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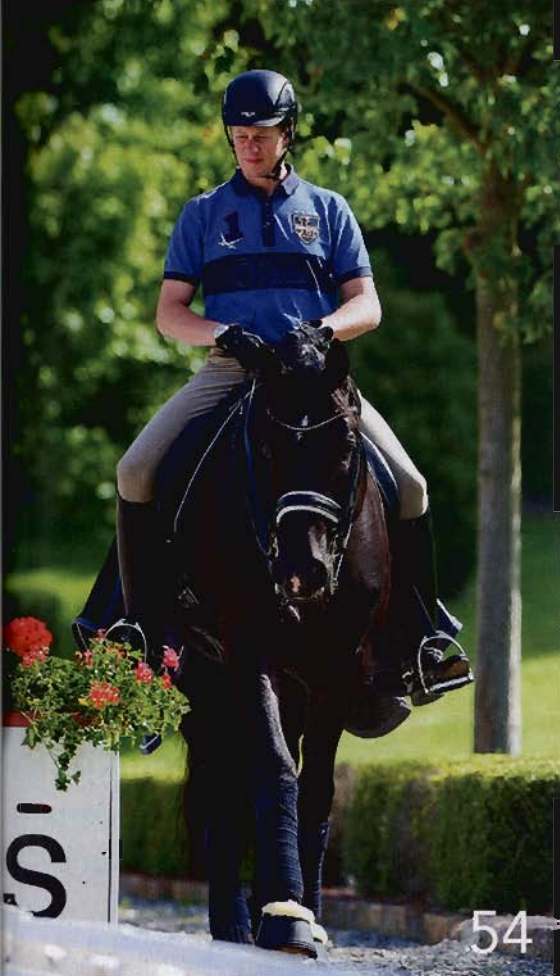
REMEMBERING
Chuck Grant

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October 2011

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AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL

Chuck Grant, one of the fathers of U.S. dressage.

By Paula Rodenas

Charles "Chuck" Grant (1914–1990) was one of our country's few horsemen of the early 20th century to appreciate classical horsemanship and apply it to his training. Years before dressage became popular in the United States, Grant considered it both a sport and an art form with spectator appeal. "He was training Grand Prix horses before we ever knew about it in this country," says ex-wife Carole Grant, also a respected dressage trainer.

Although I never met Grant in person, I began to correspond with him in the late 1980s when he sent me one of his books to review. He went on to send me newspaper clippings and friendly letters, signing them "pen pal Chuck." I learned that he was raised on a farm in rural Michigan. At 19, he was on his way to a career in maritime engineering in 1934 when he discovered a cavalry unit, the 122nd Field Artillery, in Chicago. The thought of riding horses every day was too good for Grant to pass up, and he was shipped out to Fort Riley, in Kansas, where he received training and observed the masters of the time. His interest in dressage peaked when he read a copy of James Fillis' book, *Breaking and Riding* (see a review on page 73).

Grant described Fort Riley as the home of advanced equitation in the United States before World War II. Each year various officers were sent to study in Europe and came home with new ideas about the training of dressage horses. In a 1986 article, Grant wrote: "I feel our dressage forefathers had the same problem that we are experiencing today—that is, a lack of dedicated trainers and instructors to show people how to go about training the horse."

Grant became enamored of dressage and circus performances, the latter being the first form of dressage he could remember. In the 1930s, he watched Capt. William "Bill" Heyer and his American Saddlebred mare, Starless Night, execute Grand Prix movements in the spotlight. Col. H.E. Tuttle was schooling two horses at Fort Riley, around the same time and presented an exhibition on the lawn of the White House for President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Britain's Winston Churchill. Grant also admired Col. Len "Great Balls of Fire" Kitts and American Lady. The pair rode at the 1932 and 1936 Olympics. Grant said the greatest exhibition he ever saw took place at

Chicago's Wrigley Field in 1946 when the Konyot family—Arthur Konyot; his wife, Manya; his son, Alex; and his daughter, Dorita—displayed what Grant called training at its best: one-tempi changes, passage, pirouettes and all the difficult *haute-école* movements. The influence of these horsemen led Grant to combine classical training and showmanship in his own unique style. Today, Konyot's granddaughter, Tina, continues her family's tradition of excellence in dressage. "I did not know [Grant]," she says. "I do know he was a student of my grandfather. A great deal of his knowledge came from Arthur Konyot."

After the war, Grant settled in the Chicago area to teach and train, and he judged at the first U.S. civilian dressage competition held in 1947 in Illinois. But he was advised by other professionals not to use the word "dressage" or he would have no business at all. The concept was misunderstood in those postwar years. All of Grant's students, however, were given dressage training on their way to the show ring. His equitation and hunter/jumper riders had numerous wins, and many went on to become professionals. At that time, he was married to Emmy Grant, and together they had one daughter, Randi.

In 1951, Grant wrote that a U.S. Equestrian Team (USET) class was formed



Courtesy, Mary Ann Grant



Courtesy, Paula Rodenas



Courtesy, Mary Ann Grant

Chuck Grant trained at Fort Riley in Kansas (right). He performed exhibitions on Bit-O-Shine (left) and trained at USET headquarters in Gladstone, New Jersey.

combining dressage and jumping for junior riders. The horse/rider combination had to complete a dressage test equivalent to Third Level and then negotiate a difficult course of jumps. By the fall of 1952, modified three-day events for junior riders had been organized and in 1953, three Midwest events were held.

In the early 1960s, Grant turned exclusively to dressage. He married Carole Grant in 1963, and they had two daughters, Mary Ann and Tonya. He competed at the few shows that existed and did exhibitions. He traveled to Hideaway Farm in New York and was able to train with the famous French Commandant Jean Saint-Fort Paillard of Saumur.

In 1966, Grant moved to Brighton, Michigan, and established Shine-A-Bit

Farm. When his marriage ended after 10 years, the family remained close. Carole says of her former husband: "He was a talented trainer of animals before there were how-to books and magazines. He could train an elephant to dance on a table! He taught us how to go all the way to Grand Prix by keeping it simple and teaching the horse step by step. Then you build on that." Carole went on to win gold medals at the 1982 World Equestrian Games and the 1983 Pan American Games. Today, she and her daughters operate Equistride in Fenton, Michigan, and Grant Farms in Wellington, Florida.

In 1973, Grant attended the first U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) meeting in Lincoln, Nebraska, and helped frame its

format. He wrote about dressage training in two books, *American Dressage* (1979) and *Training the Haute Ecole Horse* (1982). In the latter, he went beyond dressage and described how to teach the horse what we commonly know as circus tricks, such as bowing, kneeling and the Spanish walk. In his words, "High school training is nothing more than a continuation of dressage." He pointed out that such exhibitions had amused the public long before the birth of Christ and that none of the movements were unnatural. "There is nothing you can teach the horse that he may not do when at liberty," he wrote. To Grant, training was "a matter of communication, getting the horse's attention and teaching it the proper aids, whether it be basic schooling, high level dressage or tricks."

In a June 30, 1987, letter to me, Grant mentioned that he had begun a dialogue with the Spanish Riding School (SRS) of Vienna to discuss the possibility of starting a similar U.S. school. The SRS declined because it would never have enough riders and trainers, and such a school would take years to establish.

Grant seemed to favor color breeds for exhibition purposes: golden Palominos or spotted horses like the Appaloosa Billie Joe Freckles, who was trained to the FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) levels and could also perform tricks. Billie Joe started out as a Western horse that was roughly handled and difficult to ride. Grant found him to be talented as both a dressage horse and a trick horse. He was sold to Shelley Rosenberg, who rode and bred him, then sold him to Knoll Farm in Brentwood, Long Island, to be used as a schoolmaster. "Although I never saw Chuck in action as a trainer, I knew several of the horses he trained," said Anne Gribbons, the current U.S. dressage coach/advisor who, at that time, ran Knoll Farm with her husband, David. "We enjoyed

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Courtesy, Mary Ann Grant

Chuck Grant and Shining Gold show their style at an exhibition.

Billie Joe Freckles for many years. Not only did he perform all the Grand Prix movements, but he also did most tricks any well-trained circus horse could display. Once, when I gave him the wrong cue, he lay flat out on the ground and refused to stand up again. After a while of begging and probing with the horse just staring at me, I got worried and went to call Chuck. 'Please tell me what the cue is to get him up,' I said, and he replied, laughing, 'Buy my book!' Well, Billie got bored while I was on the phone and stood up. He continued teaching the kids and amusing us for years."

Grant maintained that there is nothing new in the training of horses since the time of Xenophon and that there are no shortcuts. He was outspoken and often controversial in his opinions. For example, he felt that FEI dressage was not for the junior rider. He was criticized by purists who turned up their noses at the circus aspects of his training. He pointed to the performances of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna and Gary Lashinsky's Royal Lipizzan Stallion Show as ways of promoting dressage to the public. In a letter dated June 30, 1987, he noted, "Many of the great dressage trainers of Europe started out as circus trainers."

Although Grant used the term

"American dressage" in his book title, he believed we should follow in the footsteps of the European professionals who devoted a lifetime to the sport.

In another letter (July 8, 1989), Grant wrote, "I think the reining-horse people are going to be on top, for they are coming up with some breath-catching movements for the horse to do." This was long before reining became an international discipline, but my pen pal was ahead of his time. Looking back, I realize that he recognized the similarities between dressage and reining and, in one short sentence, foretold the future.

In 1990, Grant passed away at age 76. His obituary mentioned only that he died at home. To the end, he baled his own hay and continued to ride, even when he had difficulty maintaining his balance in the saddle. In one of his last letters to me, he joked that he needed Velcro®, although I was not aware of any health problems at that time. In 1997, he was posthumously inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame.

After Grant's death, one of his disciples, Mari Monda Zdunic, carried on his traditions at Shine-A-Bit Farm, earning numerous dressage awards, presenting exhibitions at such venues as the Washington International Horse Show and the Quarter Horse Congress, and training a Quarter Horse, Shine-A-Bit III, to win a USDF all-breeds award in 1988. Another Quarter Horse, Lark Ascending, reached the international levels and was a Breyer horse model in 2003. Zdunic reviewed Grant's methods and philosophy in the book *American Dressage III*, which includes some final chapters on the background and direction of American dressage.

Chuck Grant left a legacy of hope and optimism for the future of dressage in our country. "There is nothing we Americans cannot do when we put our minds to it," he said. 🐾

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