

Q: Is It for the Journey or the Blue Ribbon?

BILL: This is another one of those questions that doesn't have one right and one wrong answer, although I bet you'll find some people that are sure that it does. If you read the dressage pulps or lurk around the message boards and chatrooms, you've already heard the contentious sparring: It's an art; it's all about the relationship; it's how you think about your horse and your work, not success itself; you can't measure success, anyway, by ribbons you win. That's the Less Taste side of the argument.

On the More Filling side, if you don't go out and measure yourself against other riders, you seal yourself in a bubble where "Not Very Good" can seem to you like "Just Fine"; competition is what pushes people to excel; shows attract sponsors and money and even fame, and without those things it would be impossible to breed and support star athletes like Ravel or Edward Gall's horse that we all admire.

From one vantage point, it might be even borderline sinful to spend exorbitant amounts of money on a horse with all the problems and inequities that exist in the world. But what's "too much"? Is it ten million dollars? Is it two million? Is it the price of a house? Or just a low six figures? Maybe just the price of an SUV from Korea? Might it only be a year's tuition someplace? I've heard people claim that if it's more than a thousand bucks, that horse ain't worth it. Clearly, it's a matter of perspective.

The so-called (oops, I'm showing my bias) classicists might argue that "since it's about the training" and not the innate value of the horseflesh, there's no need to spend the cash. That is, until someone acknowledges that there is greater raw beauty in the superior horse than in a common one. They might also point out that success which is purchased is of lesser value than success which is created from time and effort. Alternatively, that you can't experience what some of the movements are really supposed to feel like if you don't feel them on a horse that's truly talented and capable (and, by definition in our modern world, expensive.) You can go round and round—many people have in the past in tones both self-righteous and accusatory.

Personally, I like shows and competition as long as they don't make people crazy. Kept in perspective, showing can be wholesome, fun, and motivation to go out and put in the hours in the saddle when it might feel easier to succumb to the comfort of the couch, a glass of wine, and the TV. If you're of the journeying ilk, you'll say you're happy enough right at home, and you don't need externals to keep you focused. It's all so tied into your own personality and what makes you tick. I will say this, however, whether you do it for its own sake or specifically to get to the destination, the journey itself is inevitable, and it's always a long one. You can step out for a jaunt to the convenience store pretty easily, but training a dressage horse is more like embarking on a hike the length of the Appalachian Trail. Governor Sanford excluded, if you don't enjoy the trail itself, you aren't going to be happy out in the woods, and you're going to be more aware

of the aches and the blisters than you are of the rewards. If frustration and disappointment dominate your riding, you either need a new attitude, a new horse, or a new sport!