

Warmblood *Whoas*

By Michael Barisone

Want to Improve Your Odds? Build a Pipeline!

Top American dressage riders are not creating the pipeline they need, they just aren't. And in most cases, they need to.

Maybe you have a sponsor who has a gazillion dollars and that's great. You go out and buy a horse that does every piece of the Grand Prix, you ride it and it's a pretty good bet that you'll make it to the Grand Prix. But I challenge you: name a rider who's gone out and bought a made horse and got on a national team. Briton Carl Hester and German Isabell Werth, to name just two of the world's top riders, started with two- or three-year-olds. Their horses were created by these riders. Their model, whether they start with a yearling or a four-year-old, is creating horses for the future—and they're creating lots of them. That's where, as a nation, we're falling behind.

When we're talking about horses and our goals, we have to be careful to keep our eye on the ball with what we're doing with training and breeding. There's a disconnect between breeders and riders in America, and we need to bridge that gap. First of all, we have to get the young horses going and under the seats of our capable riders.

The family of my long-term business partner Vera is involved with a foal auction in Holland. About five years ago Vera and I realized we needed to make better use of our farm. Vera called me from Holland and said she'd bought a foal, and I said, 'buy another.' I figured out that we can buy three foals and ship them to the United States for what one three-year-old costs to buy and ship. That led me to think, if I buy one horse every year or two, I shot my wad of cash on one bet. If I spend that same money on three horses, I triple my chances of succeeding. I know this is not a simple thing for most people. Most trainers do not have their own farm and can't pay board on twenty horses. But a creative mindset—and taking advantage of what we have—is what's going to help us succeed.

So if Vera and I buy three or four foals every year, by the time the oldest are seven, we will be able to identify

which ones are rock stars. We'll also have one that's an unrideable donkey, maybe one that goes lame, but the reality is most of them will turn out to be decent horses. That's a direct quote from Carl Hester. Whether they become nice for a junior/amateur or go to the Olympics, you will have several decent horses. Over the years, Carl has only had one that was unrideable.

In my mind, that system creates a pool of horses from which our top competition mounts are going to emerge.

It also has the benefit that rather than me having to fly all over to find a horse for an amateur client, I can have them walk into my back barn to find their next four-year-old, a good quality horse I've known for most of his or her life.

Now, I don't pick out the foals we buy. We all need to stick to our skill sets; I've seen some foals in my lifetime, but Vera's brother-in-law Paul Hendricks is much better at picking foals out than I am because he does it all the time. Paul has seen thousands

of foals in his lifetime and he can look at a foal and say, "I like that hind leg for a jumper but not a dressage horse." He may not always be right but, for choosing a foal, he's the expert. I'm not the expert, so I leave that up to him. I can see the overall picture: what the papers say, what the bloodlines mean, maybe the look in the foal's eye and some basic conformation. But if I choose a foal I'm taking a bigger risk than if I let Paul choose one for me.

By purchasing foals, Vera and I can spread out the wealth. And with planning, we are prepared for the time that we have 20 horses to feed and care for. I want to have five horses of every age out there with a team of riders, whether my assistant Justin or the young women who work for me. From what I see, that's how British gold medalists Charlotte [Dujardin] and Valegro got started. You never know which combination will be next to make it big.

Everyone will have a different model: not everyone has a farm and not everyone is brave enough to take the risk of buying foals. At this point, between facilities, fees and shipping, I have probably a half a million dollars



invested in these foals by now. But it's worth it to me; I don't want to ever have a time when we don't have a horse developing.

If you look at the top riders in America, we have many who have one good horse and then they're out. Maybe they have another horse coming up, but that's it. We tend to rely a lot on luck and hope, and if your chances buying a lottery ticket are one in a hundred, buying fifty makes your chances one out of two. That's what we need to do with horses.

I'm sure Edward Gal is not buying foals—he's buying a five-year-old that has a wow factor. He's buying a lottery ticket that gives him a 1 in 2 chance to get to the FEI level. But sponsor Glock is funding that. The rank and file professional doesn't have that kind of backing. There's no reason those riders can't be in the game, but they have to be creative and find a way to do it.

The first foals we bought are now coming five. One is a lovely creature who's attractive and a kind and fun horse. She's probably not an Olympic horse—you never know, of course, but we do hope she'll become a successful Young Rider and FEI horse for her new 15-year-old owner. Another of our young horses is a rock star. She's phenomenal. She's a foal that was bought for

fair money and we put her in a field, and now she's a diamond in the rough. It stands to reason that some of these foals we bring over will be international horses, some will be useless and some will be suitable for an amateur.

If every good FEI rider in this country bought a two-year-old every other year, in ten years we would have a juggernaut of horses to rival any European country. Generally speaking, we don't do this in the United States. We don't think of the future in this way. But if we want to be successful on the international stage, we have to start—now. **WT**

*An FEI dressage rider/trainer of Long Valley, New Jersey, and Loxahatchee, Florida, **Michael Barisone** has a thriving training business and several horses winning at Grand Prix, including HF Victor, Urbanus and Lauren Sprieser's Ellegria. Michael was reserve for the 2008 Olympic team riding Neruda. He and Vera Kessels-Barisone, a Dutch native and Grand Prix dressage rider, purchase foals in Holland each year and produce all of their own Grand Prix horses.*



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Ask us about our plans for 2018!

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