



## **Reitinstitut Egon von Neindorff – "Preserving the Classical Tradition"**

At his Reitinstitut, Egon von Neindorff and his stable of schoolmasters teach classical dressage to anybody who truly wants to learn

by Kyra Beth Houston

Egon von Neindorff has realized his dream: to provide to riders of all levels the opportunity to learn the classical methods of dressage. The reality: his Reitinstitut (School of Horsemanship) in Karlsruhe, Germany, home to 60 "four-legged professors," all classically trained dressage schoolmasters.

The philosophy of the Reitinstitut is best expressed in von Neindorff's own words taken from his 1994 video, *The School of Horsemanship with Egon von Neindorff*: "The best-trained horse is barely good enough to teach the beginner rider." The purpose of the school is to teach people the basics of dressage – "the ability to sit correctly and an understanding of horse care and of the nature of the horse." And, unlike at other exclusive dressage establishments, "Everyone is welcome at the Reitinstitut, at any level, for however long they can or wish to stay."

At 73, von Neindorff still travels extensively to find his prospective equine professors. As a fellow trainer and student of von Neindorff's puts it, "When he returns from his buying trips and the horses arrive, we look, shake our heads, and say, "Surely these are not the horses he selected!" Then, six months later, after careful training has begun, we see the same horses and say, "What beautiful steeds."

Although von Neindorff keeps a variety of breeds available for his students to ride, he does not insist on particular bloodlines or age ranges. (When I asked about the breeding of a gorgeous bay stallion, I was told merely that he is Spanish.) Andalusians, Lipizzaners, Lusitanos, Hanoverians, Arabians, East Prussians (old-style Trakehners from Poland), Thoroughbreds – all are represented at the Reitinstitut. And their personalities are as diverse as their breeding – from the affectionate Peer Gynt (named for the title character in the Henrik Ibsen play), a striking gray Hanoverian who reached

out and placed his head on my shoulder every time I passed his stall, to Schneeman (Snowman), the proud, aged Lipizzaner.

To von Neindorff, classical dressage is like religion. Both require intensive study, and both welcome and accept students from all walks of life. The only prerequisites are that the student be serious – and humble – about the subject matter. As he puts it, "Many riders, because of their excessive ambition, do not at all understand the real sense of riding. Only a modest rider who wants to serve the idea will be able to understand our way of riding."

Although von Neindorff has been around horses all of his life, his own beginnings were in keeping with his philosophy of modesty. As a boy, he helped in the cavalry stables where his father was the commanding officer; he took his first riding lesson at the age of ten. He studied with his father, with cavalry instructors, and with classical teachers such as Karl Kunze and Richard Watjen. He began teaching riding himself at the age of eighteen and also competed in dressage successfully into his thirties. (A career highlight: being named German vice-champion after World War II).

Even prior to his competitive success, though, von Neindorff became determined to help preserve the principles of classical dressage because he feared that the International Equestrian Federation (FEI) tests had been revised to emphasize "non-classical" dressage.

He founded the Reitinstitut in 1947 and in 1949 moved the school to its current location, a historic cavalry building on Nancystrasse in Karlsruhe, just 2.5 miles from Karlsruhe Schloss, the castle at the city's center. The rent of the facility was modest, and city and state governments supported the art of classical riding, making the move feasible.



The rich-sandstone-hued arena at the Reitinstitut is a designated historical landmark because of its elegant yet strong arched roof support of wood latticework. Light filters through many cathedral-style windows and illuminates the buttery - yellow walls. Horses enter the arena at E – after their riders request permission to enter from von Neindorff, who sits at C on a raised, red - carpeted platform that spans the length of the short side. Spectators, too, sit atop the platform to watch the Reitinstitut's annual shows, which von Neindorff began holding in 1954. The beflagged, brass - topped pillars, set a horse's length from A, complete the classical atmosphere.

Connected to the short indoor arena (it's 40 meters in length, as opposed to the 60 meters of a regulation - sized dressage arena) in an "L" shape are the Reitinstitut's stone stables. Most of the horses live in roomy box stalls. A second (round) indoor arena, an outside dressage and jumping ring, and a parking area take up the rest of the wrought - iron - enclosed grounds. The parking lot, the path beside the arena, and the cooling - out area by the stables all are paved with cobblestones, adding to the Reitinstitut's old - world charm.

This idyllic setting is not without its drawbacks, however. The special roof is in need of an estimated \$600,000 in repairs. The German state, which is experiencing financial difficulties and reducing its support of the arts, may be forced to sell the Reitinstitut facility and other state-owned buildings. If the property is sold, a new owner might be forced to raise the rent, making it difficult for von Neindorff to remain there. Fortunately, offers of alternative facilities have poured in. Von Neindorff himself says he is confident that the Reitinstitut will continue as it has for half a century, no matter what the future brings.

Meanwhile, it's business as usual at the Reitinstitut, the only public riding school in the world with 60 classically trained dressage schoolmasters. On this day, all levels of riders come to take lessons, from the group of helmet - clad children in the outdoor arena to the apprentice trainer schooling piaffe in a private session. Many of the students, naturally, are locals from Karlsruhe (about an hour west of Stuttgart and 90 minutes south of Frankfurt); but some have traveled from as far as Bangkok, Thailand, or Tulsa, Oklahoma (this writer).

When a student arrives, von Neindorff selects his or her mount. The student grooms and tacks the horse, then joins the class of as few as three or as many as ten – perhaps with a longe lesson being conducted in the center of the arena as well. The classes are conducted in German, but students can arrange to work with an English - speaking staff instructor with advance notice. During the warm - up, von Neindorff announces the theme of the lesson – walk-canter transitions or bending, for instance.

Von Neindorff allows his four-legged professors to serve as the primary instructors, making suggestions only if students can't seem to figure out the correct aids. He emphasizes transitions between and within gaits, with exercises such as collecting on the short sides and lengthening down the long sides. He reminds students to check their position in the mirror – and always, always, – to "laud das pferd" (praise the horse).

"I plant a seedling with each student – perhaps a tiny seedling, but it will grow," says von Neindorff. "I regard it as a gift that I can serve classical horsemanship in my work."

### **Von Neindorff on Dressage**

On riders and riding:

- \* "As a rider, I am not allowed to interfere with the horse. I would be interfering if I had a bad seat."

- \* "It is important to have not just any horse, but a well-trained school horse. This takes time and effort and requires constant continuing effort."

- \* "When you have ridden from home only one horse, it is impossible to understand what the horse is telling you."

- \* "The correct sort of rider has to keep in mind not only dressage but the character and conformation of his horse. No rider should be desperate because he cannot obtain perfection in classical dressage. He may reach it. At the least, he can open the door and look in."

- \* "The good rider knows not to disturb the horse. The result will be the rider sitting on the horse [who is] flying underneath him in harmony – a horse that dances with his partner."

- \* "You can ask the horse to do maneuvers, but the important part is how you ask."

On the goals of dressage:

- \* "Where we lose sight of classical dressage: Some modern competitive horses can mechanically do the movements; but if the movements are not from a supple, carefully gymnasticized horse, the movements are not correct. This way is very time - expensive."

### **Riding with von Neindorff**

I spent five days last summer riding with Egon von Neindorff. For an adult beginner rider, most of whose dressage experiences have been aboard my sixteen - year - old Quarter Horse mare, Diala, the opportunity to ride six very different horses in seven lessons was the experience of a lifetime.

My first day, I was assigned a seventeen - hand Rhinelander/Belgian - cross mare, Duchesse (also known as "Mommy" because she arrived at the Reitinstitut in foal). I am only five feet four inches tall, and Duchesse was the tallest horse I had ever ridden. I was sure I would not be able to sit her trot, but I could. On my second day, Duchesse even gave me the gift of a true extended trot.

The following morning, I rode Charly, a handsome gray Lipizzaner (see picture) who is so light, responsive, and cooperative that he tries to give his rider anything she requests – even if he has to guess at the aids! As we worked on walk-canter transitions, I gushed, "I love him! I wish I could take him home." Von Neindorff smiled and reminded me, "All aids must come in unison. Jawohl! (Yes, correct!)"

That same evening, I had a longe lesson on a beautiful bay Spanish stallion, Alamarente, who is featured in von Neindorff's video. His gaits are smooth, easy to sit, and rhythmic – perfect for a longe horse. Alamarente helped me to understand the "seedlings" of the dressage seat.

My next lesson was aboard Reosa, a 14.2 Lipizzaner mare, whom I rode through the pillars and then half-passed to the wall.

The next day, my last at the Reitinstitut, I rode Schneeman, probably the most experienced of the horses I was assigned. Schneeman gave me the gift of passage and, seeming to know that no introduction to classical dressage would be complete without a few "airs above the ground," gave me the tiniest taste – probably his way of expressing his dislike of my seat!

I returned that afternoon for a final longe lesson the beautiful four year old, dapple - gray Romanian Lipizzaner mare Rulaska. My instructor was Tom, a trainer from Belgium who was himself taking a "refresher course" with von Neindorff. "Try to lengthen your leg, keeping it whispering to the horse's sides," Tom told me. "As your leg becomes longer, you appear more regal, making your horse appear more regal, too."

Even now, months after my trip to Germany, I am trying to absorb everything von Neindorff and his horses had to offer. I take comfort in one insider's comment that students come to ride at the Reitinstitut, but a true understanding of what they have experienced may not come for weeks or even months.