

THE HAPPY ATHLETE

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“From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step”. Napoleon

One of the silliest expressions or concepts in a sport rife with silly babble is “the Happy Athlete.” It has the same silliness think-level as “he wants to please,” or “he does it to annoy me.” This is the worst kind of anthropomorphism. Horses just do not have the hardwiring to try to please OR to displease. Horses do what they do in order to be left alone and in peace – at least for a few moments at a time. If we set up the right situation and encourage experimentation, they will generally find their “comfort zone” under those circumstances and limitation, and it will coincide with our wishes. They will have made it their choice – a much more powerful learning function than ceaseless management.

At the Global Dressage Forum a few years ago, we were asked to do an exercise in which we watched a series of 20-second video clips of several horses from the Athens Olympics and rated them as to which was the happiest athlete, the second happiest athlete, etc. Oh my....

I thought it was so silly that I watched the *human* athlete – where I felt better able to recognize “happiness.” They all looked grim (as happens when we concentrate).

The intent of the concept of “the Happy Athlete” is admirable. Modern competitive dressage is often over-managed and even coerced. As it happens, this fantasy came up after the brouhaha about “Roll-Kur.” Nevertheless, “happiness” is a very unhorsemanlike or non-Horse-Think way to approach the issue.

What are the indicators of the horse’s happiness? Horses do not smile. They do not giggle. They do not chortle. They do not coo. They do not say “whee.”

Horses are happy when they are eating or rolling or chewing withers. And that is a stretch as to whether it is “happy” or perhaps, more realistically, “content,” “confident,” “un-coerced” or some similar adjective.

I equate it to when I was in Navy boot camp. I hated the discipline, but found out how to make a least-stressful situation by adapting my own behavior relative to demands and limitations. I was not happy being in the Navy, but I was closest to “happy” when I was left in peace because I did the “right thing.” Better than 50 push-ups for a mistake. That is pretty much what we ask the horse to do in dressage – figure out how to make his life better/easier.

Happiness for horses is when we help them learn how to put a stop to our harping, nagging, walloping, clutching, and stabbing, and leave them in peace to figure out how to make all that stuff go away and make their lives better. They are ever so smart about that, but ONLY if the rider makes a clear pattern in the training – “If you do this (or do not do that), I will leave you in peace for the moment.” That is all they ask of life under saddle.

But with the concept/idea of the “Happy Athlete” written into the rules or guidelines, we are doomed to perpetuate this misunderstanding of the nature of horses and our relationship to them as riders.

I can see the Collective Marks now:

Gaits

Impulsion

Submission

Rider

Happiness (as in ‘Bluebird of...’)

Oh DO let’s grow up....

J. Moore