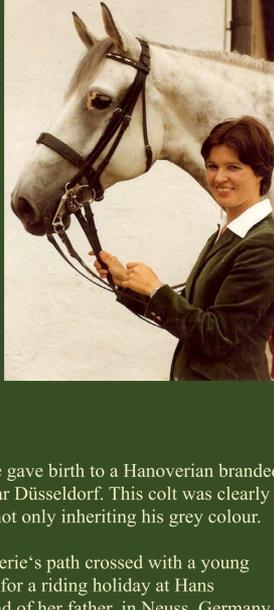


Mon Cherie, The Joyous Gift

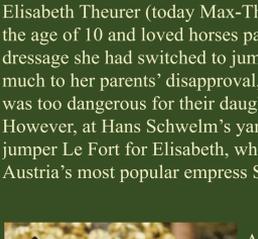
January 6, 2010

When in 1988 21-year old Nicole Uphoff became the youngest Olympic Equestrian Champion to date many were thrilled this was possible at such an age without working up the ladder for years. Though people thought this was a surprising premiere for a young rider to achieve such great success, but it wasn't!



Nine years earlier a young cheerful Austrian had delighted the crowds in the same way and with similar success on a horse, which hadn't cost a penny: Mon Cherie.

In 1969 Mon Cherie was expected. The mare Aurora by Agram, owned by Rudi Heinen und Hans Schwelm, should be covered by Georg Vorwerk's legendary Furioso. But as the latter was too busy covering other mares Aurora was bred to the Irish thoroughbred More Magic xx instead.



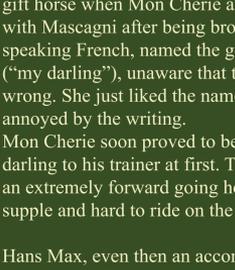
On 20th January 1970 she gave birth to a Hanoverian branded colt at "Vellrater Hof" near Düsseldorf. This colt was clearly influenced by his father, not only inheriting his grey colour.

Three years later Mon Cherie's path crossed with a young Austrian girl, who stayed for a riding holiday at Hans Schwelm, a business friend of her father, in Neuss, Germany.



Elisabeth Theurer (today Max-Theurer) had started riding at the age of 10 and loved horses passionately. After she took up dressage she had switched to jumping at the beginning 1970s, much to her parents' disapproval, who thought this discipline was too dangerous for their daughter.

However, at Hans Schwelm's yard they bought the Hanoverian jumper Le Fort for Elisabeth, who is called "Sissy" like Austria's most popular empress Sissy von Beieren.

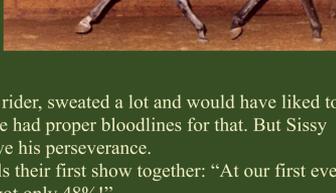


As an addition the Theurers got the three year old Mon Cherie as a gift from Mr. Schwelm, but they left him in Neuss for the breaking in.

Sissy's enterprise into jumping ended quite soon and she returned to dressage, which her parents supported most and they bought her the 10-year old S-level trained horse Mascagni by the famous Marcio xx.

With him she soon joined the Austrian juniors team and was allowed to compete in the 1974 European Championships for Juniors, which were simultaneously held with the World Championships in Copenhagen.

There Sissy didn't win a medal, but became friends with Hans Max, who competed in the Austrian senior team with the lovely Lippizan crossbred Astor.

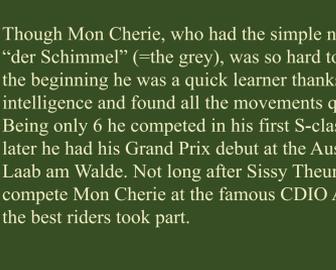


Max had already started to train her dapple grey gift horse when Mon Cherie arrived from Germany with Mascagni after being broken in. Sissy, not speaking French, named the gelding Mon Cherie ("my darling"), unaware that the writing was wrong. She just liked the name and nobody was annoyed by the writing.

Mon Cherie soon proved to be anything but a darling to his trainer at first. The Hanoverian was an extremely forward going horse, completely un supple and hard to ride on the bit.

Hans Max, even then an accomplished and talented rider, sweated a lot and would have liked to hand the gelding over to a jumping rider as the horse had proper bloodlines for that. But Sissy wouldn't allowed this so Max had to go on and prove his perseverance.

Mon Cherie's young owner also rode him and recalls their first show together: "At our first ever show we competed in an A-level dressage test and got only 48%!"

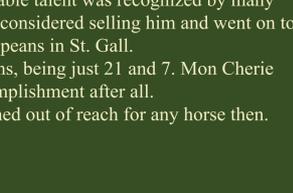


But in 1975 Hans Max' consequent and patient work slowly paid off. As a 5-year old Mon Cherie was able to do half passes and tempi changes and his great talent for piaffe and passage was visible for the first time.

As Max was a member of the Austrian senior team he was allowed to train with the national coach, Georg Wahl. First he wasn't allowed to bring Mon Cherie to the courses, but in 1975 the gelding had improved so much he could take part. The pair profited much from Wahl's mastership.

Though Mon Cherie, who had the simple nick name "der Schimmel" (=the grey), was so hard to work with at the beginning he was a quick learner thanks to his great intelligence and found all the movements quite easy.

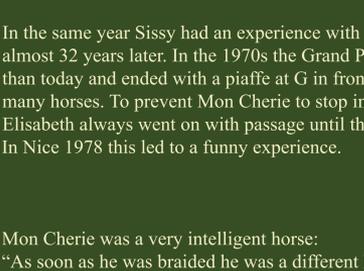
Being only 6 he competed in his first S-class and a year later he had his Grand Prix debut at the Austrian CDI in Laab am Walde. Not long after Sissy Theurer risked to compete Mon Cherie at the famous CDIO Aachen, where the best riders took part.



Despite his youth and inexperience Mon Cherie's undeniable talent was recognized by many and Sissy got serious offers for him. Of course she never considered selling him and went on to compete in her first senior championships: the 1977 Europeans in St. Gall.

There they were probably the youngest of all combinations, being just 21 and 7. Mon Cherie wasn't fully matured and placed 20th, but it was an accomplishment after all.

Granat, who defended his European title in St. Gall, seemed out of reach for any horse then.

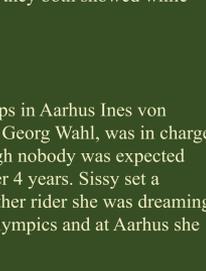


At 8 years the Hanoverian was still a very forward going horse and Sissy reminisced she had to work Mon Cherie in for four hours before the Grand Prix at the 1978 World Championships in Goodwood: "Still I wasn't sure if he was going to end in the audience after the extended trot on the diagonal." Mon Cherie didn't and he had improved much to finish in a respectable 14th place out of 33 horses, only two places from the individual final.

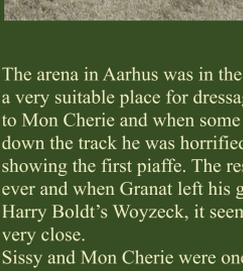
In the same year Sissy had an experience with her horse she still loves to remember, even almost 32 years later. In the 1970s the Grand Prix as well as the Grand Prix Special were longer than today and ended with a piaffe at G in front of the judges, which was a very big effort for many horses. To prevent Mon Cherie to stop in the last piaffe what many horses used to do Elisabeth always went on with passage until the next corner in her training. In Nice 1978 this led to a funny experience.

Mon Cherie was a very intelligent horse: "As soon as he was braided he was a different horse. He knew then that it counted," Max-Theurer explained. So in Nice Mon Cherie, unlike other horses, did 14, 15 wonderful and effortless steps of piaffe at G and being so clever he thought he must do passage after.

Sissy recalls: "I tried to halt, but Mon Cherie obviously thought his rider was very wrong and did passage instead. I tried to halt again, but only the fence of the arena, which luckily was higher than usual, was able to stop my eager horse. The judge at C, Mrs. Joan Hall, had to laugh a lot about his eagerness."



This little anecdote shows what Sissy and Mon Cherie expressed to everybody: dressage was fun, a pleasure and not a fatally serious affair. With that special attitude they also won the hearts of many less horse people: the joy they both showed while doing dressage became their trademark.

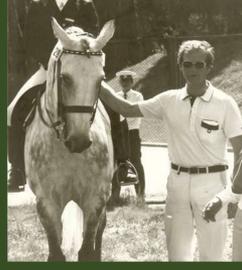


At the 1979 European Championships in Aarhus Ines von Badewitz, who had taken over from Georg Wahl, was in charge of quite a good Austrian team, though nobody was expected to stop Granat, then reigning for over 4 years. Sissy set a personal goal in Aarhus. Like any other rider she was dreaming of representing her country at the Olympics and at Aarhus she wanted to earn the qualification.

In the "preliminary" test, the Inter II, Mon Cherie came a good sixth, but in the Grand Prix he did exceptionally well to finish a remarkable third, but still more than 70 points behind the winner Granat. Anyway a medal was within reach for the only 23 years old Austrian when the individual competition was held a day later, but to beat Granat?

The arena in Aarhus was in the bowl of a cycling track and not a very suitable place for dressage. Granat had to perform prior to Mon Cherie and when those photographs were running down the track he was horrified and turned away instead of showing the first piaffe. The rest of the test was powerful as ever and when Granat left his great rival from the past behind, Harry Boldt's Woyzeck, it seemed that his third European title very close.

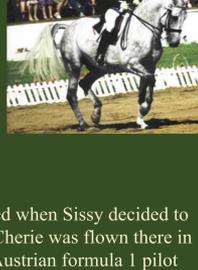
Sissy and Mon Cherie were one of two remaining pairs and their appearance was most impressive. At only 23 and with a big chance to win her first medal one should have expected her to be nervous and tense. Her rival Christine Stückelberger reminisced: „And then came Sissy. She entered the arena completely relaxed and smiling. She left the impression to enjoy it very much just to be there and she performed without mistakes and had real highlights in the pirouettes and the piaffe.“



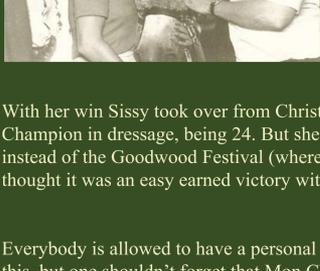
The outcome was a sensation: Granat was beaten by 20 points, defeated for the first time since 1974, not by one of the German riders, who had hunted him desperately for years, but by a 23-year old Austrian girl on a gift horse! Sissy never expected to win: „The result was indescribable. It took some time before I realized it.“ To her the gold medal was a fairytale and totally surprising: „It was my most meaningful success.“

A young woman who only intended to qualify for Moscow, traveled home to Austria, the public attention in a rather small country like Austria was enormous and Sissy's sympathetic and charming personality made dressage more popular, not only in her home country.

The Olympic year 1980 became overshadowed by the discussion to boycott the Games in Moscow after the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan. In the end the most important equestrian nations didn't go to Moscow and competed in Alternative Games instead she decided to go to Russia.



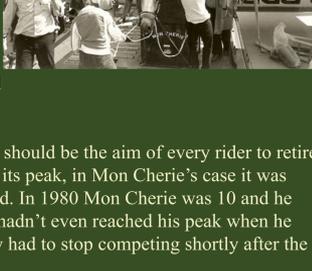
Who knew if the chance were to come ever again, let alone with such an outstanding horse? Moreover Mon Cherie has developed melanomas which often appear on greys. It didn't handicap him very much then, but nobody knew how it would end in his years to come.



Many rivals were not thrilled when Sissy decided to compete in Moscow. Mon Cherie was flown there in a Fokker plane by famous Austrian formula 1 pilot Niki Lauda, traveling happily as always in a self-constructed container. In a reduced field of mainly riders from Eastern Europe Mon Cherie was superior, of course, and won the individual gold medal far ahead of the rest. The Russians loved this pair and celebrated it enthusiastically.

With her win Sissy took over from Christine Stückelberger as the then youngest Olympic champion in dressage, being 24. But she had to face some criticism for going to Goodwood instead of the Goodwood Festival (where Granat won) not taking part in the boycott. Some thought it was an easy earned victory without her main rivals being there.

Everybody is allowed to have a personal opinion on this, but one shouldn't forget that Mon Cherie had proved his very good form shortly before Moscow by placing 2nd in both the Grand Prix and the Special at the CDIO Aachen. Whether Mon Cherie would have been able to beat Granat in Goodwood or Granat to beat him in Moscow remains theory and will never be answered. However, with or without his main rivals: Mon Cherie had shown a performance that was absolutely dignified to become an Olympic Champion, so all the rumours before and after could be considered quite unjust.

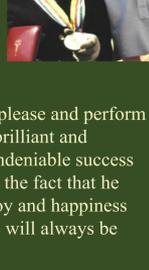


Though it should be the aim of every rider to retire a horse at its peak, in Mon Cherie's case it was unintended. In 1980 Mon Cherie was 10 and he probably hadn't even reached his peak when he very sadly had to stop competing shortly after the Olympics.

One of his melanomas was located near his jaw and its continuous growth influenced his breathing when being ridden on the bit. There was no other decision left than stop training and competing Mor

Cherie. It must have been a cruel one for Sissy and Hans Max, who became her husband three years later, but they decided for the welfare of their great horse.

Mon Cherie, whom his rider describes as „an absolute lovely horse, who always had to be entertained,“ lived for five more years. In the end the melanoma caused an increasing number of colic attacks and he had to be put down in 1985. It was the year his rider was pregnant with Victoria, who now continues her mother's success. „It was very very hard for us. Mon Cherie had meant incredibly much to me,“ Sissy admitted. „He had taught me that one must believe in a horse and shouldn't give up too early.“



His intelligence and the will to please and perform had enabled Mon Cherie to be brilliant and successful. Yet it was less his undeniable success in quite a short career and more the fact that he showed the same enthusiasm, joy and happiness in dressage like his rider that he will always be remembered for.

Article by Silke Rottermann

The author likes to thank Mrs. Elisabeth "Sissy" Max-Theurer for her tremendous support in writing this article.

Photos courtesy: Hugo Czerny

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