

And If You Remember, Then Follow

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We each have a personal catalog of especially-valued horse images stored in some recess of our minds. Are yours a foal's first steps? A snowy hack home in a winter's twilight? Or perhaps an amazing line of one tempis that made the hairs on your neck stand up straight when you saw them? Indelible images whose recollection have forever re-calibrated your riding sensibilities since you experienced them.

Of all the mental pictures inscribed into my (no-longer-so-)hard drive, three stand out. Together they reflect the kind of relationship I want to have with the horses I ride. The first comes from a September afternoon in the very late '60s or early '70s. I was quite the novice then, and I was spectating at a southeastern Pennsylvania horse trials. I watched Olympic rider J. Michael Plumb navigating the Training Level cross country course on a rangy, dapple gray thoroughbred—slipping the reins and then gracefully re-gathering them as the horse made a green, tentative leap off a bank. Then most memorably, he proceeded across a hilltop, his rounded back silhouetted against the sky, galloping in a beautiful, effortless harmony toward the next fence. The way you'd imagine flying would feel without the need of wings.

My other images both come from the CHIO at Aachen, Germany—arguably the biggest, most important annual jumper/dressage show in the world. Back in 1993, Monica Theodorescu is in the warm up on Ganimedes, her then-Olympic mount. She's in whites, wearing her stock tie but not yet having slipped on her tailcoat. She's passaging with great elevation and rhythm. Then, by the arena's edge she stops. She leans down to the side, and a helper fiddles briefly, adjusting her stock pin. Then Monica draws herself back into the saddle, and, in the very next step, creates the same exotic passage of a moment before, as though the pause had never taken place. That's what "on the aids" means!

My third image is from the same show, but perhaps from a different year. At Aachen, the dressage is held in its own stadium, but the prizes for the major classes are handed out in front of the 60,000-strong crowd at the show jumping venue. The top ten from the Grand Prix enter the field, as large as the grassy part of a baseball stadium—large enough, in fact, to contain a small lake and some jumps which include terrain features like a *grob*. The riders fan out and, at the announcer's invitation, in unison perform half passes, passages, pirouettes, and tempis for the "general" audience's approval. Then they assemble for the awards presentation, the flag raising, and anthem playing. Finally, there's the Yastrzemski-esque victory lap around the field's perimeter. The crowd hollers and waves. Some of the horses prance and shy till one, undaunted by the ruckus, leads them past the echoing stands.

Positioned near the out-gate, through my camera's lens, I watched all this transpire. As the horses approached me, they broke from their gallop and began to passage. The image that sticks with me is a pair of the riders passing by me, still in their passage. One has taken the reins in a single hand, and she's turned in the saddle

gesturing to a passaging neighbor off her left shoulder, seeming to be casually discussing where they might dine that evening. No fuss, no muss. No poking, prodding, grinding, or frowning—just an elegantly effort-free and unconscious expression of lightness and movement.

. . . special memories I try not to lose sight of when I school or coach.