

Dressage Then And Now: **A Photographic Comparison**

In this photographic essay, an “O” judge evaluates photos taken from different eras of dressage to see how the sport has evolved.

Axel Steiner

WE HAVE COME A LONG WAY since the first photo in this article was taken, when dressage was a sport for military men only, men who were riding whatever horses were available to them. My father was one of them.

As a young cavalry officer, my father was in training for the 1940 Olympic Games, which were canceled due to World War II. That war decimated not only the German cavalry but also those of most other European nations. After the war, when horses lost their military and agricultural uses, civilian equestrian sport took off.

Thanks to the fine-tuning of the many ensuing generations of breeding, we are now producing horses that have been created specifically for the sport, often with the woman rider in mind. The horse of today tends

to be lighter and hotter, with more of an “engine” that moves forward freely and willingly.

In this series of photos we see a progression. In early days of Olympic competition, horses were being ridden well in front of the vertical, but without the power from the haunches that we find in our modern horses. As the sport evolved, we also see conformational changes, with more effective angulations that allow the horse to move in a more athletic fashion.

That additional power, however, often requires a different connection, one that channels the horse’s thrust over the back and into a more vertical head position. We have to be aware of the danger of placing too great an emphasis on any one aspect, whether it is power, scope or even submission. Dressage is about balancing of all of the above.

Axel Steiner received his early dressage training in Germany. Upon immigrating to the United States, he had dual military and equestrian careers. He became a dressage judge in 1968 and an FEI O-rated judge in 1988.

Steiner has judged Olympic Games, FEI World Cup Finals, Pan American Games and countless CDIs in the United States and around the world. He was a founding member of the U.S. Dressage Federation and has been a member of the U.S. Equestrian Federation Dressage Committee for more than 20 years. He retired from the U.S. Air Force as a Lt. Colonel.

*Steiner is now actively judging as well as teaching riders and judges at all levels.
He’s also happily married to Terri Miller, an artist and photographer.*



This image of Xavier Lesage, a French officer, on Taine was taken in 1932 at the Los Angeles Olympics, in the warm-up area. Lesage was the team and individual gold medalist.

This is a nice looking, well proportioned horse, with a rider who is inclined forward in a very light seat. His legs are well off the horse, and he is riding in an all-purpose saddle.

It appears that the curb bit is somewhat more in play than the snaffle, but the horse is in front of the vertical. Unfortunately, however, he's not sufficiently engaged behind to be truly on the bit. The pitch of the horse's back between the saddle and the croup shows hollowness, which would make engagement difficult.

By the way, the 1932 Olympic Games was the first time that piaffe and passage was required in the Olympics, and the test was 16 minutes long.

Photo courtesy of ARMOR magazine (Cavalry Journal)

1932

1956



This photo from the 1956 Stockholm Olympic Games is an early appearance of the German rider Liselott Linsenhoff on Adular. They won the team and individual silver medals.

1952, was the first time women were allowed to ride in the Olympic Games—in dressage only—and in 1956 two of the three dressage medalists were women: Lis Hartel, the silver medalist, and Linsenhoff, the bronze.

The first thing I notice in this photo is the dreaded chalked centerline. How many horses actually tried to jump this? I'm not sure, but I certainly rode a few of them!

Looking at the horse itself, it is certainly a nice size and elegant build for a "lady's horse." But it is doing a half-pass that lacked engagement, suspension and self-carriage.

The tack is slightly different from what we see now: string girth, a very thin pad, and no knee roll to speak of on the saddle. And of course, Linsenhoff is wearing the "poofy" style breeches that would be replaced by stretchy fabrics.

The horse is in front of the vertical and looks happy in his work, but he's not doing much of it.

Col. Poudret/HorseSourcePhotos.com Photo

1960s



Riding for Sweden, Bengt Ljungquist and Karat competed in the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. Karat was an old-style dressage horse, relatively short-legged.

Again, the horse is in front of the vertical, but in this picture does not show the engagement required for a really superior piaffe. While the haunches are a little bit out behind, the horse shows activity that is similar front and back.

The rider's leg position, which is far in front of the traditional shoulder-hip-heel line, is not helpful to the horse, but it should be noted that he is riding in what looks like an all-purpose saddle.

Col. Poudret/HorseSourcePhotos.com Photo

1960s



Sergei Filatov and Absent were the individual gold medalists at the 1960 Rome Olympic Games and bronze at the 1964 Tokyo games.

This photo is taken at a difficult moment, approaching the downward transition from the extended canter to collected canter. (Some of you may recognize this as the "Whoa, Pony!" stage of the movement.)

Even so, Absent is nicely on the bit. Normally in this phase of the canter stride you would not expect to see the rider quite so far forward, but horse and rider are in balance. This seems to be a good team, as the horse appears to be totally focused on the rider based on the position of his ears.

This is the first picture in the series that shows a "modern" type dressage horse—lighter, more athletic, with a little more "hot" blood.

From a fashion point of view you can note the shape of the top hat and the height of the boots are different from what we expect to see now.

Col. Poudret/HorseSourcePhotos.com Photo



This image shows Henri Chammartin and Wolfdietrich—team bronze medalists at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games—at the 1966 World Championships.

This image is a quantum leap forward. It symbolizes what dressage is all about.

The horse is well built for the sport, and he is being ridden well. He is not only properly on the bit and still slightly in front of the vertical, but he is also “through the back.” You can see this in the shape of the horse’s back behind the saddle and the parallel reach of the diagonal pairs of legs in the trot stride.

The horse’s mouth is closed and his tail is relaxed. The rider has a lovely position. This would be a high quality trot today.

Col. Poudret/HorseSourcePhotos.com Photo

1966

1980s



Nicole Uphoff and Rembrandt were dominant during the 1980s. They won individual and team gold at the 1988 Seoul and 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games.

I remember Rembrandt well. In his younger years he went from trainer to trainer because no one could handle him—he was that hot. Only when they started riding him much lower in front than was customary did he become controllable and eventually a star.

Here he shows beautiful self-carriage on soft contact. Although he was notorious for paying attention to distractions outside the ring—and his ears show that he would like to do just that—at this moment he is in perfect harmony with his rider.

This picture shows passage, a few strides before the piaffe. Rembrandt’s was not a very “sitting” piaffe, but incredibly cadenced and elevated.

Peter Llewellyn/HorseSourcePhotos.com Photo



Here, team and individual gold medalists Reiner Klimke and Ahlerich compete in the Grand Prix Special at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games.

This photo is personally interesting to me because I saw Ahlerich compete many times while I was stationed in Germany during the early 1980s. Ahlerich did not stand out because of superior conformation or athleticism: he stood out because Klimke's meticulous training turned him into a star—and that is what dressage is all about.

I do remember in his early years that Ahlerich often had his own ideas, and several times I saw him try to leave the arena after the medium canter and flying change in the old Grand Prix!

In this photo, Ahlerich's expression is calm, his mouth is still, and his ears show him to be totally focused on his rider. He is comfortably up in the bridle. We see a horse properly ridden and positioned in the half pass, but without the spectacular forward and sideways scope that we see in some of our modern athletes.

To make sure that I was not being fooled by a single photographic moment, I did review the video of this ride, which confirmed my estimation of the movement.

By the way, his winning score for this ride was 71.40 percent. This score would not put him in individual medal contention today.

(Karl Leck Photo)

1984

2005



Salinero, who with Dutch rider Anky van Grunsven won individual gold at the 2008 Olympic Games in Hong Kong and the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, is probably one of the most athletic dressage horses of our time. This photo shows his strength in the passage.

Is this the epitome of elegance? Not really. Riding a horse with this much power is not for the faint of heart!

Personally, this is not the direction I would like to see dressage go in the future. We can continue to breed for and reward more and more power, but that is not the ultimate answer: rideability and grace need to continue to define our sport.

(Terri Miller Photo)

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Isabell Werth and Satchmo are one of the most dominant pairs in dressage today, with team gold from the 2006 World Equestrian Games and 2008 Olympic Games in Hong Kong, as well as individual Grand Prix Special gold from the 2006 WEG and individual silver at the 2008 Olympic Games.

This photo was taken at the 2009 Rolex FEI World Cup Final (Nev.). I observed Isabell's warm-up at World Cup. She schooled Satchmo, who can be very hot, in a very low frame but on soft contact.

The result, seen here in the extended trot, is an extremely athletic horse. The curb may be a little tight in this moment, but the horse is pushing mightily from rear to front.

He is through the back, and you almost feel the energy moving directly from the pushing hind leg to the poll, with Isabell being the guiding part of the team. Satchmo shows great articulation in the joints of the hind legs, and superior reach in the stride.

(Terri Miller Photo)



This is Ashley Holzer and Pop Art, who represented Canada at the 2008 Olympic Games in Hong Kong and were fifth in the 2009 Rolex FEI World Cup Final.

To me, this picture demonstrates where I would like dressage to be heading. "Partnership" is the word that comes to my mind when I look at this picture.

Pop Art is an athlete, but his and Ashley's performance is taking place with great grace. His piaffe is exemplary, and the entire picture is worth emulating. Compare Pop Art's degree of engagement and the outline of his back behind the saddle to the first photo, of Xavier Lesage.

I challenge all riders to strive for this level of elegant athleticism.

(Terri Miller Photo)

2009

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Capturing The Moment

It's important to also consider the history of photography to put these images in context. The images taken in the era of the 1930s, '40s and '50s were captured by equipment that's a far cry from the high-speed, high-tech cameras of today.

The first 35 mm camera was produced in Germany in the late 1930s by Zeiss. Before that, most portable cameras had what is called a "waist-level" viewer, which means that the photographer held the camera at waist level and looked down into a viewfinder, which, by the way, showed the image upside down!

The film was advanced manually, which means that once an image was shot, the photographer had to flip the winder level up and wind the film forward to the next frame. Sometime within the next 3 to 5 seconds, they were then ready for the next shot.

These days, if there are 12 to 15 steps in the piaffe, a photographer might have 12 to 15 shots of it. In 1932, they were lucky to get one that was in the frame and in focus.

In regards to the image from 1932, of Xavier Lesage, now that we know that photographs were far more rare than they are now, it's possible that this image was staged, rather than taken during the actual competition. The concept of "sports photography," with long lenses, during competition, was a few decades in the future.

By 1956 and the image of Liselott Linsenhoff on Adular, cameras and lenses had advanced, and the photographer appears to be standing just outside the actual competition arena.

There were still no motor drives, and still no in-camera light meters, which meant that photographers still had to manually advance the film (although it was done more quickly with the new 35mm cameras) and

still had to make an educated guess at how to expose for the available light.

By the mid 1960s, cameras had light meters built into them, and film had advanced enough technically to allow for faster shutter speeds that could capture the action. Notice how the image of Henri Chammartin and Wolfdietrich from 1968 is clearer and sharper than previous photos.



(Kat. Netzier Photo)

By the 1980s, the use of a "long" lens, probably a 300mm or 400mm, became common, as shown by the tack sharp horse and the blurred out background of the image of Rembrandt and Nicole Uphoff.

The photos of Salinero, Satchmo and Pop Art—all taken at an indoor venue—would not have been possible with the cameras that took most of the other pictures in this article.

Indoor arenas pose difficult lighting problems, and only today's modern equipment can meet those needs. The camera equipment of today is more athletic, flexible, and able to take on a variety of challenges: just as the modern dressage horse is designed by breeding, training and riding, to take on the challenges that we throw at them.

Terri Miller

Terri Miller is not only a preeminent equine photographer, but she is also a nationally recognized painter who accepts commissioned portraits in oils, watercolor, and pencil.

Her photographs have appeared in a host of magazine including People, Sports Illustrated For Kids, Fine Homes, Practical Horsemen, Dressage Today and Equus. They also appear in many books and calendars. A graduate of New York's acclaimed School of Visual Arts, she sees through the lens with the eyes of a painter. Recently she won the Shoot To Win press photo contest sponsored by Offield Farm at the 2007 Rolex FEI World Cup Final in Las Vegas, Nev.

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