We Have The Tools At Hand To Achieve Excellence In Dressage

By taking advantage of the depth of knowledge already available in this country, we can rise to the top again.

BY MICHAEL POULIN

U.S. dressage already possesses many of the essential elements necessary to compete in Olympic dressage—and to win again.

Yet, as a national endeavor, we acknowledge our continuing frustrations. Much has been said about the need to fundamentally restructure an approach following London. And perhaps rightfully so.

However, it’s also possible that solutions—transformational and uniquely American innovations—are closer at hand than one might think. We have within our grasp the keys to reshape our sport. If we collectively demand and achieve excellence in its broadest and most classical sense, trips to the podium will follow.

Recommit To Proven Training Systems

Achieving a successful system isn’t a secret. The road to the Olympic Games begins five to eight years before a rider typically gets to the Olympics. An Olympic team is made up of individuals who have already developed a proven, successful system. So what is the ideal “system”? To me, it’s simply a support group with complete honesty and a coach with deep knowledge born from experience.

“We have within our grasp the keys to reshape our sport,” says Michael Poulin, shown here riding Graf George at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, where they won team bronze. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL POULIN
This depth of honesty and knowledge is absolutely necessary to repair problems under pressure. The rider must respect and believe in his or her coach immediately in a singularly difficult situation. Experience and knowledge of the process leads to an innate understanding of what needs to be done. A horse and rider under extreme pressure will only respond positively when there is unequivocal confidence in that coach and that process.

The difficult truth is that there’s no organization or coach who can successfully intervene at the last minute. Particularly after a team has been selected, it’s counterproductive to make significant changes in a rider’s approach or attempt to improve the horse.

**Engage Our Collective Experience**

Experience matters profoundly, perhaps more so than in any other sport. Competing at the Olympic level exposes the horse and rider to great travel distances, a new and difficult environment, tension, stiffness, sometimes sickness and always a great deal of pressure. Without a familiar coach who is highly experienced with this level of pressure and competition, such factors alone can destroy even the very best horse-and-rider partnership.

To foster the greatest possibility for success, I submit that team coaches should: 1. be selected with a very long lead-time, and 2. have deep experience at the highest international levels. Keen insight during trying situations is invariably drawn from past experiences and, frankly, from our own prior mistakes.

This isn’t to say there is a single “correct” coaching vision. On the contrary, each team member is an individual with a special path to success. Creating an initial zone of success is the realm of each individual and his or her coach. The team coach must understand those bonds and be able to function within them, to complement and assist rather than override. Achieving the requisite respect and confidence in a moment of intense pressure can’t be done in an instant. Repetition drives experience, which in turn produces confidence.

**Knowledge Will Yield Success**

The depth of the riders’ knowledge will determine the strength of the team. This simple tenet is nothing new; we already know it. But we have strayed. We must establish systems that mandate adherence to it at all levels. We must demand a commitment to a lifetime of constant learning. It’s the only way we’ll be successful again.

Take an in-depth look at our history and why we were successful. We thrived in an atmosphere of learning and support. We continued with each of our time-tested systems. Engendering trust in one another’s way of doing things and respecting each person’s path built a team dynamic. Trying to change too much would’ve destroyed the process.

Contrary to some schools of thought, I believe we have very good quality horses in this country. However, we don’t have the same quality of training. Many are capable of starting an Olympic horse, but only a precious few can develop it to higher levels, particularly regarding the piaffe and passage. We must disseminate our collective knowledge now, or else, over time, it might be too late.

Training disasters will always strike, and they’ll strike at the worst of times. When something goes bad, and the rider and trainer lack the knowledge to fix it, there’s nowhere to turn. The horse will always be totally honest, and only a deep knowledge of nature’s process will yield an answer.

**Integrity**

More important than any specific training regime, our drive for a new excellence demands adherence to an uncompromising and reasserted set of conduct standards. Our leaders and role models must imbue these standards at all levels—to our riders, trainers, coaches, owners, veterinarians and handlers. Failure to maintain the most honorable approach to our craft will eviscerate the impact of any purported achievements.

Our sport must lead the world if it is to be something in which Americans can be proud.

We can re-take the podium. To be sure, our best riders need our governing body to facilitate training and competing in Europe. But we must simultaneously develop our U.S.-based training process by re-committing to successful systems that are already in place. In that setting, our governing body will foster, hone and polish the training process to truly lasting success.

**IN THE FORUM**, horsemen are invited to express their views and offer constructive criticism on any topic relevant to working with and enjoying horses. The opinions expressed by the writers are entirely their own and not necessarily those of The Chronicle of the Horse.

Michael Poulin

Michael Poulin’s contributions to U.S. dressage span the gamut from the competition arena to coaching to judging and governance. He won team bronze at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games and boasts multiple national and international championships. He heads the Poulin School of Dressage at the Dressage Center Inc. in DeLeon Springs, Fla., and has trained multiple Olympians. He sits on the Board of Directors of The Dressage Foundation and has been a long-time member of the U.S. Equestrian Federation Board of Directors and Dressage Committee. He’s a member of the International Dressage Trainers Club and the Classical Dressage Riders Association. He also travels nationally and internationally as an FEI “I” rated dressage judge and dressage coach.