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You choose - who is the best of the BIG 3

Chris Hector looks at Germany's hottest dressage bloodlines... They are the big three of modern dressage breeding: Donnerhall, Rubinstein and Weltmeyer - and their fans, like fans anywhere, are quick to praise their hero - and belittle his challengers. In truth, all three stallions offer quite different qualities and possibilities.

The oldest of the three is Donnerhall, born in May, 1981. Donnerhall has certainly enjoyed the most competition success, although he has yet to sire a horse that has really made its mark in the competition arena at an international level. Of the three, he is the only one not to come from a 'good family'. Admittedly his sire, Donnerwetter disappeared into the wilds of the United States over a decade ago, but while there are a couple of Donnerwetters 'gracing' the German dressage arenas, they are pretty ugly, untalented creatures. Even Donnerhall's famous rider, Karin Rehbein notes that despite the large number of foals Donnerhall has sired, she has yet to find one that matches up to the stallion.

"There are a lot of Donnerhalls who have a little similarity to him but it is difficult to get another just like him," says Karin, "Look at Donnerhall's full-brothers, you couldn't compare any of them to him. In appearance, in everything about him, the full brothers don't come anywhere near Donnerhall. There were even two brothers who competed Grand Prix, but they were nothing compared to Donnerhall. They don't even look the same, don't move one little bit the same."

Mrs Rehbein started riding the liver chestnut stallion when he was four years old. When she first got on the youngster she thought 'this horse could be something'.

"He was always a good horse to train. Good in the head, he was always straightforward and learnt everything really quickly. He is still fantastic, he could still go out and win right now."

To see Donnerhall compete was to marvel at the imposing power of the

big stallion, but surprisingly, even though Mrs Rehbein is not very tall, and certainly not very big, the ride he gave her was 'very good'.

"He was very soft. Sometimes you had to hold him a little bit through, but you have to do that with every horse."

Donnerhall's talent was apparent right from the start, and he scored 131.92 to be second in his performance test at Adelheidsdorf in 1984. Donnerhall's competition career is the stuff of legend. He won many Grand Prix, Grand Prix Specials and Freestyles for Mrs Rehbein. In 1994, Donnerhall was individual bronze medallist (and team gold medallist) at the 1994 World Championships at The Hague. Donnerhall won the European World Cup Freestyle League final standings twice, in 1997 and 1998. He retired from competition in 1998.

Certainly that is what Donnerhall seems to give to his offspring, a trainability and a strength to handle the more collected work, even if their natural paces are not so spectacular. It would seem more likely that the mix of Donnerhall and a large drop of 'blood' (Thoroughbred that is) in the sire is more likely to produce competition horses. Donnerhall's son Davignon (out of a Pik Bube mare) is the sire of the very exciting youngster Duvalier who is already looking good at FEI level, and even those direct Donnerhall progeny that are going well at FEI level - like the mare, Dona Castania - are out of Pik Bube mares. The other son consistently producing exciting looking youngsters is Don Primero, again out of a Pik Bube mother.

Don Primero was the five year old dressage champion of the 1990 Bundeschampionate, and went on to be a winner at Grand Prix level. His full-brother, Don Schufro has been exported to Sweden. At the 1992 Bundeschampionate, Davignon won the 4 year old riding horse title, with a record points score of 9.36.

1997 saw the first of the Donnerhall grandsons to star at the Bundeschampionate, with the gelding Duvalier (out of a Bolero mare) winning the 5 year old dressage title - while the following year, this class was won by the black Donnerhall son, Del Piero (out of a Matcho AA mare).

The Donnerhall son, De Niro (out of a Akzent II mare) started competing at Grand Prix level at the tender age of seven. It's not what you would call great Grand Prix at this stage, but it is still Grand Prix. De Niro's foals look great - better than their dad.

Another Donnerhall son to impress is Dream of Glory who sired the 1998 three year old stallion winner, Dreamy's Dream, and had a number of representatives in the finals at the 2000 Bundeschampionate, and they

all looked sweet rideable horses. Once again, Dream of Glory is out of a Pik Bube/Romadour II mare).

Unfortunately Donnerhall is not available through frozen semen. One son, came to Australia, Donnerheist (out of a Belgian mare by a Belgian born son of Wendekreis). Donnerheist had a very successful competition career up to Medium level, but died before reaching FEI level. De Niro semen has been used successfully, and more recently, semen from Davignon. The Don Primero stallion, Donario (out of a Pik Bube mare) was imported in 2000. The Donnerhall son, Duntroon (bred by Australian, Ed Richards, and again out of a Pik Bube mare) has been competing in Germany with Australian Olympic Team member, Kristy Oatley-Nist, and he has sired a number of foals in Australia already, using frozen semen. A Donnerhall daughter, Dona Carrera was imported to Australia, and has won several young horse titles.

Weltmeyer born in 1984 is only slightly younger than Donnerhall, but has already produced an Olympic representative in the form of Rosemount Wallstreet, which is a bit ironic given that the Donnerhall fans tend to run the line that while the Weltmeyers were very fancy moving young horses 'of course they will never collect'. In fact, Weltmeyer almost had two representatives in Sydney, the stallion Wie Weltmeyer was long listed for British selection, but the general feeling is that it was more the inexperience of his British rider, Emma Hindle that kept him out of the team than any lack of horse talent. Ironical too, that Wallstreet's rider at Sydney should be Kristy Oatley-Nist who has spent more than ten years training at Donnerhall's home, Grönwohldhof.

Weltmeyer was a sensation the day he was born, according to his breeder, Hermann Meyer (the 'meyer' in Weltmeyer) and he proved Mr Meyer right when he was champion of his licensing in Verden. At the Bundeschampionate, Weltmeyer continued his triumphal progress. According to deputy breeding director of the Hannoverian Verband, Dr Ludwig Christmann: "He moved through the arena unflustered. His trot was magnificent. It could not have been any better. The judging committee gave him the top score of 10. His canter stride was a leap forward flowing through the entire body of the horse. It earned a 9.5. The walk was ground-covering and earned an 8.0 (if there is a little worry about the Weltmeyer progeny it is in the area of the walk - CH). In addition he received a 9.5 for conformation and for his overall impression."

Weltmeyer went on the win his performance test at Adelheidsdorf with a dressage score of 143.94 - more surprisingly he had a jumping score of 141.44, although it must be confessed that he has yet to produce jumping progeny. With the huge demand from mare owners for Weltmeyer, state stud director, Dr Bade took the unprecedented step of not sending Weltmeyer out to a stallion station, but keeping him at the breeding station in Celle where he was bred to 200 main studbook and State Premium mares from all over the Hannoverian breeding district.

This was a 'kick start' the like of which no other first season stallion had received, and there are still those who question Weltmeyer's success, claiming that it comes in no small part from the superior mares he covered.

Still there is no doubt that Weltmeyer is a sensation as a breeding stallion. In 1991, a colt from his first crop, Wittinger (out of a mare by Raphael) was champion of his licensing, and went on the following year to - like his dad - win the title at the Bundeschampionate, and his performance test. At the 1992 licensing, Wolkenstein II (out of a mare by Wendekreis) was reserve champion, and then won his performance test the following year, the year in which Wolkentanz (mare by Ludendorff - no relation to the stallion that came to Australia) won his licensing and he went on to win at the Bundeschampionate, and stand reserve champion at his performance test.

In 1997 Weltmeyer's first grandsons made their appearance with Welser (mare by Lanthan) reserve champion at the licensing, while the following year, Waterford (x Matcho AA) won his licensing and Welser placed second in the performance test.

Weltmeyer at last count had produced 64 licensed sons. Interestingly, unlike Donnerhall who found the perfect match with Pik Bube, Weltmeyer has clicked with mares by a number of sires, from the slightly more old-fashioned mare lines of Dr Sebald, Stellenflot

slightly more old fashioned mare lines of Dr. Schulz-Stenemmen (Wolkenstein I, II, III) to Welt Hit 1 to 6, out of a mare by the Thoroughbred, Hill Hawk (The first of the Welt Hit brothers won the 4 year old stallion class at the 1995 Bundeschampionate).

Weltmeyer is also proving a valuable sire of broodmares, and the cross Donnerhall/Weltmeyer has produced some very nice horses.

Weltmeyer is no freak, he comes from the most successful dressage family in the world, the 'W' family that begins with Woermann who was the sire of World Cup (1 to 4 - in Germany licensed full-brothers are given the same name with the numeral indicating the order in which they were born), World Cup is the sire of not only Weltmeyer but also Walt Disney, and Warkant. Woermann is also the sire of Wenzel I & II and Winterkoenig - exported to Australia.

For mine, one of the most exciting things Weltmeyer does (in common with most of the good 'W' stallions) is stamp his offspring with a wonderful hock action, instantly cleanly forward and under the centre of gravity - none of that 'out behind' coach horse action of earlier times. His offspring also have very pleasant brains, despite an amazing rumour that swept Australia about the 'superhot' Weltmeyers.

The other great thing about Weltmeyer is the potency of his semen, even at the age of 17, his breeding station reports that they can get between 10 and 15 serves from each collect, and his frozen semen is consistently the best on the market, so there are quite a few sons and daughters of Weltmeyer already in Australia. The Weltmeyer grandson, Rituel (by a Belgian son of Weltmeyer and out of a mare of Belgian breeding by a son of Wendekreis) was imported to Australia as a foal in

1995 by Australian Olympic representative, Mary Hanna. The young stallion won the Australian Young Horse Championship, and then went on to represent Australia at the World Young Dressage Horse Championships in Arnhem 2000 where he placed a creditable 12th. The Weltmeyer son, Walton (out of a mare by Don Carlos) has recently been imported to Australia.

Rubinstein was the youngest of the big three, but sadly, is the only one not alive, having died in 2000. If Weltmeyer comes from a 'good family' Rubinstein comes from a dressage Royal Family. His dam is Antine, one of the three daughters of the mating of the Thoroughbred stallion, Angelo and Dodona (the two male foals from this pairing were Olympic dressage stars, Amon and Ahlerich). Rubinstein is by Rosenkavalier - Rosenkavalier is by Romadour II, who is the sire of World and Olympic champion, Rembrandt, out of Antine's full-sister, Adone. From another full-sister, Annette came Romancier (also by Rosenkavalier) who stands at the Blue Hors Stud in Denmark. Having said that, I should also note that I had the opportunity to purchase Rubinstein's younger (full) brother, very cheaply. He was a truly awful horse and moved like a startled chicken. I also saw Rubinstein's full-sister in the paddock and she was nothing to get excited about.

Rubinstein was acquired at an early age by Mrs Gudula Vorwerk-Happ of the famous Vorwerk stud in Oldenburg. Rubinstein was third in his performance test at Adelheidsdorf remarkably finishing in a higher position (4th) in the jumping rankings than he did in the dressage (5th). Rubinstein was ridden in his early tests by that gifted rider/trainer Martina Hannöver, winning ten of his eleven starts at S-level. In 1995, Rubinstein scored eleven first and second placings at Grand Prix and Grand Prix Special level and he was seriously being talked about as a

Stable and special level, and he was seriously being talked about as a candidate for the mighty German team to go to Atlanta. Then Mrs Vorwerk and Martina had a falling out, and the ride on Rubinstein went to Heike Kemmer, and the magic was lost. Nicole Uphoff rode the horse for a season, but even she could not get Rubinstein motoring again - his weaknesses, he lack of power and scope, particularly in the trot, were glaringly apparent.

Still, by this stage, Rubinstein's most exciting son Rohdiamant, a foal from his first crop (out of Elektia V who is by the Anglo Arab stallion, Inshallah) was doing the performing for him. In 1993, Martina rode Rohdiamant into equal first place (with Wolkenstein II) in the 3 year old Championship at the Bundeschampionate.

Rohdiamant is now an exciting Grand Prix horse, ridden by the German based, US born, Lisa Wilcox, and just missed out on the American dressage team to go to the Sydney Olympic Games. He too is proving an exciting sire, with his son, Roman Nature winning the 3 year old Stallion title at the 1998 Bundeschampionate, and the 5 year old stallion class at the big stallion show at Zwolle. Rohdiamant's full-brother, Royal Diamond (born in 1994) won the 5 year old championship at last

year's Bundeschampionate.

In his second crop, Rubinstein sired Regazzoni out of a Werther mare. Regazzoni was the champion of his stallion test at Münster-Handorf with a score of 140.53. Regazzoni is already the sire of a number of licensed stallions - and working at an FEI level himself, looks (even to Nicole Uphoff) just like a stallion version of Rembrandt. Regazzoni semen was used for the first time in Australia in the 2000 season and the results have been quite good. Rubinstein has had at least two foals and a reported four pregnancies, but has not had a good striking rate/ Rohdiamant has had very bad results, while Royal Diamond, his full brother, has been most successful.

Rubinstein is also the sire of Rotspon, born in 1995 out of a mare with classic Hannoverian bloodlines - Argentan, Pik Bube, Wendekreis. Rotspon topped his performance test in 1998 but sadly did not get a chance to compete at the Bundeschampionate, seemingly because Dr Bade did not wish to promote the son of a Westfalen stallion, standing at an Oldenburg stud. Like Weltmeyer, Rotspon produces wonderful semen, and frozen babies are springing up all over Australia (I seem to be the only person who produced a nil result from three breedings of the stallion!)

In Australia, Rubinstein is represented by the exciting young stallion, Riverdance, purchased in 2000 from the Vorwerk Stud by Holger Schmorl for his Kinnordy Stud. Riverdance is out of a mare by Atatürk, who is also the dam sire for Kristy Oatley-Nist's Wallstreet. The stallion, Grand Kavalier is by Grundstein, out of Resista who is by Rosenkavalier out of Antine - one of those three sisters again.

So there we are. What is most valuable? The power of Donnerhall? The rideability of Rubinstein? Or the movement of Weltmeyer? Or is the way forward, a wonderful cocktail of the three???

