

SOME SERIOUS CHANGES MUST BE MADE IF NEW ZEALAND DRESSAGE IS TO CATCH UP WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD ACCORDING TO

Leonie Bramall

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Canadian born Leonie Bramall needs little introduction. Based in Germany since 1984, she is one of the world's most revered dressage riders, with over 2500 wins and placings at the Advanced to Grand Prix levels. Highlights over the years include competing at the Olympic Games Barcelona 1992 and Atlanta 1996 as well as the World Equestrian Games in Den Haag 1994, with the exceptionally talented chestnut Oldenburg mare 'Gilbona.' Leonie is also in high demand as an instructor. Her positive approach, amazing eye and impressive track record training some of the best stallions and young horses in Germany has attracted a loyal following of students. This includes German Olympic Gold/Bronze Medallist, Heike Kemmer.

New Zealand is lucky enough to have Leonie as a visitor a few times each year, when she holds intensive clinics with a select group of riders. The most recent three day clinic was held at Showfields Equestrian Centre in Te Kauwhata and was attended by a number of the nation's up and coming dressage riders. Long time Leonie student, Andrea Bank was present with her stunning dressage stallion 'Doringcourt,' as was Victoria Wall with 'Astek Gymnast' and Britta Pedersen aboard her Dutch stallion 'Upendo.'

During a rare break between lessons, Leonie told Show Circuit that she is proud of the progress her New Zealand pupils have made over the years but feels dressage in this country still has a long way to go before it catches up with the rest of the world.

'Quite a few of the riders I teach in New Zealand have been with me since word go. It's great to see them growing and gradually improving each time I come out here. The

results they are achieving in competition are testament to the fact that they are listening to what I have to tell them and its working. It also shows me that they are going away after the clinics and really working on their riding at home,' explains Leonie. 'Unfortunately, some of the riders here seem to think that if they're riding Grand Prix and receiving 50% for their tests, then they're doing a good job which is just crazy. Nobody should be satisfied with those kinds of marks at that level of competition! There doesn't seem to be any desire to aim higher.'

'The problem is they think that if they're doing a flying change and all of the other tricks then they're riding top dressage. To me this simply demonstrates that they're missing the whole point of the discipline. They're in such a rush ...Riders are moving on to the higher movements when they can't even trot in a straight line yet.'

According to Leonie, riders in New Zealand need to review the basics, especially if they want to become internationally competitive. However, this is a concept that many Kiwis, especially those entering Advanced and Grand Prix competitions can struggle to come to terms with.

'There are riders out there who come to me and say they want to improve piaffe or passage but can't walk on a straight line with their horse on the bit,' says Leonie. 'They need to go back to walk/trot transitions and make sure they have the fundamentals absolutely right. Not enough riders are concentrating on the basics, or consistently working on them.'

'It's not rocket science although plenty of people overcomplicate it. At the end of the day, we're looking for three things: rhythm, balance and contact. One you have those things, and

you are balanced on a straight line and the horse is going forwards willingly, you will progress. The rider should continue to pay attention to those basics, whatever level they are at and whatever movement they are performing, be it a shoulder-in, half pass or one-time changes.'

One of Leonie's pet hates is people that don't take the time to understand their horse or they blame their lack of success in the dressage arena on their mount simply not being good enough.

'Every horse has challenges, whether it is the one with the biggest price tag or a 'normal' horse,' explains Leonie. 'You have to work with what you have and tailor your training to the horse. They are all individuals and have to be treated as such. Some will be more auditory or visual, meaning they will react to different things in different ways. Some will offer up responses to your questions naturally, while others will take twice as much work.'

'Unfortunately, some people allow ambition to cloud their judgement. Everyone that rides thinks that they're going to the Olympics and they forget what dressage is actually all about. It's about truly learning how to ride. It's figuring out how each individual horse learns and training them in a way that they can understand. It's about suppling and gymnastising them so they can perform each movement comfortably and

open mind and that drive to continue advancing. Unfortunately, some individuals have closed minds and aren't prepared to listen or learn.'

'I also think that getting out of New Zealand and riding overseas can be hugely beneficial,' adds Leonie. 'I encourage all of my students to come out to my yard in Germany to ride. They soon realise that it's not about sitting on a school-master and pushing buttons. They sit on a variety of different horses and they really have to ride. One of my pupils, Andrea Bank has had a stint overseas, as has Britta Pedersen and Kylie Baker and it has really broadened their horizons.'

Finally, Leonie believes that the level of support offered by Equestrian New Zealand needs to be significantly increased for the sport to make the necessary leaps ahead.

'Money needs to be dedicated to the younger people and their horses. In particular, they need support when they want to compete overseas,' says Leonie. 'After all, if these riders can't cope with a competition environment in places like Europe, how are they ever going to succeed on the international stage and take New Zealand dressage forward? The Germans and the Dutch are always striving to improve overall standards and it's frustrating that the same approach isn't being taken here. I also don't like the level of gossiping and backstabbing that seems to go on in this country among the competitors themselves... It is not constructive

I think it's time for things to shift and I do believe that people are ready to change their mindset. I wouldn't keep coming back to teach if I couldn't see something positive happening...

Let's just hope the change comes about sooner rather than later.'

happily. Riders also need to bear in mind that taking a horse through to the top levels takes time; they don't change in one day. Be patient, chip away and keep making steps in the right direction. One small step is better than no step at all. If you adopt this attitude, you will progress and you will get to where you want to be in the end.'

It frustrates Leonie that some riders assume that if they buy an expensive imported dressage horse or search for another 'Moorlands Totilas,' it will lead to success in the dressage arena.

'Moorlands Totilas is a freak of nature and his performances are the result of a unique relationship between him and Edward Gal. Horses like him don't exist in reality. But suddenly, you have a load of people rushing out and trying to find the next one of him or spending money on a pricy horse from Germany or Holland. First of all, New Zealand riders should consider why the trainers in Europe are selling these horses! It is usually because they have not cut the mustard overseas and have been tossed out the window. Instead of wishing they had a ready-made dressage horse with a larger price tag riders should be working on improving and training the horses they have. Suppling them up and teaching them to understand the exercises.'

Leonie also wishes that more riders would put in the hours at home, and remain dedicated to continuing education, rather than relying entirely on visiting clinics and trainers.

'Some of them think that the clinics will do everything for them but they still need to do their homework and improve

their riding at home,' she explains. 'There is no excuse not to keep learning. Even if you don't have access to a top trainer at all times, there are videos and the internet. There are other resources available. The most important thing is to have an

for the sport. There seems to be an element of 'tall poppy' syndrome in New Zealand when the focus should be on lifting the discipline as a whole, not bringing other people down and concentrating on individual success.'

'I know New Zealanders were disappointed when the country didn't qualify a dressage team for the Beijing Olympics,' adds Leonie. 'However, that was simply a symptom of what's wrong in the system. Something needs to change or it will be impossible for the sport in this country to evolve.'

