

Capt. Divinity

If there's not an app for it, too many people forget.

Frank Robinson was a ballplayer of historic proportions. With the Cincinnati Reds and later the Baltimore Orioles, he played in eleven All Star Games, won the Triple Crown (no one has done that since 1967), been Rookie of the Year, the only person to be MVP of both leagues, played on multiple World Series teams, and retired with 586 dingers—fourth most then on the all-time list. Oh, yeah, and he was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame and later awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Later, he managed in the Majors, and one spring afternoon during a rain delay, the guys were sitting around the clubhouse killing time when one of his fuzzy cheeked kids, new to The Show, was trying to make conversation. “Hey, Skip,” he said to Robinson casually, “you ever play any ball?”

In every sport—in every discipline whether athletic or not—there are men and women of such stature that we are all poorer if they are forgotten. One man you need to remember is Bert de Nemethy. Any rider over 40 who followed show jumping “back when” probably does know his name. Everyone else should.

In short, he ranks as the most influential person in jumpers in the U.S. in the past sixty years. Born in Hungary in 1911 and having served in the cavalry there, he emigrated to America after World War II. In 1955, he was appointed as the first coach of the newly minted civilian USET show jumping squad. During his tenure through 1980, he presided over 72 Nations Cup wins plus a plethora of Olympic, Pan Am, and World Championship medals. The riders he coached could make up an entire Hall of Fame roster—Bill Steinkraus, George Morris, Frank Chapot, Mary Mairs Chapot, Kathy Kusner, Neil Shapiro, Buddy Brown, Mike Matz, Melanie Smith, Conrad Homfeld, Katie Monahan, Joe Fargis. And that's just for starters.

So why should this be important to a dressage person? Alan Turing, Miles Davis, and Hyman Rickover are each of equal consequence in their own fields, but I'm not writing about them. The answer lies in Captain de Nemethy's methods.

Back in The Day, horse shows were decidedly different from now. The hunters occupied the sprawling outside courses, and jumpers were relegated to the small ring, their fences high, their courses uncomplicated. “Once and a half around and down the middle” was the norm. Training techniques were also less than systematic. Into this milieu de Nemethy brought his European sense of orderly schooling, and local American trainers did not welcome it or him grandly.

Before de Nemethy took over the Team at Gladstone, he worked privately. One person for whom he rode was Eleonora Sears (yes, *those* Sears) in Massachusetts. Our friend, Jane Sheehan, recounts the story of de Nemethy and fellow Hungarian Gabor Foltényi schooling their horses in the warm up at the PHA show in Medfield, MA, back in 1952 or '53. We would recognize what they were doing as gymnastic flatwork—in short: dressage. The other professionals thought their work was the height of silliness and sat on the rail making snide and rude remarks about their pretensions. The punchline, of course, was *until the pair won just about everything!*

That was the dawning of a new technical approach to schooling jumpers in this country. De Nemethy was a firm believer in grids, gymnastic jumping, and long sessions

on the lunge line to develop his riders—even the experienced ones. I had the good fortune to meet him on several occasions.

In the summer of 1973, I was at the American Dressage Institute riding with Lockie Richards, the resident instructor. Captain de Nemethy was simultaneously conducting a two week dressage course for the advanced riders. On Thursday evening the Richards hosted a barbeque for all the participants, and as the evening wound down, de Nemethy rose to make a short speech. At that point he was at the pinnacle of his success in the jumper world, but he told his audience how touched he was to have been invited there as a “serious” dressage person—it meant a lot to him, he said, to be recognized as understanding and applying classical principles in his work.

A few years later, after the Montreal Olympics, I had the opportunity to take part in a ten day ADI seminar at Gladstone, the USET’s headquarters. I was riding with Colonel Sommer who had just judged at the Games and with the USET’s dressage coach, Colonel Ljungquist. In the early morning mist as I warmed up, de Nemethy was always on one of his jumpers doing flatwork. I was an absolute nobody, but he was uniformly gracious and interested and made me feel welcome in his ring.

De Nemethy wasn’t always totally serious. While at ADI, he worked alongside Robert Thibodeau, a ballet master who with the Poulins was teaching an “at the barre/on the lunge/riding the horse” approach to learning called Body Control and Development. De Nemethy would teasingly address Thibodeau as “Mr. Tippy Toes” and relished the rejoinder when Thibodeau referred to him as “Captain Divinity.”