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## putting age, size and soundness in perspective

*The other day I was talking with an experienced professional about a Grand Prix horse that was for sale. When I mentioned that the horse would soon turn twelve, the knee-jerk reaction of this person was, “Oh, then he will drop in price, because twelve is the magic number.”*

Says who? Well, the insurance companies, for one, since they tend to make the premiums steeper after age twelve.\* Perhaps that is why our minds make a mental slash at this age, although, especially in our game, that is completely absurd. In real life, twelve is indeed the magic age, but in a totally positive way.

### Good Things Take Time

As we all know, there are dressage horses that have been able to produce all the movements in Grand Prix at age seven or eight, but they are a

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\* See further discussion of the “magic number” on p. 111.

product of unusual talent, and mental as well as physical strength. And they are ridden by experienced and competent riders who have traveled the route many times before. A handful of them go on to glory on the international scene, but many simply disappear as quickly as they appeared and are never heard from again. To me, the exceptions prove the rule that “good things take time,” and more often than not a horse that reaches his first public performance in Grand Prix sometime between ages ten and twelve will bloom in his mid-teens, and stay sound and going close to his twenties. Sometimes a horse like this will even continue into his thirties as a schoolmaster and revered teacher.

Following the proper and fair progress of training, and figuring in the “hiccups” on the way, it takes, or ought to take, at least four years to teach even a very talented horse the whole Grand Prix program. That means he will appear in his first year green Grand Prix test at the earliest at age nine. Usually, the test at that point will show green mistakes and a lack of strength and stamina for all the requirements. To achieve the appearance of ease and casualness we look for in the finished horse, you can count on two years of polishing. The horse will now be at least ten years old, and normally he is closer to twelve.

Here he is, the finished product that has just arrived at the pinnacle of the sport, and now he is worth *less*? At least for dressage horses, there is something wrong with that thinking, and we need to stop buying into the insurance companies’ view of horse age and look at the truth in the sport. Check out the ages of the horses competing in the Olympics and the World Games, for a start. Then look at the ages of the winners and high-placing horses. Not too many under ten there! The ones who make history and remain in our memory from Games past are the horses who kept coming back to new Games late into their teens, only getting better as they aged.

Although most of us are aware of the downside of younger horses, we become captivated by the dream, which often remains just a dream with

many disappointments on the way. We forgo the horse that already offers the whole Grand Prix for the “hopeful” younger horse, which very possibly never arrives at the destination. Of our team riders in the last World Equestrian Games (WEG 2006), Steffen Peters was the most successful on the oldest of our horses,\* and Olympic competitor Kennedy was far from a spring chicken when Jane Forbes Clark purchased him for Robert Dover. At the 2007 World Cup Finals, three horses over sixteen (Briar, Floriano, and Idocus) were in the top six placings, and many past Olympic medal horses were closer to twenty than fifteen when they earned their greatest honors.

Smart people see the whole picture, and do not fall into the age trap, which especially for dressage horses, is relative to the level of the performance and the overall health of the individual animal. When it comes to purchasing a teenage horse, even the pre-purchase exam is less torturous. Instead of guessing how the horse will stand up to the workload of the job description, you get to examine his show record, and you can find out if he has had long absences from the show scene for reasons of health. If the horse has performed consistently for at least a decade, chances are he will continue on track until his last breath. Whatever shows up on X-rays he is either unaware of or has learnt to live with, and you can expect no surprises, only some “maintenance” down the road—of the kind that many of the younger show horses receive, as well. No crystal ball necessary, since what you see is really what you get!

## All Horses Great and Small

The size of a horse is another topic that has been misunderstood, but here there has been some major improvement over the years. There was

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\* *Floriano was sixteen years old when he helped the US Team win bronze at the 2006 WEG.*

a time, in the days of Christine Stückelberger's champion Granat, when no horse could be tall enough. Every call about horses for sale would start with "How big is he?" You would believe this country was populated by giants, since the demand for horses over 17 hands was impossible to satisfy. Then the prospective customer would show up, all five foot of her or him, and "the look" was not a thing of beauty. The fact that there was no harmony in the picture of horse and rider never seemed to matter, and often the complete lack of communication between man and beast, due to the incompatible weight and strength of the horse, made no impression. The horse had to be big!

Since I had to train some of these oversize models, and at 5 feet, 8 inches had some problems communicating with all that volume, I could never understand this fad. As I mentioned, the tendency to favor oversize horses has luckily diminished over the years, but there is still not a great call for the smaller, better horse. The truly athletic 16-hand or under animal can easily carry most people who are 5 feet, 6 inches or shorter—and some even taller, if they are reasonably slim.

There are a number of advantages to the smaller horse. First and foremost, they are usually easier to motivate with lesser aids, which makes riding less work and more fun! Secondly, the mobility and easy "fit" in the dressage arena gives you an advantage in riding the test. There is a larger margin for error and more time to prepare your next movement. Particularly in riding freestyles, I much prefer being on a smaller model horse; if you make a mistake, you can get back on track more quickly and smoothen the picture. My best freestyle horses were Amazonas, who won the Grand Prix freestyle at Devon, and Genius, who won several World Cup qualifiers. Amazonas was barely 16.1 hands, and Genius stood a proud 15.2. Because his movement was so expansive, he was always thought of as a bigger horse, and boy was he handy in the arena! Some of my larger horses were just a bit too "filling" in the ring, and since they were not as easy to maneuver, their mistakes were obvious.

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*finding "the one"*

Another real advantage of keeping size moderate is the soundness issue. I have found, along with many other people, that the bigger the horse, the more fragile he tends to be. The modern sports horse we strive to produce today stands tall and "leggy," and often measures way over 17 hands. All that height without a solid foundation takes a beating while we make a ballet dancer out of an animal that was designed to do nothing but graze and wander about in a leisurely fashion. I am well familiar with the patching and pampering that goes on in every barn at the big international events, and it is not because these horses are ill, but because their job description is not really "natural" and the taller they are, the more they appear to be at risk. Ponies, as you know, hold up a lot better to the demands of being trained and ridden, and they usually live forever.

When the size of the rider and the size of the horse are in harmony, the horse is the right size. And remember that a lot of good things come in small packages!

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