

Maren Engelhardt Interviews Gisela Gunia On

What is Desired For Young Trakehner Stallions

Gisela Gunia is a member of the German Trakehner Verband stallion inspection committee, and a S-level judge in Germany for dressage and show jumping. Mrs. Gunia owns and operated Gestüt Eichenhof in Lower-Saxony, which over the years has produced a number of very successful Trakehner show jumpers, e.g. Schneesturm TSF.

ME: Where does the selection for future breeding stock begin?

GG: The preselection begins with the decision of finding a suitable horse. If you buy a stallion prospect, an important factor is his pedigree. Additionally, the development of the young foal and, in older colts (up to 18 months of age), the general development of size, type, movement, conformation and, most importantly, soundness. At this age, we usually conduct a thorough health exam with X-rays for OCD.

ME: What is a good time to start the young colt in training and what are important criteria for the upbringing of young horses?

GG: As for every young horse, a solid and fair upbringing is the best start into a bright future. Daily turnout on large pastures or paddocks with enough room to play and run is very important. The hooves need special attention; some corrective trimming might be needed at this age. The horse's feed should be calculated in detail. We begin our foals on foal starter after about 3 months of age when the mare's milk supply decreases. Once weaned, the young horses need to grow up in groups with other horses their age. This teaches them a lot of important things that will shape their characters and behavior towards humans. In general, I try to have my weanlings grow up on pastures that are not too "fat" and also offer small hills to strengthen their muscles and to develop a feel for balance in the young horses. I am strictly against the addition of chemical supplements to boost the colts' development; the same is true for hormones.

ME: How do you prepare the colts for the approval selections in the late summer prior to Neumünster?

GG: Beginning with their second year, they learn to accept a bridle and longeing surcingle, but still stay out on pasture with their pals. We also make them feel comfortable with a saddle and side reins. At the same time, we start them over fences, using a variety of jumps and combinations (in-and-outs, etc.). The colts also get used to trailers, and we haul them short distances to different indoor arenas so that they get used to the excitement. With all this, we never separate them from their group; they stay in the group as long as the training lasts.

ME: How important is the free-jumping and what is important when teaching it to a young colt?

GG: The free-jumping is much more than just a simple test of the abilities of a young colt as a jumper. With the free-jumping, breeders and the commission get an impression of the general abilities of a young, not yet broken horse. Abilities without which a modern sport horse cannot succeed, among them balance, reaction time, ability to coordinate complex movements, character and boldness to approach new situations, the ability to make decisions, concentration, response to mistakes. Is the horse learning from its mistakes?. All these traits tell you a lot about the work ethics and the will of a young horse. Also, elasticity and movement of the horse can be observed in a different way than by just inspecting the gaits at liberty. Here the back has to bend and move, and so do the haunches. Is the horse strong enough?

Of course, the ability over the jump, its bascule and style, are of interest as well; after all, we breed a “versatile all-purpose riding horse.”

ME: What must be kept in mind when training a young horse?

GG: I want to see enough “wood,” which means obstacles that are composed of several rails and invite the young horse to jump rhythmically and without fear. I want to see enough standards and wings that prevent the horse from stopping, and the distances must be adjusted to each horse for a maximum of security and a good experience for the horse. Never rush horses, especially not by using a whip! Be calm and let only one person handle the horse and also only one person speak to it. The most important aspect is to show the horse that jumping is great fun.

ME: Which type of Trakehner horse do you think is preferred today compared to the models we saw about 15 years ago?

GG: The criteria of conformation — most importantly movement — have really improved dramatically over the past years. It is not only the trot that counts, walk and canter are even more important. The trot in the Trakehner breed has reached a high standard with extreme impulsion, knee action and elasticity. The walk is of special interest to the inspection committee, both at the stallion approvals and the mare inspections every year. The canter seems to be the hardest gait to “improve,” and still needs a lot of improvement over the coming years. Together with the quality of the movement (balance also counts here), it is of utmost importance to see horses with a substantial body, with clearly distinct forehead, midsection and hind end. We want to see long lines and big frames, also in the haunches, slightly sloped croups and excellent angles, enough space for muscling all the way down to the hocks. Type was always of great importance in our breed, and still is today. Gender type must be clear. Trakehner type includes a certain variety, but also great beauty, elegance and charm, a certain flair — that doesn’t necessarily exclude the athletic type. Horses that lack Trakehner type but display tremendously powerful sport horse type will today be placed ahead of Trakehners that offer beauty only. Acceptable flaws in the foundation are no reason not to approve a colt if he clearly demonstrates outstanding talent as a future competition horse and thus might add valuable genes to the breed.