

# MEET THE *Professionals*

In the first of a new series, we take a look at some of the young professional trainers who are working their way up the ladder in the sport of dressage. Penny Goring caught up with Josef Haag.

Watching Josef Haag teach and ride at former Olympic rider Sarah Whitmore's Kent yard, where he was taking one of his monthly courses, was a fascinating experience. His pupils range from national to Olympic level, with Australia's Brooke Staples and Britain's Laura Fry representing the top level in eventing and dressage.

It becomes clear why Germany has a seven year training period for professional trainers, when you see someone like Josef in action. He has a quiet approach to teaching and riding; from the sidelines, hoped for

verbal tips disappeared into the ether, and body language alone appeared to be the order of the day when he rode. Each horse he sat on seemed to rearrange itself into a softer outline, switch its mind to his and improve without any sign of effort or struggle.

For someone whose name means fence, (there is a small town and a village near his home with the Dutch name and his grandfather researched its origins), Josef had never been restricted by walls or rails. He hacked out on a neighbour's horses, every day, rain or

shine, from the age of ten to 16 and then decided to make horses a career.

The first part of his training was with General Hepp, an ex-German cavalry officer, who was 'very army-like, a very correct rider – and shouted a lot!' Nevertheless, Joseph learned about having the right attitude towards the horses, how to treat them, how to sit in the right position to get the right feeling and, as he put it, 'all those important things'.

Having taken his Bereiter Prufung at Warendorf, he went on to study



for the second stage, with Reit Meister Gunther Festerling, now head of the German Professional Rider's Federation. At the time there were only two people holding that title, the other was the late Theo Hansen. "I learned such a lot there; he had many horses up to grand prix level, so we could ride very well schooled horses every day. It was a really good time."

As a Pferde Wirtschaftmeister, Josef was ready to set up on his own and he rented a yard near Munich.

Professional trainers do not have much time to compete themselves. Busy training other people's horses, they often rely on client's horses for much of their competition experience. To date, Josef, 45, has trained around 20 horses to Intermediaire I and has had two grand prix horses to ride. But, another potential grand prix prospect walked into his yard last autumn.

Business commitments brought owner, Mrs Toffolu to Munich from Wiesbaden and her previous trainer, Werner Schwenk, advised that the best person to continue the horse's training would be Josef. Bernstein is a nine year old Bavarian chestnut, with established changes and piaffe. He is a super horse, very talented. I am working a little bit on the passage and I hope to bring him out in an Intermediaire II in the spring. I hope he stays sound," he chants the competitors pre-season mantra, and raps the wooden table twice, for luck.

At home, Joseph's day starts at 7.30, when he gets on his first horse. He rides until around 2 pm and then goes out to teach his private clients. When he is away, his wife Andrea acts as stable manager. His son, Philip, 16, gave up riding after the pony stage. "He is a typical teenager, interested in basketball, football and computers," he said.

Josef has an English Bereiter, Angela Collis, who approached him at a competition to ask if she could work for him. Having established that she was not expecting a yard full of grand prix horses and was happy to work with youngsters and show them, Josef said, "why not." Angela has been there for five years and it was through her that the link with Sarah, with whom she trained, was made.

"Sarah was looking for a horse for Laura and I took her to a dealer," Sarah bought Massenet, by Werther, a half brother to Josef's Wyang, on which Angela got her first Prix St. Georges placing last year. The dealer took them out to lunch afterwards and Josef mentioned that he was planning to go to the States to do some teaching. He was easily persuaded to change the destination and he laughed as he recalled Sarah's tactics. "She told me America was such a long way to



Sam Jeningson on Comancher run

go, that it would be tiring for me and I would be much better off coming to England!"

Of course he agreed and so the seeds of an institution were sown. Because the same people are consistently on the course, the improvements are tangible. "We all know each other so well and when I come back each month, I can check that they have done their homework." The riders now ring Josef at home to tell him of their progress. "They will ring and say, 'I won my class yesterday or I had the highest marks I've ever had'. That gives a very good feeling and then I tell the girls in the stables and that makes them feel good too."

Another Werther horse arrived on the course when Mette Assouline, brought her six year old chestnut to Josef after winning her first advanced medium with him.

Although all three are out of different mares, they carry the sire's influence, from colour to physical shape and temperament. "They are all a little bit sharp at times," said Josef, "so you can't push them too much." At the end of the day, I asked Josef to explain his modus operandi and unsurprisingly he told me he hated to ride with pressure. "I want to make the horses understand what I want in an easy way." As an example he told me the story of a young horse that had recently been brought to his yard as a last ditch attempt to make something of him. The owner asked Josef to ride him for a few weeks and then tell her whether she should follow her plan to put him down.

"He was as stiff as a pole and carried his head very high and was very hollow in the back, I rode him for a few days and then long reined him for a few days and he learned to stretch forwards and downwards. The owner asked me what I was doing. I told her I watched the horse, saw the problems and tried to help him to convert them in an easy way without any pressure. He felt much better in the back after the long reining, and after two weeks, he started swinging through the back without any pressure. That way of riding gave him confidence, riding on a light contact, showing him the way forwards and downwards working a little more through the back without pushing.

"After two months, he bends each way, does shoulder in easily down the long side, from just thinking it and can canter from trot and walk without hollowing or throwing his head up. But when I tried to teach him leg yielding, he didn't understand it at all. So I went back to long reining on both reins and then I walked behind him on the track and pushed a little bit with the outside rein and he moved the quarters in easily. The next day I got on him and he did leg yielding like an old hand, because he had understood how to react to the sideways leg pushing aid.

"And that's the way I want it to be. I don't want to kick horses around or pull on the mouth, or to ride them under pressure. I hate it. I just want to sit there and try to ride nicely, and be a team with a horse."