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We were happy to receive the new release of Fritz Stahlecker In-hand-work for young dressage horses. We cannot deny that "creative in-hand work leads to fascinating successes."

Fritz Stahlecker's training method hand-saddle-hand (HSH) encourages young horses to easily learn classical dressage exercises. In the last decades, Stahlecker has been training dressage horses up to Grand Prix-level. Part 1 of the DVD: Shows the Basics Part 2: Advanced training

Fritz states: "Horses are like children, their ability to learn is greater in the first years of life. If horses are carefully and gently trained in-hand the first years of their life, their qualities will be fostered well and perfect results can be achieved later on." With his exceptional hand-

saddle-hand-method, Fritz Stahlecker shows how to train movements up to advanced dressage exercises with young, only three-year-old horses – gently, without any stress and considering important sport psychological aspects. If the horse is backed at the age of four, the rider can start on an already advanced horse that knows the exercises and that has already developed the necessary muscles to carry the rider without any problems. He continues to train collection and cadence in-hand later on – this is of great advantage for the body and the soul of the horse.

„Légèreté“ – riding without a strong influence of the hand – is what every rider should strive for. The well padded schooling bridle of Fritz Stahlecker was especially designed for the basic in-hand training. The young horse learns basic exercises without the rider's weight, without any bit. His mind gets challenged, yet there will be no resistance which has the positive result of no tension or wrong movements. The horse will be ready for high performance training.

All those who prefer aesthetics and creativity rather than force and strength when training dressage horses will love this film.

Additional information:

Fritz Stahlecker, a textile engineer, born in 1925, has worked with horses, also difficult horses, since he was a child. His opinion is, the biggest mistakes result from a violent use of the reins. Inspired by the Légèreté, one of the basic principles of the Romanic riding style, he developed his own training method and has already trained various horses up to advanced level.,

A very special thank you to Petra Wägenbaur for her work and efforts in translating our questions in English to German for Herr Stahlecker and then translating the answers back to English. Thank you Petra Wägenbaur . Having had the opportunity to watch the First DVD, we share with you some of the questions that came up watching the first DVD part 1.

## **1 Why do you call your training system Hand – Saddle – Hand?**

I start with work in hand, over a period of one year in which the rider is a sort of playfellow of the horse. The young horse gains more and more confidence and learns all the difficult movements which are necessary for dressage competitions. Then, very slowly I combine the work in hand with riding, at the beginning, first week - 5 minutes riding walk, second and third week - 10 minutes walk, 4th to 8th week 15 to 20 minutes walk, 8th --16th week – 15 minutes walk and 5 to 10 minutes trot!

With the time I reduce the time I spend on work in hand but it still remains a possibility in between to correct errors, to improve certain movements and to have a greater variety in what I am doing with my horse, to offer him a change in our program.

## **2 You mention in your video that in the past that horses were backed in October of the 4th Year but that breeders today want to get their horses backed that much sooner. You also mention that like children it is easier to teach horses when they are younger. But we don't put children at 1 or 2 into school. So what age would you recommend that we start working the horse?**

You can start as early as you want, without the weight of the rider and without bit it won't do any harm to the horse. With my stallions I would start when they were 2 ½, at the age when they left the herd, when the selection for breeding purpose in order to become a stud took place. You can't let them go back into the herd afterwards and so I started with them always in autumn. With mares you might wait or you can do the basic schooling during the winter and give them back to the herd for the summertime. They can "digest" what they have learned, enjoy a bit longer liberty and freedom and grow up. When you then start again in

autumn the following year, you can go on where you stopped and you will see that everything you taught them is still in their mind.

**3 I notice you state in the beginning that “The mouth is not to be touched for the 1st few months”. Would you like to share with our readers why you think this is so important?**

The mouth of the horse is very sensitive. As long as the horse doesn't understand what you want him to do, you are not allowed to touch the mouth. Nowadays very often people act according to the principle of avoiding pain that means that the horse is forced to find out how to behave in order to avoid pain in its mouth. With the HSH-method I try to exclude any kind of pain by using a smooth padded schooling bridle. As soon as the horse understands what you want it won't put up resistance, and then the influence with the rider's hand on the sensitive mouth can be very delicate and differentiated.

**4 Again could you possibly share why you think that daily turnout is a necessity, is so important?**

Daily turnout is a Must, otherwise the horse can't move as much as it needs. The HSH-method is based on the French principle “on dresse un cheval au pas” – “to school a horse at walk”. The process of learning basically takes place at walk, once the horse gets “warm”, the circulation of blood becomes faster the brain is no longer “cool” enough to take up new things to learn. So for the young horse learning should be finished after 10 or 15 minutes – it can't concentrate any longer. Lunging a horse dulls his mind. It is less detrimental when the horse gets the exercise it needs in the paddock, in liberty.

**5 Your comment “No need to teach the horse to push from behind. It should start learning to carry as soon as possible”, could you expand on this.**

The “engine” of the horse is in his hindquarters, it is there where the natural power – just think of a race horse – comes from. The hindquarters of a horse are developed stronger as it needed to be able to make a quick start and flee in case of danger. A dressage horse should learn as early as possible to change this driving power (thrust) of the hind legs, this momentum into weight-bearing capacity. The hindquarters have to lower slightly and carry weight, the forehand has to become light – the carrying power of the hind legs is the requirement for collection and movements as piaffe and passage.

**6 I was wondering if there was a secondary reason other than as a proof of humility why you work with your the horse yielding the head to the pressure of the hand?**

The horse should accept the rider as the senior, higher-ranking. It proves this by giving way/yielding to the pressure of my hand. To consider this as a sign of humiliation would not be correct. It's not a proof of horsemanship if one tries to get the yielding by force (for ex. Rollkur). The way the hierarchy inside a herd is made clear can serve as example, it's done by playing, scrapping, impressing the other, but not by humiliating each other. Once the hierarchy is clarified, then there is peace and harmony, horses won't repeat this process day after day. To maintain the order little gestures of remembrance are sufficient.

**7 In the Yielding Exercise – note touching where leg will be later – Noticed the horse yields to the right almost without touching but going to the left you actually have to push? Is this one of the signs of the lack of straightness and equal development that we normally see in the horse?**

No, I think it is more or less by accident that when doing this exercise the horse yields to one

side without touching and needs more pressure to go to the other side.

**8 When you are working with horses have you seen this in other horses? If so, are other horses tending to more sensitivity and to be more quick to move from one side than another?**

I have experienced that mares oppose more often and first of all go against the pressure. Then you have to push with more energy and several times. You can also try to hold the horse at the halter and turn the neck slightly aside. Light pressure with your hand would be enough then to let the horse step aside.

**9 What is the piece of wooden equipment that you were using to tighten the girth? Where would one get it?**

We call it "girth-tightener", as it helps very efficiently to tighten the girth from both sides and the saddle doesn't risk to be turned away from its position. You don't need any strength, it functions with leverage and it is much more comfortable for the horse. You can get it in most of the shops selling riding equipment. (I can send you one if you want!)

**10 I noticed that you tap on the croup quite directly and behind the saddle, when saddling and tap on the horse's side when tightening the girth. Is this misdirection or something else?**

In essence it doesn't matter where you tap. It serves only as diversionary tactic before I tighten the girth one more hole - like the doctor pinches you somewhere before giving an injection. You might change the place where you tap!

**11 Normally cavessons have an iron hinge, you use what you call a schooling bridle. Again where do you get this? Do you have it custom made? If you do what kind of specifications do you suggest.**

Indeed, this is a special cavesson, which I have developed over many years. It can be purchased on my website ([www.hsh-fritz-stahlecker.de](http://www.hsh-fritz-stahlecker.de)) or directly through Petra Wägenbaur ([waegenbaur@t-online.de](mailto:waegenbaur@t-online.de)). This schooling bridle has no iron hinge, I wanted to have a cavesson which adapts perfectly to the shape of the head and is smoothly upholstered (you can remove the upholstery and add or reduce the filling material) so that the horse may support itself on it and won't feel any pain. With this softly padded schooling bridle you can very well exert an influence on the horse. The schooling bridle is hand made (for detailed description see my website, soon also in English! – besides the softly padded noseband the big rings are important so that the reins very easily pass through) and of high leather quality. We sell only one size which fits horses from Arabian to cross breed – until now we didn't need any other specifications.

**12 Draw Reins – lower reins – not to the bit which is quite different. You do state that you condemn the draw reins, but use something that is quite similar but you don't believe in consistency of side reins but prefer this draw like rein arrangement allowing the horse to raise and lower the neck and the head.**

**Do you not believe that the side reins offer the same opportunity? Could explain your observations on the difference that you have observed in horses when using side reins instead.**

Draw reins and side reins have the same effect, the big difference is that draw reins like I

use them go to the schooling bridle and don't touch the bit. Side reins are in constant movement caused by the shoulder of the horse. The shoulder, especially the one at the outside, pushes against the rein with each movement forward so that this rein is very unevenly. The draw reins have been invented by the French masters to be used in combination with a cavesson. It is only when draw reins are used in combination with a bit that they become a mean to use force. This bad use of draw reins later on unfortunately has become a habit in Germany.

**13 Draw Rein Activity tend to have the horse drop his head rather than raise it when being ridden, how do these work differently?**

The lower reins limit the raising of the head, the top reins prevent the horse from lowering the head too deeply. With the combination of lower and top reins in essence you can get any position of the horse's head you want. The rider should be aware to ask for a position which is against aesthetic criterion and detrimental to the natural expression of the horse. Any exaggerated position which hurts the visual impression is reprehensible. Horrible pictures don't only hurt the aesthetic principle, they are also against horsemanship and cause mental and physical damage to the horse.

**14 Why do you kneel to the ground with foot in front of the horse's feet. Is there any concern of any danger to the trainer in this position? Do you find this is a great reinforcer as praise for the hind leg position?**

To kneel to the ground is a way to please the horse, to make the trainer in its eyes a person it likes. At the same time it means offering confidence which the horse understands easily. It won't kick against the kneeling person.

**15 I noticed that when you have the horse halt that the cannon bones are slanted forward from the hocks down. How important would you say this is?**

I think it is fine when the hocks and the cannon bones form a direct vertical line, when the cannon bones are slanted forward this is ideal in view of collection. In this exercise I pay much more attention to the hoofs and if they stand at the same height/ in parallel line. This is for example important when you want the horse to stand correctly when you have to halt in a dressage competition. Contact with the hand helps the horse to achieve a better consciousness of his hind legs and their position and by this improve the coordination of the legs.

**16 You say to step back – avoid using the reins. Many people would then ask well how would you get a horse to step backward if you did not use the reins?**

If you want a horse to step back in most cases it is sufficient to exert a little pressure against the chest. The horse realizes very quickly, that you want it to yield to any pressure and that it will be rewarded when doing so. If pressing with the hand is not enough you can reinforce this aid by pinching the chest.

**17 The long lines are tied one to the other. Would you like to explain to our readers why?**

Sometimes I need a short leading rein and then I use just one of the long lines. For this reason it is very useful to have them tied together you can quickly change from long to short. They are of different length so that you don't have in hands the piece where they are tied together when you work in hand.

**18 Notice the weak point in attachment of cavesson to reins with a piece of leather similar to the set up you use with the halter and the lead rope. Other trainers are very concerned with keeping the horse under control that the horse does not get away, do you not have the same concern?**

You might be right with your concern. In case of any accident or sort of confusion the weak point will break, the horse is free and in order to avoid further training it could run away. This happens rather seldom, as the first exercise of the HSH-method is to teach the horse to stop like a monument when you shout "Halt". The exercises of the first days of HSH are to stand with both hind legs in one line. Standing still on command should become a good and marked habit. Only then, when the young horse has internalized this "stop"-exercise easily understandable you can start with the actual schooling. It is recommendable to be cautious and start training these first stop/stand-exercises in an enclosed area so that the horse cannot run away. At the very beginning of schooling it might happen that a very lively horse succeeds to free itself and runs away. But if you care for a consequent training this won't happen any more at an advanced phase. Don't risk to work without the straps with weak points, severe accidents might happen if you don't use them.

It happens for instance that by accident a lead goes like a loop around a leg of the trainer. If the horse breaks free or starts running the weak point must break to avoid any damage to the trainer.

**19 Next lateral work – starts with travers on all horses. Noticed the other horse you worked with the shoulder-in as this is what the horse offered you. Is this how you would normally work, working with what the horse offers you?**

It is always a good thing to accept willingly what the horse is offering, if presumably this leads to an exercise which is anyway part of the learning program. By this the voluntary cooperation of the horse will be encouraged. In general – not always – the young horse offers as first of all lateral movements travers, this is what causes less difficulties. For us travers has the big advantage, that this is the best movement to control the horse. Turned towards the kicking board the horse cannot run away and is forced to stay on the track. It is sort of "framed" from all sides. To have the horse make shorter steps it is sufficient to enlarge the angle between quarters and kicking board.

**20 You flip the inside rein over to outside which creates an indirect rein of opposition. Do you have any concern when working in hand that this might create some limitation on the horse, such as what we see if someone over uses the indirect reins of opposition especially through corners. And if not, why not?**

It is not before the first phase of this exercise on two tracks is settled that you come to the second phase where you flip the inside rein over to the outside. Not before the horse is able to easily pass through the corner going travers.

In the first phase the trainer walks behind the horse on the 2. track, when the rein is flipped over he walks on the 1. track. In an advanced phase he can even walk more closely to the horse, in the angle between horse and kicking board. When passing the corner he will shorten a bit the inside rein to show the horse where it has to go. With the time the horse should learn the bend of the neck and head inwards and this can be taught very easily when passing through the corners! The inner rein is not to pull but just to indicate now and then the direction where the horse should go, therefore there is no limitation to the horse.

**21 Do you follow the concept of some of the old masters that to make a horse straight first you work on bend? Is this one of the reasons you begin such early work with the travers?**

Before you can straighten a horse it has to be able to bend well to both sides. This is the only way to reach symmetry of the body. To straighten means to attain symmetry. I like to start schooling a horse with travers as this lateral movement as I already pointed out is very easy for it. If a horse prefers and offers the shoulder-in, which is much more difficult, then I just say: so much the better. The horse may choose!

**22 I noticed that the beginning half passes looked more like full passes. Would you say like Wynmalen that often this is actually easier for the horses?**

I have experienced that it is too much all at one to ask already from the beginning the exact travers as this movement consists of 2 elements:

- a) crossing of the hind legs
- b) bend of longitudinal axis

When the horse has learned the crossing of the hind legs, the next lesson should be the bend of the longitudinal axis! This can be taught best on a small circle without crossing of the hind legs. That means, when I start training this travers-exercise I don't pay attention to the bend from poll to tail. I act according to the principle to divide an exercise into small steps of learning, that's the best way for the horse to learn!

**23 Could I get the proper spelling and some general information on each of the horses on the DVD's.**

Mataré stallion, Hannoveraner, father Metternich (angloarabian Macho XX)  
Manfred gelding, thoroughbred,  
William gelding, Hannoveraner, father Wolkenstein

please look at the website [www.hsh-fritz-stahlecker.de](http://www.hsh-fritz-stahlecker.de)

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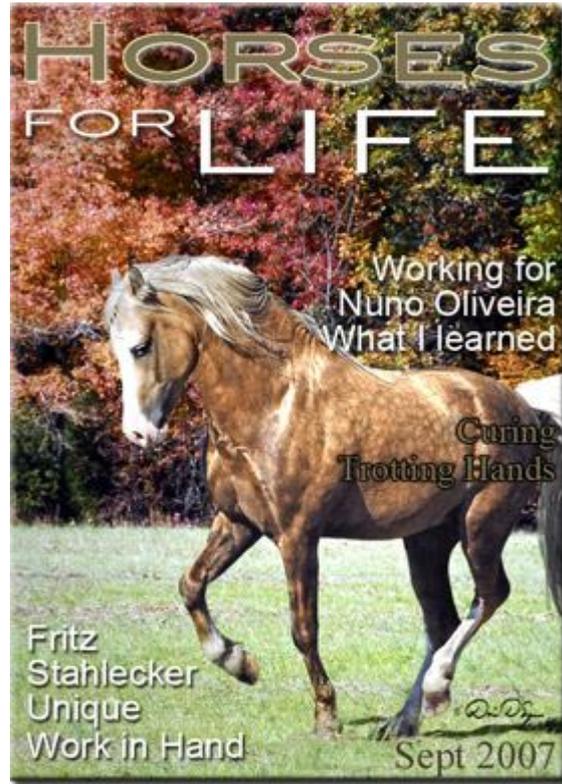
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