AKH: All of them. For me there are only two ways to ride – no matter whether the style is military, western, dressage, jumping, racing: the correct i.e. good way and the wrong way. A

trainer should be able to get the best out of any horse and not say I can only work with this breed or that one.

TK: During your long career as a trainer of the classical teachings, have you had any experiences with gaited horses?

AKH: Most of my experiences with gaited horses were gathered with Icelandic horses. I was invited to a riding course in Sweden where Icelandic horses had been worked in dressage. It was fascinating to me to see what the horses can accomplish when the rider is sensitive with his seat and aids. When I train these horses I obviously don't work against their genetic abilities. After all, nobody would send somebody to play basketball when they are only 150 cm tall.

TK: As a dressage judge, what do you hope for in the future of the equine sport?

AKH: I wish that riders, judges and trainers would obey the rules which we wrote together a long time ago and which are available in black and white. Then we don't need referees at the warm-up ring who watch out for and prevent unfair and damaging riding. Then we all just have to ride according to the rules and with understanding.

TK: Many thanks for taking this time for the Tölt.Knoten.

Ulrike Amler asked the questions / Translation: Christiane Soeffner

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