

## The Evolution of the Stallion Performance Test

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A special “test” during the 365 days at Zwion in the 1930s: obedience!

Testing stallions prior to their career in breeding has a long history, not only in the Trakehner breed. Hanoverian State stallions were among the first to undergo extended testing in accordance with a strict set of rules. The very first “test station” however was the East Prussian Zwion station, where Trakehnen and the local studs tested its future breeding animals for a total of 1 year. Similar to the situation today, there was more than one way to adequately “test” a young colt for its mental and physical abilities. And since the breed’s purpose back in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not a competition horse for human enjoyment, but rather a war mount for troublesome times, the requirements varied.

It was due to three men and their revolutionary ideas that Trakehnen became famous for the athletic ability of its horses. The three stud masters Burchard von Oettingen (stud master from 1895-1911), his son-in-law Kurt Graf von Sponeck (1912-1922) and Siegfried Graf von Lehndorff (1922-1931) pioneered performance testing. The breakthrough really came with von Oettingen, who built the legendary Hunting Stables at Trakehnen. Here, all young colts that were to be selected for breeding had to undergo strenuous fox hunts and cross country races throughout the summer and fall hunting seasons. The terrain with numerous ditches and walls provided optimal training grounds and was very demanding for horse and rider. Young horses participated in 20 to 25 hunts per season. The Hunting Stables were the major tool for selection in the Trakehner breed up into the 30s of that century.

The stallion test station in Zwion and Trakehnen’s own programs proved to be adequate for selection of the best and most promising sires for the breed, and if it hadn’t been for the sudden end of the farm itself, some similar methods of selection would probably still be in place today.

However, with the downfall of Trakehnen at the end of World War II, and the rapid change in demands with respect to breeding horses (from essential farm help

to practically an useless animal), a new test system came into perspective. All of a sudden, horses had a new purpose, and that purpose was to be partners in sports, excelling in various disciplines from dressage and show jumping to eventing and driving. And with a new goal, new “testing” was due. While it was more about stamina, speed, soundness, boldness and endurance in Trakehnen, it all of a sudden shifted to a focus on movement, scope, jumping ability and technique and overall athleticism. For many of Germany’s other warmblood breeds, the influx of English TB blood and a few selected Angloarabians, plus several foundation sires from East Prussia, the new goal was achieved rather quickly. Their mares had the substance and power to be great partners for these heavy doses of refinement, without compromising distinct features of the local “warmblood”. As an example, let us chose Holstein, and see that the traditional “high action” in this superb driving horse breed that always had natural talent for jumping was nicely fit into a different frame on the basis of selecting for show jumping. In the end, the Holsteiner is a modern sport horse with a high degree of thoroughbred influence, probably only surpassed by the Trakehner, with exceptional jumping ability, technique and scope while suiting amateurs and professionals alike. For the Trakehner, already diminished in numbers and not welcomed in the remaining parts of Germany, the start into the “riding horse career” was very rough, and came from a completely different background. Nobody will argue that the Trakehner was the world’s best real competition mount prior to WWII, documented by numerous Olympic medals and championships all across Europe. The Trakehner’s high percentage of TB and Arabian blood made it an ideal partner for pretty much every equestrian discipline. In fact, even the world’s toughest steeplechase race, the Pardubice, was won by Trakehner horses in the 20s and 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In contrast to most of the riding horses in the 50s in Germany, the Trakehner was collected feverishly, and bred to maintain the breed and eventually save it. There was little time, money or actually desire to show horses when mares were so valuable being bred, and stallions often too busy to compete. And in this unfortunate situation, the reputation of the Trakehner as a sport horse was quickly lost to other warmbloods that took advantage of refinement and improvement blood, often from our horses.

Stallion performance tests were State business after Germany was back in business, and the uniform 100 day test was “invented”. It was a healthy mix of some pre-war standards, many of them from Zwion and Trakehnen. Stallions were to be tested at a central station (Klosterhof Medingen was the only private 100 day test station in Germany), in all three basic paces, over jumps, and in a cross country run at the end of 100 days. In addition, scores for temperament, constitution, willingness to perform and rideability were added to the list. The only thing missing from Zwion was the driving test, although in South Germany, driving was part of stallion tests for a long time into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 100 day test, for many years, was the most important test for a 3 year old stallion to pass in order to achieve life-long approval in Germany. All breeds were treated the same,

and all breeds competed against each other, even though the complicated way of calculating the results made it virtually impossible to actually “compare” results among various test stations. 110 points in Adelheidsdorf could mean 140 points in Munich. But that is another issue.

From the beginning, the 100 day test was under critique. Obviously, the program was tough for 3 and 4 year old stallions, whose gelding and mare counterparts were probably still out in pasture while they had to undergo their test. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Germany had re-designed the tests and started what is now known as the 30 day/70 day test system. The idea was to come up with a more horse-friendly system that would take into account that 3 year old stallions - especially when of Anglo-background - had clear disadvantages in the old 100 day test. The 30 day test was also mandatory, because “unproven” stallions could no longer service mares in their first season after approval. What seemed like a great idea turned out to actually worsen the situation for many stallions. Mostly not even truly 3 years old in March, these youngsters had to go to their 30 day test fully prepared, meaning they usually were under saddle before they even came up for approval, as 2.5 year old colts. The most recent rule change involved that untested stallions are now allowed to breed mares during their first season, which takes some of the strain off them.

However, one can argue that neither the 100 day test, nor the 30/70 day tests really tell the truth about a sport horse sire. And consequently, breed registries have started to open the doors for new test systems, or “quality control”, if you will. Take the KWPN for example. Dutch approved stallions in The Netherlands undergo approval and testing as youngsters, but then are evaluated every year until they are 7 years old. And this not only means that the stallion is looked at into in more detail, but that his offspring is part of this equation too. Stallions that disappoint, or don't meet certain standards, lose their approval status. Something similar is in place in the Baden-Württemberg breed in Germany. Other breeds, like the Trakehners, have long ago started to recognize the potential of a stallion as a performance horse and base his approval and performance test on actual sport horse competition. Today, it is widely accepted that this system is probably the most comprehensive one for a breed whose standard breeding goal is a performance horse. The very first stallion in the Trakehner breed, who was approved due to his performance record, was the grey Fabian (by Donauwind \*E\* out of Fawiza by Maharadscha). He won many S-level dressage tests under his owner Dr. Reiner Klimke, and was an accomplished Grand Prix competitor, when the Trakehner Verband approved him as an 8 year old. More examples followed in the 90s when many Russian performance stallions came to Western Europe, without ever seeing a test station. Almox Prints J, Waitaki, Abrek, Biotop, Acartenango, Perechlest, Euphratas and many more found their (much deserved) way into the Trakehner breed that way. Abdullah \*Pg\*E\* (by Donauwind \*E\* out of Abiza \*E\* by Maharadscha) is another example. Obviously, in our modern

times and markets, not every stallion owner can send a horse to the Olympics before thinking of approval. In Germany, the “way out” is diverse and interesting. Stallion owners that opt to not send their stallion away for the 70 day test have the possibility to try and qualify their horse for the Bundeschampionat in any one of the disciplines. This competition is the world’s most prestigious, and tough, young horse championship. Just qualifying a horse is a huge achievement and usually raises that youngster’s value significantly. A young Trakehner stallion can go through his 30 day test, and then qualify twice, in two years, for the Bundeschampionat. However, since the risk of not making it among the country’s tough competition is high, only very few stallions have actually gone that way. One is the approved Connery (by Buddenbrock out of Caro-Dame by Karo As), another is the not yet approved Osharin’s Peron (by Peron TSF \*Pg\* out of Osharin by Handryk). Another route is to go for a full performance career after initial approval, but that also includes no breedings for a stallion for a significant part of his youth. An example is the Grand Prix dressage competitor Lions Club (by Ferrum out of Laska by Matador). The stallion was approved in Neumünster as a 2 year old, but was never performance tested in the old fashioned way. He lost his approval status with the German Verband, but at the same time, served as a competition horse for his owner. In 2004, he had the sufficient amount of wins and placings at S-level for his approval to be activated again. The ways to get a stallion approved for breeding are diverse today, and reflect the many choices that stallion owners face. But one thing is true for all of them: we breed performance horses, and horses that cannot perform lose their approval status. It’s a key feature of selective breeding.

And in North America? Since the density of stallions is considerably smaller in North America, no test stations in the old sense have come to life. 100 day tests are offered throughout the country, and several breed registries request young colts to pass them (e.g. Oldenburg). Even some Trakehner stallion owners have sent their stallions through US-operated 100 day tests, e.g. Special Memories \*Pg\* (by Abdullah \*Pg\*E\* out of Kluwall xx by Cornwall xx) or Rubinesque (by Rubin out of Viv’s Exclusive xx by Gray’s Exclusive xx).



**The 100 day tested ATA approved Special Memories \*Pg\*, who also competed at preliminary level eventing and up to Grand Prix classes in show jumping.**

Most ATA approved stallions however, fulfill their performance requirements in the years after approval by finishing a Novice or Training level event (depending on the age of the horse), not even on a certain score. It is pretty obvious that the performance requirements vary a great deal between the ATA and the Verband in Germany, however, new systems have been agreed upon lately with the announcement that every ATA approved stallion, where a German Verband inspector is on the committee, is also automatically approved in Germany. Since that stallion still has to pass his performance requirements, the ATA has published a list of tests that will grant full approval status – worldwide. That list includes certain performance achievements in the US at upper levels, or the option of shipping a stallion to Europe for his stallion performance test there (as done recently by Tylord Farm for Lord Luciano, a son of Enrico Caruso \*Pg\*E\* out of Lilly of the Valley by Unkenruf \*Pg\*E\*, who was 30 day tested and approved in Germany in the spring of 2006). Since the latter is probably out of question for the majority of stallion owners, it will hopefully lead to more and more Trakehner stallions in North America finishing more than a Novice event.

No stallion performance test will ever tell the whole truth. If a 100 or 70 day test result was the last conclusion of wisdom, Hanover would have lost out on two of its best show jumper producer ever, Grannus and Gotthard, who both had below average 100 day test results. However, Grannus ended up as a competition horse and proved his worth many times – in the ring and as one of the world's top jumper sires. On the other hand, we don't really have a choice other than to put our horses under saddle. No matter which way you as a stallion owner chose to go, it is in the best interest of our breed if performance standards remain high, so that the Trakehner can again be what it once was: the world's most athletic sport horse.