



A Training Tradition Lives On In Karl Mikolka

From his early days at the Spanish Riding School, he's embraced a horse-first philosophy and devoted his life to teaching classical dressage.

BY JENNIFER B. CALDER
PHOTOS FROM THE COLLECTION OF KARL MIKOLKA

Under the cover of darkness Karl Mikolka reenacted a scene he recalled from one of the many imported Western movies he watched as a boy growing up in war torn Vienna.

Mimicking the villains from cowboy films who used ripped gunnysacks to muffle the horses' hoofbeats, Mikolka wrapped the white Lipizzaner stallion's hooves before leading him out into the still night. Siglavy Capriola glowed ghostly in the pale light as he obediently followed his rider across the cobblestone courtyard, and the duo entered the arena of the legendary Spanish Riding School.

One whinny or snort could wake the feared director of the school, Alois Podhajsky. His superiors had denied Mikolka when he requested additional practice time, so discovery would certainly cost him his job.

Once inside, Mikolka longed the horse around and around, street lamps softly glowing through the large windows of the Baroque hall providing the only illumination.

Breaking the rules and risking his position was a chance worth taking if it meant the horse might improve and learn to be more responsive. After settling the enormous stallion in his stall, he returned to the arena and painstakingly raked the ring, erasing the perfect circle they made in the sand

in the hopes that their clandestine work would go undetected.

Mikolka has devoted his life to the horse's well-being and advancement. He's dedicated to the preservation of classical riding as it was taught to him by his mentor, Alfred Cerha, at the Spanish Riding School, and it has been his destiny to bridge the lessons of the past with the riders of the future. Along the way, this vivacious 78-year-old U.S. Dressage Federation Hall of Famer has amassed a group of devoted supporters and students all eager to ensure his methods of training continue.

The Horse Comes First

Speaking with Mikolka on his charming screened porch overlooking the New England fishing village of Gloucester, Mass., he explains, in his expressive staccato German accent, that he deems the practice and preservation of classical horsemanship an endeavor as vital as breathing, more important than winning competitions, more important than financial success.

"My lifelong goal—and the reason I am not so famous and able to say, 'I made this horse into a champion and that one to be champion,'—is because I made the horses not necessarily champions in shows but for the owners they became safe," he explains. "They became champions for their owners. All my horses, knock on wood, they were all 28 years old before they died. Healthy. The horse comes first! His health, his soundness. It was, over the years, my goal. Not stupid ribbons and being judged by somebody who doesn't

even know that much but has the authority to sit somewhere, at C, and say this was a 4, and this was a 5!"

Mikolka is no shrinking violet, and it's hard to remember this man with the larger-than-life personality has recently battled—and beaten—cancer. The only evidence is his request for me to remove my shoes upon entering so as not to track in germs.

Every sentence is punctuated by exclamation points, and he's quick to laugh, which we do a lot throughout the day. Watching him talk is more of a performance than a conversation, complete with sound effects and scenes acted out before me. The delight he finds in recounting a life inseparable from his love of horses animates his entire being.

We start at the beginning with a childhood marred by an absent father, drafted to fight for the Germans when Mikolka was just a boy.

"I was 4 years old when he was saying goodbye to us," he recalls. "I remember this—still I remember this—early in the morning he boarded a train and left."

The senior Mikolka was sent to the Eastern front to fight Russia and Poland.

"My father was the worst soldier!" he says with a laugh.

"He always said, 'Why should I shoot people that never did anything to me?' and always shot his gun into the air. If an officer would have seen it they would have..." his voice trails off, and Karl configures his hand into the shape of an imaginary pistol, "Pow! Pow! Pow!"

Equally vivid is the memory Karl has of his father returning

Karl Mikolka has dedicated his life to the art of classical dressage, prioritizing the horse's well being above winning competitions and financial gain.



Siglavy Capriola was a favorite of Karl Mikolka's, and he snuck the Lipizzaner stallion into the Spanish Riding School arena after hours, risking his own career and reputation to train the horse.

unexpectedly on a leave. "It was winter, and when I was little I liked boats. I took walnuts and broke them into two little halves and put a stick on it and a sail and fffffffeewwwwww," he says, making a blowing noise. "I was standing in the kitchen playing, and I turned to my mother and said, 'Papa will come tonight.' And it was a storm out there, blizzard conditions, and a half hour later we hear something!"

Karl stops talking and whistles a five-note tune. "It was our whistle!" Again, the five notes. "That is how we called each other. That was something my mother said she will never forget. I was 6 years old, and he marched through the door!"

The next time they saw him was a year later when he came home with a head injury from a grenade that also cost him his right eye. "His entire battalion was sacrificed, and he was on the last airplane that took out heavily injured soldiers and was not expected to survive," says Karl.

At this point Karl's wife of 26 years, Lynn, shows me a photo of his father, and sure enough, there is a divot in his forehead that looks as if it was made by a small ice cream scoop. But the injury didn't affect him mentally, and Karl was thrilled to have his father home. As an only child, the trio was close, although his parents didn't understand their son's fascination with horses and refused to give him permission to leave school and go work on the track.

Karl sidestepped their rule for a while thanks to his skill in forging notes from his mother to his school, explaining he was ill. His obsession with horses began early; his mother told him he would gleefully bounce up and down whenever they passed the many horses still working on the streets of Vienna.

"I was in the stroller calling to them already in the bouncing trot!" he says and laughs as he bounces up and down in his chair across from me, the white hair on his head rising and falling as he moves. He stops suddenly and stares intensely at me, hands steeped under his chin, "So something bit me before I even came out of the womb—I already had something."



Col. Alois Podhajsky was the director of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria, from 1939-1964, and Karl Mikolka credited his dog Lumpi with helping him gain admittance.

When asked if he remembers the first time he was on a horse, Karl bellows, "I remember because I paid for it! I was 15 years old. It was a beautiful 21st of August, beautiful blue skies and sun and cool, and I said I would like to take a riding lesson. I used to make a little pocket money by shining shoes, and I

“It was one lesson, but it was enough to poison me.”

—KARL MIKOLKA

had a few bucks. I rode a white horse, not a Lipizzaner, but a white horse with a bad habit of letting his tongue hang out like a long snake. It was one lesson, but it was enough to poison me.”

As fate would have it, the woman who taught his lesson was the aunt of Arthur Kottas-Heldenberg, who became Chief Rider at the Spanish Riding School. Karl would be admitted just five years later, quickly rising through the ranks to Assistant Rider and ultimately achieving Chief Rider, or *Oberbereiter*, status.

As my conversation with Karl unfurls, it becomes evident that many of the significant moments in his life have been touched by what he interprets as serendipity or divine intervention. It began with the premonition of his father's return and continued with his acceptance into the Spanish Riding School.

In an effort to keep from fidgeting during his interview with the stern director, Karl explains, “I had my hands under the table, on my lap.” Opposite him, on Podhajsky's lap, sat his beloved daschund, Lumpi, the director's pride and joy.

“I had no clue how important this bloody dog was to Podhajsky,” he continues. “So we are talking, and suddenly this dog leaves his lap and jumps on my lap! Suddenly! And Podhajsky said, ‘This! He never, ever did this before!’ I got the job! Years later, at the Christmas party, Podhajsky asked me if I remembered. Of course I remembered! The dog got me the job. This is a story I will never forget.”

The Mikolka Method

Karl's 14 years at the famous school in Vienna instilled in him a passion for traditional horsemanship as taught to him by his mentor, Alfred Cerha. The approach was a circular construction, as perfect as the voltes he rode over and over and over.

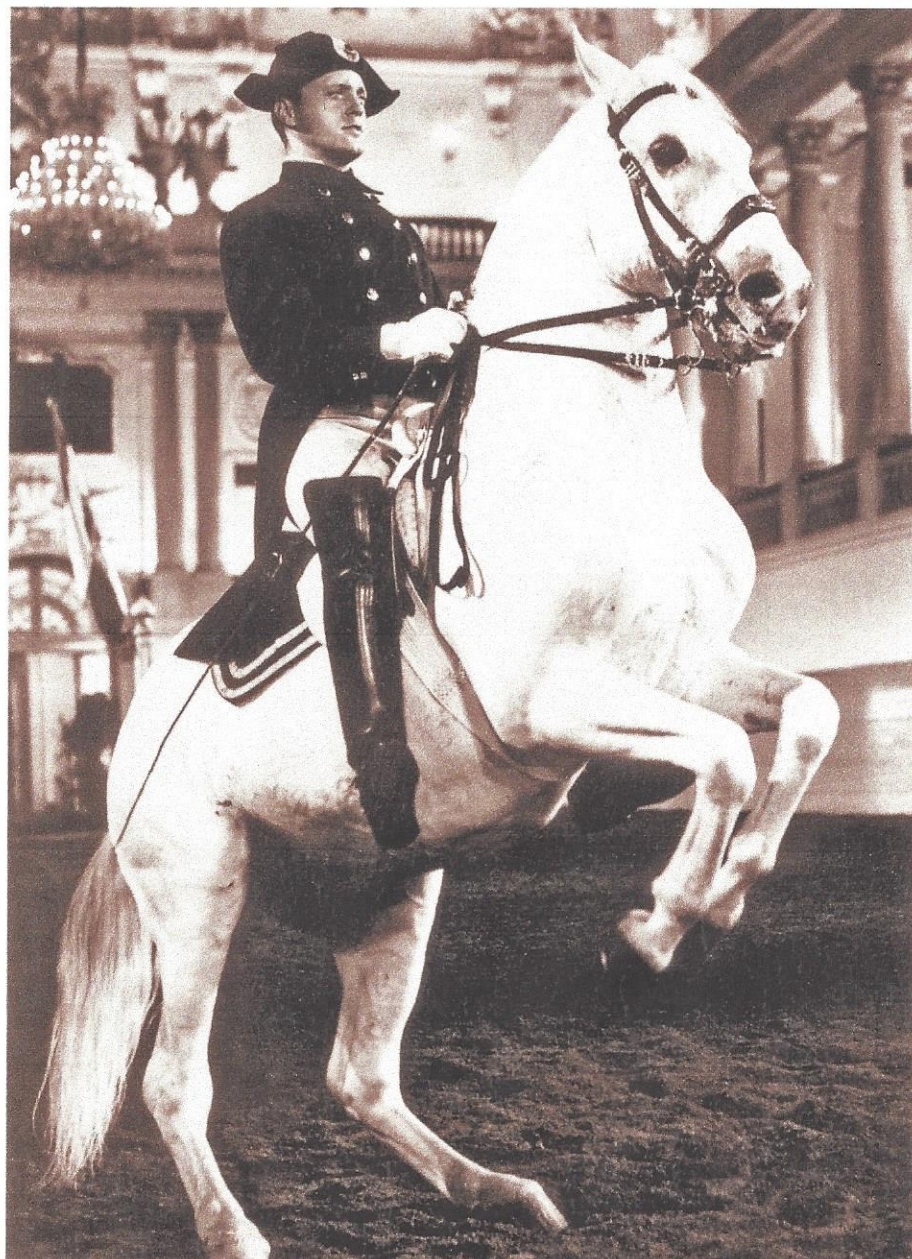
“The horse as the student, the experienced rider as the teacher, the schooled horse as the teacher to train the student,” Karl explains. “I live for classical horsemanship! I never really became a business person and couldn't care less about the money as long as I could do what I like to do—that was very important to me.”

In Cerha's system the horse was trained to look and feel effortless to ride and to be light on the aids.

“Cerha said to me, ‘You know, Karl, if I would have to push a horse, I would rather ride a bicycle.’ Smart, right? He was a super rider and a super teacher,” recalls Karl.

Six months after being promoted to Chief Rider at SRS, Karl left for Brazil. He had been recruited to help establish and coach a team capable of international competition. His superiors were unhappy with his decision

Karl Mikolka performed the Levade on Neopolitano Stana at the Spanish Riding School.



to leave the school, and, in a punitive measure, they withheld his *Oberbereiter* certification.

Once in Brazil, Karl hired an attorney who successfully petitioned for the document, and it was sent to him in South America. There remains, however, an empty space on the SRS roster next to the year, 1967, where Karl's name should appear. (SRS did not return emails on the subject.)

In addition to the certificate, he left behind two sons and an ex-wife. They still live in Vienna along with three of his grandchildren. His second wife, Cindy Sydnor, joined him on his move to Brazil.

In Brazil, Karl was able to propagate his approach, and he enjoyed testing the "whole horse training" theories on the different breeds he found there.

After four years, he fulfilled a boyhood dream of moving to the United States where he's spent the past 40-plus years refining his system, describing it as "an endangered species" that he's made his

life's work to protect and pass down.

He defines the "Mikolka Method" as being "based upon the most natural development of the horse's character and body—it is equine body building [physical] and educating the [horse's] mind so that the horse is not stuck in the alphabet but knows how to read more difficult sentences."

It is a lengthy process requiring patience and ingenuity, and he believes his program differs from many other training methods used in today's competitive dressage schooling.

"The competitive approach is to practice movements, always the movements!" he says. "They ride the movements and forget to ride the horse! You *must* ride the horse. Meaning make him supple, make him agile, make him equally left- and right-handed.

"Most dressage horses are one-sided, just like people," he continues. "So this one-sidedness was the first thing in Vienna that was eliminated through proper longeing and then longeing with a rider—a process that took almost 1½ years."

In the United States, he began his career on the East Coast, opening the Massachusetts Dressage Academy at Friar's Gate Farm in Pembroke, Mass. Following his divorce from Sydnor in 1975, he moved his base of operation to Long Island, N.Y.

Over the years, Karl's

philosophy sometimes bumped up against the more mainstream dressage paradigms and, as a result, he found he preferred training to competing.

“They ride the movements and forget to ride the horse!”

—KARL MIKOLKA

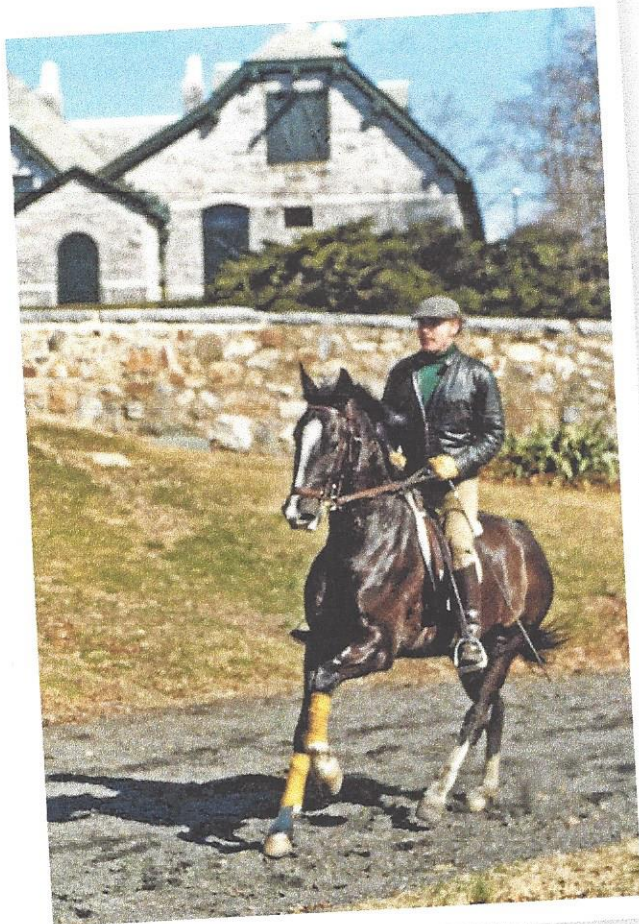
"I like to pass, preserve, and everywhere I went, I was trying to do this," he says. This preference was informed by his perceived politics of the sport, a conclusion he reached after years of judging at shows and selection trials (including the Olympic Games trials).

"The stupid politics! And later I saw this, as a judge again and again until I quit," he says. "The sport is infiltrated with political—not even correctness—incorrectness! Which ruins the whole thing."

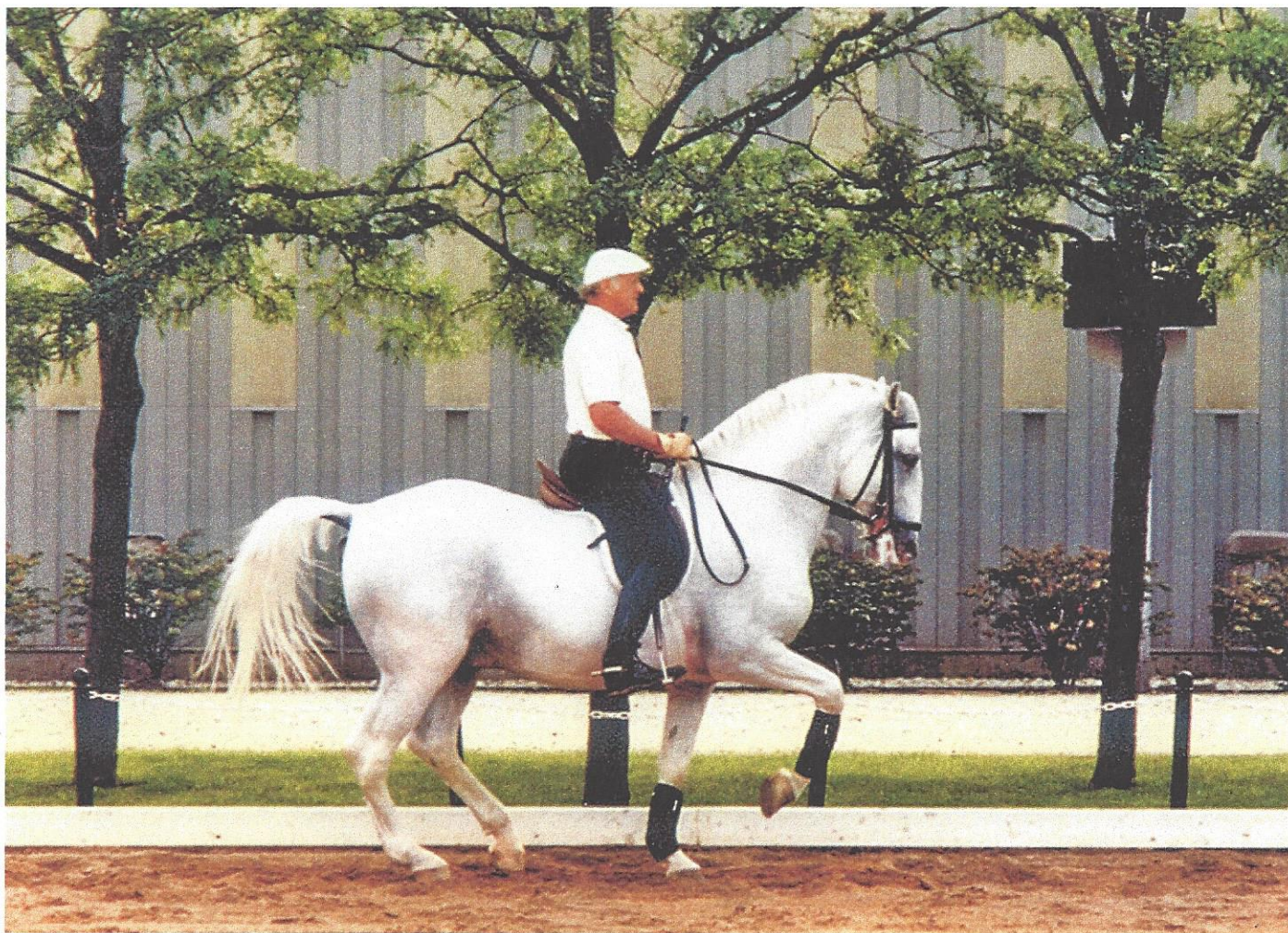
During these years, he spent some time working at the Steinkraus' farm in Connecticut. Bill Steinkraus employed unconventional methods for training his horses, often riding them around a race-track he built on his property to increase their stamina.

Karl credits Steinkraus with improving his riding. "Bill Steinkraus loved to ride with me, setting a pace that was quite different from what a dressage-only horse could maintain," he remembers. "He taught me the finer points of true forward riding."

Realizing his true desire was to train those passionate about classical dressage, he eventually found his way to Tempel Farms, a 6,000-acre farm outside of Chicago that was home to more than 400 Lipizzaners. Karl worked there from 1980-1997.



Karl Mikolka rode his dressage horses on the racetrack at Bill and Helen Z. Steinkraus' farm in Connecticut. "Bill Steinkraus loved to ride with me, setting a pace quite different from what a dressage-only horse could maintain. He taught me the finer points of true forward riding," he said.



"I live for classical horsemanship!" said Karl Mikolka. "I never really became a business person and couldn't care less about the money as long as I could do what I like to do." He left competitive dressage in order to teach and train horses like Conversano Belvedera at Tempel Farms in Illinois.

His passion is contagious, and along the way his fiery commitment to his art has inspired many in the dressage community who regard Karl as the last of his kind and share in his desire to preserve the lessons of the past.

"It takes quite a bit of discipline to adhere to Karl's system, which was discipline in yourself, first and foremost," says Grand Prix rider Shannon Peters. "Being physically and mentally prepared to train the horse to its potential, no shortcuts, no tricks."

She praises his "methodical approach to training. It makes sense to me as a rider and, most importantly, is a clear way of communicating with the horses. When the rider has a clear system, the horses have a clear understanding."

An Extended Family

Karl is clearly a beloved mentor, and his devotees' admiration is as much for the man as his methods. Never was this more evident than during his recent bout with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, which was diagnosed in 2009.

"Karl was diagnosed with cancer the week after the last clinic he did at our farm in California," says Peters. "Most of his students, from all around the country, supported him during his year of treatment by donating clinic fees, making monthly contributions, doing what we could to help him and his lovely wife Lynn through a difficult period in their life.

"I know for myself, there was not a second thought about helping him," she continues. "The amount of knowledge and effort he put forth over a 15-year period to make me a better rider, trainer and teacher could never possibly be repaid to him. It was the least I could do."

Speaking about that time, Karl declares, "I never was afraid! I never

was afraid of dying; it was really weird. I never thought about it! I trusted the doctor."

The doctor, James D. Levine of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, was a smaller man, reminding him of his father and his mentor, Cerha, and right from the start he got "good vibes" from him.

Good vibes, I learn, is one of the highest compliments Karl pays, having learned to trust his intuition. It's a skill honed over many years of working with horses and learning to interpret and depend on nonverbal communication.

Karl is also a man of "tremendous faith and a devout Catholic," shares Lynn. She confesses, "I was terrified! I have faith too, but I was terrified!"

At this, Karl tenderly glances at his fourth wife, a Juilliard-trained professional musician and dancer he loved at first sight. "This young lady walked by me [at a clinic he was conducting] and ssssssttt! ssssttttt! ssssst! ssssttt!" His sound effects again bring the



Karl Mikolka has learned to play the French horn, inspired by his Juilliard-trained wife, musician Lynn Mikolka. "Like my wife is devoted to music, I am devoted to [classical dressage]," he said.

The question "Why me?" is one of Karl's trademark sayings, sometimes in jest, sometimes as a complaint. In this book, thoughts on his teachings are organized into chapters with titles such as "Mastery: Inspired by Passion and Curiosity, Accomplished by Education" and "What Is A Teacher?"

This exquisite labor of love is more than 100 pages and

story to life as he makes shooting sparks noises. "I am not kidding! Sparks were flying! I remember I said to myself, 'I have to behave. There is something special here.' " Twenty-six years later that something special remains evident.

"In the SRS we learned that in order to teach a horse, you need to be prepared to repeat something three times—which is called one reprise," he explains of his multiple marriages. "If the first time it should fail, you have two more times to make it better. Three wives were a reprise. A new reprise in riding starts not with number No. 4 but with No. 1. Lynn therefore is and always will be No. 1!"

Along with the financial support they received from the larger dressage community nothing meant more to the Mikolkas than a privately published hardbound book containing some 70 essays and tributes about Karl titled *Why Me?: A Tribute to the Master, Oberbereiter Karl Mikolka*.

contains photograph after photograph of horses and followers who've supported and believed in Karl over the years. It is an impressive physical testament to things sometimes difficult to qualify and, as Lynn explains, "It was a surprise and came at the perfect time, when Karl's spirits were low, and he was feeling ill."

Dressage Is For Every Horse

This project was spearheaded by Cherie Beatty, a longtime supporter and advocate of Karl's system. Beatty first met Karl in the mid 1990s at one of his clinics.

"When I heard Karl say for the first time that every horse must and can be trained—not every expensive horse or every talented horse or every rider with a trust fund to afford such training, but every horse, and that he had a system that had been taught to him that would improve every horse and every rider if followed without deviation, I knew I had found the person and the method

I believed in," she says. "I believed in it because I saw it work with horse after horse, including the throwaway horses, the washouts, the untalented, the less than ideal."

She was so inspired by what he could accomplish with his classical horsemanship techniques that when she unexpectedly came into a bit of money, she decided, after jokingly toying with "the idea of buying a house in Hawaii," to instead "build a place where anyone could come who really wanted to learn and to follow that system. Here they would find a welcome and quality instruction, and Karl would be freed from the pressure of a grinding clinic schedule and be able to work in a central location."

"I saw it work with horse after horse, including the throwaway horses, the washouts, the untalented, the less than ideal."

—CHERIE BEATTY

Further explaining her motivation, she says, "Like many people who take up horses, I did not come from a privileged background, and my parents were decidedly lower middle class. I could never afford the best horses or the best lessons or the best of anything when I was a younger person. Building Snug Harbor's Riding School [in Unionville, Tenn.] to his specifications was the best thing I could have

done with that money! It has given so many people who lack means but not authentic desire a riding home and access to the best instruction."

Over the years Karl has earned the reputation of "The Repairman," and he finds a special joy and satisfaction in working with challenging or problem horses.

"He adores the challenge of taking horses others would turn away and through careful application of the system, turning them into horses they never thought they'd be," says Beatty.

One of her passions is equine advocacy, primarily focusing on the abusive training methods of the Tennessee Walking Horse. Employing Karl and his techniques, they've retrained a number of these horses, teaching them to move more naturally and away from their original careers as gaited show horses.

"Producing genuinely good riding horses with good minds and good manners is his special skill, and teaching others how to do that too is my definition of a true horseman," says Beatty.

I ask Karl if he ever feels like quitting or giving up on a horse and he, in his now familiar expressive style, answers, "Giving up was not done! Quitting was not in our vocabulary! It was not done until you really explored all avenues; you never give up. Never give up in riding. Always—if you give up—you [are a] loser. So I don't want to be a loser!"

Beatty's efforts, combined with Karl's, have gone a long way toward ensuring his methods will continue. He cites three students of note who will carry forth the torch: Anita Adams of Mt. Horeb, Wash., Don Paulhaus of Woodside, Calif., and Mary Werning of Camden, S.C. Others such as Gigi Nutter and Shannon and Steffen Peters also helped plant the seed, nurturing it as it grows (Nutter's husband, Scott Nutter, was the driving force behind Karl's acceptance into the Hall of Fame).

His new website, mikolkadressage.com, is a testament to his training philosophy and allows for the wider dissemination of his life's work. It was another unex-

pected gift. One of his students, who is also a graphic/web designer, created it without Karl's knowledge.

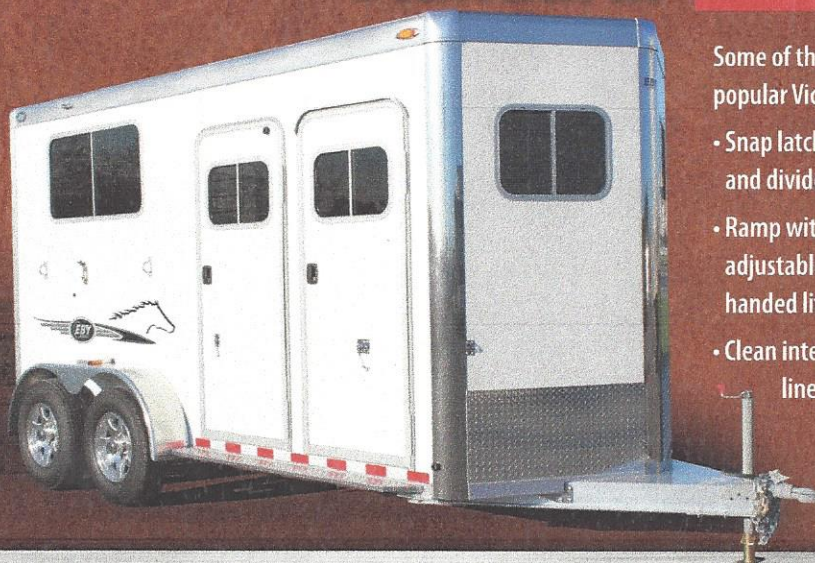
"Karl always tells us that the horse is the book you learn to read, but Karl Mikolka is the teacher who gave us the vocabulary we needed to open that book," sums up Beatty.

There is a saying in Vienna that "the horse makes the man noble," and that certainly seems to be a fair assessment of the man nicknamed "The Master." As we wrap up our talk, the morning fog has lifted, and the skies over Gloucester, while still moody and atmospheric, have brightened.

Karl offers this final thought: "I don't know anything but riding. I feel really good about myself. I never screwed anybody by selling a lame horse for big bucks and, like my wife is devoted to music, I am devoted to this! My greatest desire always was to learn how to ride and train the noble horse so that it can fully develop—in the most natural way possible—its physical and mental abilities." 🐾



Full of new enhancements ... standard! Victory II



Some of the new features of our popular Victory II trailer:

- Snap latches for breast bar, tail bar and divider release
- Ramp with non-slip surface and an adjustable springless hinge for one handed lifting
- Clean interior with seamless wall liner and plush stall pads



Visit our Blue Ball, PA location or call to find your nearest dealer.

mheby.com
800-292-4752

