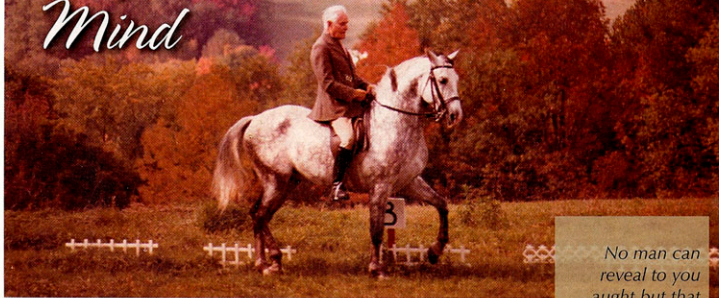


Dr. Henri L.M. van Schaik

To The Threshold of Your Own Mind



Dr. Henri L.M. van Schaik riding his Andalusian stallion Embajador.

An elegant silver-haired man and his silver horse proudly advance across still-green autumn grass, rusty-golden fall foliage rimming a field in the background. Rein gently slackened, the powerful horse in beautiful balance and collection, together they present the image of the quintessential ride...a moment of grace, of union between man and horse. The picture draws us in, symbolizing the quest so seductive to equestrians through time who have sought to share a moment of grace and union with their horses.

"Unity in the movement of man and horse is the goal of equitation, the art of riding," writes this man, Dr. Henri L.M. van Schaik, in his 1986 book *Misconceptions and Simple Truths in Dressage*. "Without this unity no movements in high collection are possible, and this unity is only possible when there is a mutual confidence between man and horse...There is no such thing as a quick and easy way in equitation." Indeed, throughout his long equestrian career Henri van Schaik admonished modern equestrians to embrace the classical perspective that the physical and mental development of each

individual horse must be given the time it needs. At the same time, he continually tested new ideas in his riding, schooling of horses and instruction of students.

Because Henri van Schaik (1899-1991) was born in Holland at a time when horses were a part of everyday life, it was natural for him to gravitate toward riding and eventually the Dutch reserve cavalry. As an officer, he had many years of experience in international jumping competition in the 1920s and 1930s, winning a silver medal with the Dutch show jumping team in the 1936 Summer Olympics. With a lineage of classical European horsemanship, which developed in part with the demands of equestrian military maneuvers, van Schaik patiently read many of the classic texts in the original languages to comprehend the finest points of their teaching. Van Schaik immigrated to the United States in the early 1950s, when America was just becoming interested in dressage and competitive dressage. While he gave of himself generously to those who dedicated themselves seriously to their equestrian education, he was known for his high expectations of students,

No man can reveal to you
ought but that
which already
lies half
asleep in the
dawning of our
knowledge...
If he is indeed
wise he does
not bid you
enter the house
of wisdom, but
rather leads you
to the threshold
of your own
mind.

~ Kahlil Gibran

By Kip Mistral

expecting them to have done their "homework" before entering into the debates he relished.

And in this sense, it is perhaps his greatest legacy that he led his students "to the threshold of their own minds." Through the recollections of van Schaik's students Paul Belasik, Sherry Ackerman, Sheila McLevedge, Robin Groves and Jean-Marc Oppenheim, this article celebrates the courage and integrity of a world-class equestrian who was devoted foremost to understanding the horse and to educate thinking horsemen of all disciplines to advance that imperative.

Paul Belasik is a well-published author, trainer, dressage instructor and avowed proponent of classical equestrian ideals.

"I hear people say that the generation of classical "masters" is dying, but the generation of masters is only as good as the generation of masterful students that preceded it," he states. "A whole web of equestrians on which Henri van Schaik had a tremendous influence is now well-known or even famous. Schooling horses is complex, because horses must be approached on an individual basis, and masterful trainers can and must adapt to individual horses. Learning classical dressage is ultimately practical because it can be used with every horse in every discipline. After all, the biomechanical requirements of any horse in work have to be met. The goals are always straightening crookedness, attaining balance and symmetry, and strengthening. Nothing has changed; and classical methods have stood the test of time for 500-600 years."

Belasik contemplates the influence of van Schaik in his own career. "Dr. van Schaik was a wonderful example. He made understanding classical dressage a life's work and passion. He lived in a modest house in Vermont, and the wind blew snow through the boards of the barn. He shoveled snow all the time. He lived a simple life but was not a simple man. If I earned it, he treated me as an equal, which was a very important thing for me, an honor, and I try to re-create that kind of relationship with my students today. We had a very collegial rapport and enjoyed many dinners centered over deep discussions. But our job as a student is to find our own journey. Henri van Schaik was there when I was ready to ask questions about taking the next step, but you don't rely on someone else telling you what to do. The true student is motivated by intrinsic rewards, not extrinsic rewards. Henri van Schaik was always interested in learning; he had 'the beginner's

mind.' Mastery isn't obscure and elite. The approach to mastery is through your own process."

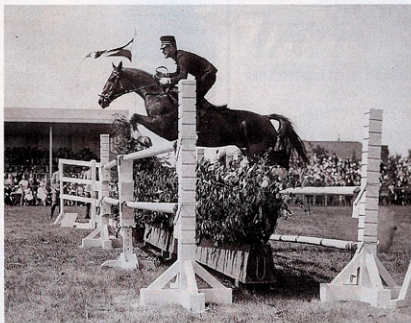
Dr. Sherry Ackerman, author, university philosophy professor, dressage instructor and creator of a new program she refers to as "Integral Horsemanship" recalls, "How I came to Henri van Schaik is one of those wonderful coincidences. I had grown up riding dressage and eventing in New England, and after college someone told me about this "old man in Germany" and suggested that I should ride with him. So, I decided to put off graduate school for a year and go. The "old man" turned out to be Egon von Neindorff, who rode invisibly and harmoniously; it was a whole new world to me. I was hooked. However, though

I'd been eventing at preliminary and intermediate level, when I got there, the ground fell out from under me."

"Herr von Neindorff said 'You know nothing!' and I said 'I know nothing.' He asked 'What level do you think you're riding?' I said 'I think I'm riding Third or Fourth Level.' He said 'You're NO level! You know nothing!'" Ackerman laughs. "And resigned, I said 'OK... I know nothing....' When it was time to go home to begin graduate school and I asked von Neindorff where I could continue my education back in the States, he said 'I have this friend who lives in America in a place called Vermont.' And that friend turned out to be Dr. Henri van Schaik. Henri

van Schaik was a purist, methodical and perfectionistic. He was appreciated by people who were approaching dressage intellectually, philosophically and artistically. You could ride with van Schaik for two years and he would never let you touch the rein. He and von Neindorff were very good friends. Herr von Neindorff didn't call it training, he called it horsemanship. You didn't go to his School of Dressage Training, you went to the von Neindorff School of Horsemanship. And van Schaik came very much from this persuasion."

"He believed that dressage training improved everything and trained all his jumping horses in dressage. He taught that correct classical work is biomechanically assured to develop a horse that is light, sound, sane and has good longevity. Like investing in your IRA, in developing your horse through classical work you are investing time and money into the longevity of usefulness of your horse. However, the competitive dressage world where he settled in New England, was influenced by the German interest in the short, deep neck - "deep and vertical." The horse was to be vertical in the bridle at all costs, even at training level.



As a member of the Dutch national (military) jumping team, Henri van Schaik won many international awards and competed with the Dutch team in the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin riding his mare Santa Belle. Together they placed individually, and helped win the Team Silver Medal in jumping.

Photo courtesy of the van Schaik family, circa 1932-33

In fact, people who were riding at training level with the nose gently above the vertical were penalized quite heavily. Dr. van Schaik protested vehemently and voluminously against the practice. He was a prolific writer for this cause, placing many articles in the *Dressage* and *Combined Training* magazine, counseling people not to show their horses at training level because he thought this was damaging to the physical integrity of the young horse or the horse young in training. The magazine's publisher, Ivan Bezugloff, called van Schaik "the conscience of American dressage."

"My book *Dressage in the Fourth Dimension* would never have existed if it had not been my resonance with van Schaik. Early on I felt my life was divided between philosophy and equestrian art. But through time I realized I wasn't interested in two things that were seemingly very different, although it might have seemed that way in the eyes of mainstream culture...I was interested in two things that were very well seamed together. Henri van Schaik, through his living example, made me realize that there wasn't a break between those two parts...that my life was, after all, the integrated life that I sought."

After long study with Henri van Schaik, Sheila McLevedge directed his Academy for several years after van Schaik's retirement. She has much to say about van Schaik from the perspective of a 16-year personal friendship.

"Kindness, humanity and unifying horse and rider through the adoption of classical values and use of classical training technique were at the forefront of van Schaik's concerns," McLevedge fondly reminisces. "The rider must respect the horse for its beauty, spirit and willingness to work with the human. 'We are not taming lions, we are schooling horses,' he often said. We talk about 'modern dressage,' but to him there was no such thing. He was firmly convinced that the classical principles must be adhered to and defended, having been painstakingly developed over hundreds of years in the interest of the complete and lasting training of the horse."

"As traditional as van Schaik seemed to be, he was always interested in learning new things," McLevedge continues. "He frequently went back to Europe to find out what was going on in the equestrian world. From my friend Peter Payne, he learned the Alexander Technique, which influences release in patterns of tenseness in posture and movement so that graceful and efficient movement is possible. Henri van Schaik stayed very flexible because he was a stickler for a balanced, supple riding position.

He placed an enormous importance on both the function of the rider's seat to help communicate to the horse what was expected of him, and the elegance of the rider's seat to showcase the elegance of his horse."

"He was a great man, and a great inspiration. I cannot say how many riders came through those barn doors to learn from him and create a foundation for their international careers in this business...it is a list of today's 'Who's Who' in the dressage community of the United States. They are all indebted to him, and they have said so. I will be, always. As an example of his gener-

osity, to continue my classical education he arranged for me to ride with masters Egon von Neindorff of Germany, Nuno Oliveira of Portugal and Michel Henriquet of France. He was a fervent debater and instilled in all of his students the desire to read, to develop their minds and learn how to debate back. I am forever grateful for that, as I have been a great reader of all of the old masters and many of the 21st century ones. I miss him still."

Driving instructor and clinician **Robin Groves** has for many years driven her horses to championships at top national competitions, using the principles Henri van Schaik taught in classical dressage to develop her carriage horses.

"Horses are asked to do things they were never designed to do, especially today," Groves reflects. "We have to keep developing the horse for the job he has to do, and the training never ends. Instead of saying as of such-and-such a year a horse will be advanced to such-and-such a level, whether he can be or not, with van Schaik there was no rush. Dr. van Schaik insisted that the horse have time to develop the muscles, tendons, ligaments that allow the horse to travel."

"He also impressed on us the absolutely essential nature of correct position. The rider has to be correct, balanced, elastic, and light, and be perfectly at ease in order for the horse to be at ease. Many people ride in a precarious position, and how can a horse respond to a precarious rider? Henri van Schaik was a glorious example himself. To watch him on a horse was always a pleasure. He rode elegantly into a very old age. If you rode van Schaik's lesson horses correctly, they were angels. If you didn't, you were in for a bad time. And he would say 'Ah-ah, Sammy tells me you didn't do that very well!' You couldn't drag them around...and when you got better you could ride his upper-level horses."

"Henri van Schaik taught us creativity in our approaches,



Photo courtesy of the van Schaik family, circa 1950

After World War II, Dr. van Schaik became committed to the tenets of classical dressage and enjoyed schooling his horses in high collection and demonstrating haute école. In this photograph taken in Holland, van Schaik's Friesian stallion Wopke performs levade.

New England Dressage Association

- August 1-2** New England Breed Show Series at Maplewood Warmbloods, Middletown, NY
Contact: Melanie Sloyer 610-420-2535 or msloyer@aol.com
- August 9** T.H.E. Farm Schooling Show @ Strongwater Park, Tewksbury, MA
Contact: Diana Lane 781-662-2373 or dqlane@msn.com
- August 22** New England Breed Show Series @ Central Maine Dressage Association, Durham, ME
Contact: Carol Poulin-Taylor 207-353-8533 or esprite@aol.com
- Sept 9, 10, 11, 12 & 13** Great American/USDF Region 8 Championships /CDI-W /Y @ NEDA FALL FESTIVAL@ Hits on the Hudson, Saugerties, NY
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- Sept 29** NEDA Year End Awards for Mounted and Sport Horse Awards
Deadline for postmark. Contact: Sue McKeown 508-459-9209 or suemckeown@charter.net
- October 1** Applications due for the NEDA Fall Scholarship Program Nominations due for the Ann Villani Award
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- Oct 30 - Nov 1** Fall Symposium with Hubert Schmidt @ UMASS Hadley Farm, Hadley, MA
Contact: Jennifer Dillon 508-641-3121 or jdpdillon@verizon.net
- October 31** NEDA Year End Awards Banquet @ Clarion Hotel, Northampton, MA
Contact: Debbie Harvey 413-283-6193 or daharvey529@yahoo.com
- Nov 12-15** Equine Affaire 2009 - NEDA Booth, West Springfield, MA
Contact: Karin Swanfeldt, kdswany@aol.com

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and what I loved is that there were no absolutes. For instance, we would learn to ride a given exercise with one aid, and then one day we would come to a lesson and he would tell us to ride the exercise with another aid. Amazingly, we would get exactly the same effect from the different aid. On one occasion he rode a difficult horse of mine and he said, 'Now, remember I told you that you must never, never, never do [this]? But for this horse, you must do only [this], and it will work.'

"Dr. van Schaik's school wasn't like an equitation academy - you had to want what he had to offer. He didn't have a formulaic approach where he turned out cookie-cutter riders. He taught us to try to understand the horse, to feel where the horse was in his development, to pick him up from there and go on. Recently I found myself confessing to one of my horses that I wished I knew 15 years ago what I know now. Dr. van Schaik taught us that riding and schooling horses is a process, a lifetime study. He taught us that you have to be able to think and change. Henri van Schaik's spirit was the spirit of always learning."

Dr. Jean-Marc Oppenheim, author, professor at Columbia University and respected scholar of Middle East studies, was a fully-trained professional competing in three-day eventing in New England when he met Henri van Schaik. "My girlfriend at the time was a working student at van Schaik's school. When I visited her, van Schaik offered to give me a lesson. I thought, why not?" Oppenheim chuckles. "When I showed up at the school the next week, I got the oddest lesson on one of his school horses, like nothing I knew, getting the horse to yield to the hand by using the leg and using the circle. That first morning when I finished my lesson, van Schaik asked me to stay for lunch, and we talked for hours in his library on many intellectual topics. Then I was invited to have another lesson in the afternoon and was asked to dinner. That day was the beginning of a most enjoyable weekly pattern for the next two years, although we only talked horsemanship in the barn. In his informed and enlightened conversation, van Schaik broached religion, ethics, culture, politics, literature, everything! He sincerely believed that horsemanship, in its purest application, was a civilizing influence on mankind."

"His teaching of riding was extremely original. For example, he would tell you to use the inside leg as you approached the corner, then afterward he would tell you for five minutes why the inside leg should be used as you approached the corner. He talked a great deal about the biomechanics and the balance of the horse. You weren't taking a riding lesson on that horse, he was teaching you how to school any horse using these exercises. In fact, van Schaik never used the word training. He thought of training as a mechanical act, like teaching a horse to sit or pick up a blanket with its teeth like in a circus. Schooling meant teaching the horse how to improve itself using equestrian methods that went back centuries. He felt schooling required a certain pedagogic sensitivity on the part of the horseman."

"Dr. van Schaik's lessons were thought-provoking and stimulating. He believed that any and every horse would benefit from foundational dressage whether it was intended for dressage, field hunter, hunter, jumper, or hacker. The method was the same and it was intended to gymnasticize the horse. He rode young Thoroughbreds until his mid-70s, still mounting from the ground, and his flexibility allowed him to handle his horses very softly. He believed the rider must ride in a very elegant fashion, and

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that meant using the human body correctly and conveying aids to the horse with every part of the human body, not just the hand or the leg. He would transmit the classical masters while he was teaching, and he believed in subtle aids as had they. If you had to use your hands, it meant your other aids had failed. The end result of his soft, gentle schooling was a loose, soft, rhythmic, cadenced horse that responded to the aids willingly."

"As a writer of many articles and his excellent book – which I am honored to say I strongly encouraged him to write – his expertise, opinion and integrity were beyond reproach. I still feel a special closeness to him and his memory."

Great teachers cast seeds not knowing if or where they will land or if they will send out new growth. The former students reminiscing here about their mentor, Dr. Henri L.M. van Schaik, represent a handful of the horsemen whom he "schooled" in the same spirit that he taught them to "school" horses...to improve themselves using equestrian methods that evolved and were perfected over centuries.

Dr. van Schaik's papers and books have also made their way out into the larger world, perhaps planting seeds that in their time may sprout. His papers (research, notes, correspondence, photographs, and rough drafts of articles) are in the possession of the National Sporting Library in Middleburg, Virginia, accessible to the public.

The renowned equestrian book collector and bookseller, Robin Bledsoe, who directed the dispersal of Henri van Schaik's library, writes eloquently of van Schaik in her firm's catalogue of The Equestrian Library of Dr. H.L.M. van Schaik (1995). This excerpt from her piece reminds us that the thinking horseman, as Henri van Schaik lived and taught, always pushes the threshold of his own mind.

"A library that spans a lifetime is a window on that life... What sets Dr. van Schaik apart from many collectors is that he was a voracious reader who knew and used his books. His passion for applying the wisdom of the masters – in their original languages – to specific situations was well known. As he read, he sometimes highlighted passages with a yellow marker. Book lovers deplore this habit, but here, with a reader of Dr. van Schaik's subtle intelligence, it becomes a certain form of conversation.

In fact, conversation is at the heart of the collection. At the most basic level, there is the conversation between horse and rider that is counseled within the books' pages. Then there is the conversation among Dr. van Schaik and his peers by way of the books and articles they exchanged.

Finally, there is a conversation over centuries and continents, as within these volumes horsemen across the ages gather to teach, reminisce, gossip, and debate. Dr. van Schaik, who "hated a person with no opinions," joins in with zest. And through the legacy of his library, we too can sit in on this celestial conversation." ■

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