

## American Dressage Legends: Dr. Max Gahwyler

*Guardian of the classical tradition,  
“Dr. Max” is US dressage’s unofficial historian*

Now in his early nineties, Dr. Max Gahwyler doesn’t travel to the USDF annual convention any more. But many USDF members remember with fondness the many years that he did, bringing with him passionate opinions and sharing bits of his voluminous library of archival dressage texts with all interested comers at his popular convention lectures.

happily compare and contrast theories and philosophies. For years he was a fixture in the USDF Historical Recognition Committee, sharing generously of his knowledge and his own memory bank.

But Gahwyler didn’t just exist in the world of the *manège* school. As a US Equestrian Federation “S” judge, he officiated at shows both large

and his wife, Doris, immigrated to the US in 1952, settling in Greenwich, CT. It was in the US that he began his equestrian career. His choice of location proved fortuitous, as the Northeast was one of the first US dressage hotbeds at the time. In the 1960s, Gahwyler was one of a small group of visionaries who worked with fellow Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Famer Margarita Serrell to establish the American Dressage Institute—forerunner to the USDF—in Saratoga Springs, NY. During his term as ADI president, Gahwyler was instrumental in bringing outstanding European trainers to the US, including Colonel Hans Handler, Karl Mikolka, Nuno Oliveira, Herbert Rehbein, and Richard Wätjen.

The Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame inducted Gahwyler in 2004, in recognition of his life’s work in preserving and passing on the humane, classical methods of dressage training to American riders and a modern audience. But don’t just take our word for it. Read on for an abridged version of a Gahwyler dressage-history lecture, delivered at the 1993 USDF Annual Meeting (as the convention was then called) and published in the July 1994 issue of *Dressage & CT* magazine.

### Dressage Yesterday, Dressage Today, Dressage Tomorrow

*A talk, delivered by Dr. Max Gahwyler at the 1993 USDF Annual Meeting*

We, as dressage riders, are not only participating in the endeavor of our choice, but we are also involved in determining the direction dressage will take into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To do this, we must try to understand the circumstances which influenced and determined the development of dressage in the past, leading up to what

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CLASSICAL STYLE: “Dr. Max” in an undated photo

“Dr. Max,” as he is known to all—he’s a medical doctor by profession—is a dressage historian and scholar. From Alexander the Great to Xenophon, if you had a question about any classical horseman in history, Dr. Max probably owns his book and would

and small. Many dressage enthusiasts know him primarily through his books: three volumes entitled *The Competitive Edge*, which taught thousands of riders the basics of dressage competition and test-riding.

A native of Switzerland, Gahwy-

we are doing today. Doing just this, it becomes abundantly clear that to a very large extent, dressage in America is test riding, pure and simple, particularly at the AHSA [now US Equestrian Federation] levels. It is the tests that determine the training and movements we are learning and practicing.

This is nothing new and was already recognized by [the late US eventing-team] coach Jack Le Goff, who stated, shortly after he came to the United States, that Americans don't want to learn how to ride but how to compete. This trend is further pushed by the large number of recognized and unrecognized shows and innumerable awards, championships, horse-of-the-year recognitions, breed awards, and special trophies from the local riding-club level up to the national organizations like the USDF and AHSA. Inherently, there is nothing wrong with competitive dressage as long as the tests do not dictate the training and standards but are simply checks in the development of the

horse. This, however, is a little bit idealistic in our country and probably not for our time. Even so, the original objective of the AHSA test is simply to help horse and rider reach FEI levels mentally and physically sound and in so doing fulfill the fundamental tenets of dressage as stated in the introductory paragraphs of the FEI and AHSA Rule Books. But will our generation ever get away from competitive test riding? Most likely not, particularly not as long as the cultural environment in which we are living does not change and remains highly materialistic, mechanical, and, above all, competitive. Let's face it, dressage is and has always been an expression of the time in which it was practiced, a true mirror of the cultural period, an outlook on life of those who practiced and developed it in its time. This was recognized already a century ago by Alphonse Toussenet, who stated that if you look at how a nation uses its horses, it will show you its character and civilization. Also today, we are

definitely putting competition before knowledge and education, and very few riders make even a minor effort to study, read, and understand the concepts, approaches, and theories postulated by past and present masters. They simply don't realize what they are missing.

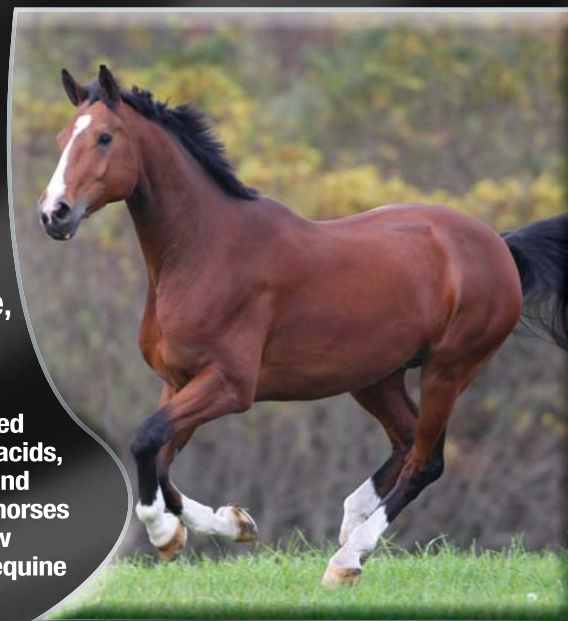
Looking at dressage in this unorthodox manner, we see its first appearance as an equestrian endeavor when the dark Middle Ages came to an end and the Renaissance literally exploded in Europe with a totally new outlook in literature, art, architecture, and lifestyle. In this environment, the first Academy of Equestrian Art was founded by King Duarte I of Portugal in the early 1400s. He himself was an excellent horseman and left us two books of his concepts of riding, and in so doing became the founder of the equestrian history of his country.

The next big development happened in the early Renaissance in

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the 1500s in Italy. It was in 1550 that Frederico Grisone published his famous book *Le Ordine di Cavalcare* and put dressage for the sake of dressage on the map. Crude training methods progressively gave way to more sophisticated training techniques and the use of better-suited Iberian horses. Riders of the School of Naples were using practically no spurs, primarily weight aids, very little hands, soft bits, and very often the use of voice. The objective was to obtain the best harmony, lightness, and expression of the horse in his work unrelated to utilitarian purposes.

In 1593, Salomon de la Broue from France summarized his equestrian concepts in *Le Cavalerie François*. He was followed by Antoine Pluvinel, who was the instructor of Louis XIII and wrote his famous book *Le Manège Royal*. Somewhat later, the Duke of Newcastle published *A Grand System of Horsemanship*, which together with Pluvinel and de la Broue best represent the concepts of Renaissance dressage.

But time moved on, and the Renaissance changed to the Baroque and later to the Rococo, a more opulent, extravagant, and lavish period. It was François Robichon de la Guérinière who expressed this to perfection and in order to achieve this objective used more of the Iberian horses, closer to the Lipizzaners of today. He further changed the saddle to its modern form, leading to today's leg position and weight aids, and introduced the shoulder-in to collect the horse from behind without pulling on the reins in front, abandoning leg-yielding as an exercise, which in his opinion was simply putting the horse on the forehand.

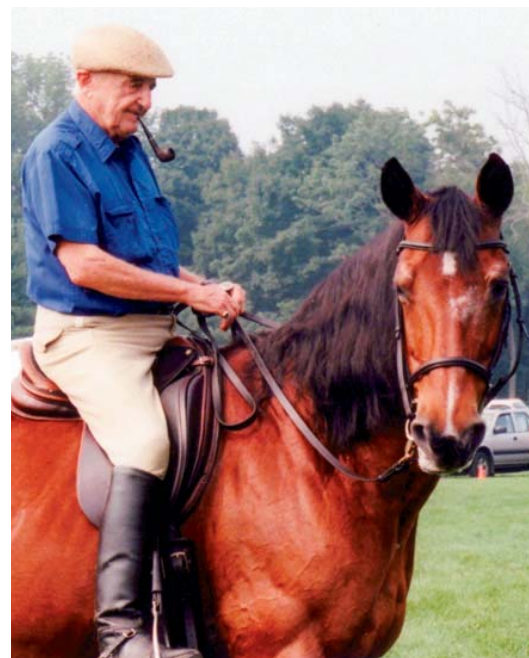
At the same time in Portugal, the Marquess of Marialva moved in the identical direction. His teaching is still followed today, perpetuated by many outstanding riders, the most well known probably being Mestre Joaquin Gonzales de Miranda in the early

1900s, who was actually the teacher of Nuño Oliveira. On the other end of Europe, de la Guérinière's principles were fully embraced and perpetuated in the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, where authentic Baroque dressage is still practiced today.

In the rest of continental Europe, dressage vanished as a result of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. The British Anglo-Thoroughbred replaced the Iberian horses, and polo, hunting, and racing became more prominent. In France, the École de Versailles and its achievements were rejected and Andalusian horses forgotten. François Baucher presented his new method in circus performances, mainly with Anglo-Thoroughbreds, often claiming as his inventions what had been stated by eminent equestrians long before him. Basing his approach on the domination and destruction of any resistance and personality of the horse, softening of the jaw between curb reins and spurs, it was not surprising that there was an outcry of opposition. Ultimately, Baucher gave his critics their due by retracting his teaching method only to promote his second method, which consists of a much softer hand, a snaffle bit, slow progress, and the concept of hands without legs and legs without hands, which is basically nothing new, was never controversial, and was already recommended during the Renaissance hundreds of years before.

The French General Alexis l'Hotte, a student of François Baucher, ultimately rejected him and finally came to the same conclusion as Gustav Steinbrecht in Germany: to ride the horse "forward and straight." They and many others all used, to some extent, Baucher's second method, but France was never able to develop a clear concept.

In countries such as Germany, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden, there was a longing for the "good old days" prior to the Revolution. In the 1800s, the Prussian and German monarchs asked Ad-



RIDER AND WRITER: *Gahwyler and an unnamed mount in an undated photo*

olf Seidler and Louis Seeger, then in charge of the Cavalry School outside Berlin, to reestablish a more structured riding which was more reminiscent of how it used to be a hundred years ago.

Seeger, together with the *Oberbe-reiter* of the Spanish Riding School, established the cavalry program of riding, including dressage, tailor-made for German warmbloods of the time, using the basic concepts of de la Guérinière but much less demanding and achievable by the average rider and horse. In his book, *System der Reitkunst* (A System of Equestrian Art), published in 1844, he outlined these concepts very clearly. Gustav Steinbrecht, who married Seeger's daughter, continued his work, as did others including Col. Waldemar Seunig.

Then comes the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period not yet labeled by historians but characterized by mechanization, materialism, and fierce competitiveness combined with the progressive obsolescence of the horse as a necessity. As if on command, competitive dressage appeared first as a test for officers against officers, introducing new concepts such as gaits and transitions,

probably the most important innovation of the century, tying together movements and exercises that were originally performed by themselves. Of what used to be dressage, only three movements were preserved, namely passage, piaffe, and pirouette, to which later was added a circus trick, tempi changes at every stride, which is basically pacing in the canter, while everything else was relegated to the schools of Baroque dressage in Vienna and Portugal.

After World War I, it became clear that something had to be done to prevent the further deterioration of dressage. The FEI [*Fédération Equestre Internationale*] was founded, and its first step was trying to preserve as much as possible of what dressage used to be, leading to the definition of the first paragraph of the FEI Rule Book. Further, the systematic and clear approach of Seidler, Seeger, Steinbrecht, and others became the definition of what was right and what was wrong, and the German warmblood, for whom these rules and definitions were made, became the horse of choice for dressage, which it still is today.

Dressage moved from a military competition to a civilian sport. In 1952, for the first time, amateurs, women, and noncommissioned officers were allowed in international competition. It is at this time that test riding really became the dressage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The levels of competition are being scaled down progressively, so anybody who wants to compete, competent or incompetent, can do so.

The concepts and parameters of dressage had fundamentally changed, and so had the horses. It is more important to have a horse able to do everything somehow than one who is brilliant only in some aspects. For instance, a horse superb in passage, piaffe, and the airs above the ground would have been highly esteemed in the old days, but not any more unless he can also do tempi changes, and if not, he would be useless for interna-

tional competition. Very rarely do we see a horse that is really superb in all aspects.

But the 20<sup>th</sup> century still has more surprises—something that has never happened before in the history of horsemanship, to the best of my knowledge.

Did you notice that all equestrian books from centuries ago up to roughly 1960 were written exclusively by men, but 90 percent of all books coming on the market today are written by women? Also, that the original competitive test riding done and created exclusively for cavalry officers has now become a predominantly and almost exclusively ladies' sport? Furthermore, that the dressage organizations from the local level up to our national organization were formed by women and are run by women? This by necessity will put a much more feminine touch on dressage over the next two or three decades.

But whether we will see the preservation of the concept of what

dressage used to be or not will also be influenced by the broad lack of interest in education, theory, and knowledge combined with a certain lack of determination and dedication to really learn the basics before showing.

As it stands today, however, most of our lady riders do not realize that they are literally in the saddle in two ways: 1) when they are riding, and 2) when shaping what is going to happen with dressage. It will be most interesting to watch how they will acquit themselves of the enormous responsibility for dressage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ▲

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