

Photography & Report: Stephanie Law  
Photo: Katrin Burger on World Hit at  
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## Training Young Horses: An Interview with World Young Horse Champion, Katrin Burger

Katrin Bürger impressively earned her German Gold Medal Badge for her success at Grand Prix with the stallions, Dornenkönig and Day Dream. However, it has been in the young horse divisions where she really made her mark. She was the 3 time Regional Champion, the German National Champion, the 2003 Bronze Medalist, and 2004 Gold Medalist in the FEI Young Horse World Championships with the stallion French Kiss.

Being the co-manager of Gestüt Schlossäcker which is a large stallion station and breeding farm in the German State of Baden Württemberg, she wasn't just the rider of French Kiss, she selected him and developed him from the time he was a foal.

In 2006 she moved to Vechta, Germany to join the Oldenburg team where she is the Deputy Breeding Director of the Verband, and where she still rides and trains 3 to 4 horses privately. She will be teaching a clinic on training young horses at Red Hawk Ranch, CA on November 3rd and 4th. Please visit [www.redhawk ranch.tv](http://www.redhawk ranch.tv) for more information.

**Q: Do you recommend handling newborn foals, and if so to what extent?**

A: Well, certainly foals are not to play with. They are very fast and unpredictable so although they should be handled, this should be done carefully, and by adults that know what they are doing. They should be introduced to the halter, leading, tying and picking up their feet while they are still by their mother's side. If you wait until they are weaned at 6 months old it can be much more difficult because they are quite strong by that age. They can fight harder, and be more prone to injury as they become older.

**Q: At the 2006 Global Dressage Forum, Dr. Andrew Maclean explained that a large part of the behavioral patterns are formed in the young horse's brain by the age of 3. How much do you work with horses under the age of 3, and what type of work do you do with them?**

A: I think once the foal is used to being handled as I already described it is best to let them be horses for the next two years. It is very important to turn them out in a group so that they are exposed to the natural social structure of a herd. They are happy not only when they are the "Chef" or boss, but when their place in the order is clear.

This social development and understanding of the hierarchy is not only natural for a horse, but it will help with the

training later. When you then work with a horse that understands the idea of a social order, they are more likely to accept you as the "Chef" which you of course must be. This is not done by dominating the horse, but by simply making the rules and your position clear.

**Q: At what age do you feel a horse is ready to be started under saddle, and what do you look for to determine that they are ready?**

A: This depends on the individual horse. Stallions who are chosen to be presented for the approvals are typically those that have matured and developed earlier than others. They are brought in and handled, lunged, and free jumped at the age of 2 to 2½ in order to be prepared for the selections. Mares and geldings, or late developing stallions are typically brought in and started with this work when they are coming three years old.

I typically look for the horse to be physically mature and strong enough. They should be able to lunge in balance, be used to your presence, and be familiar with your voice and verbal aids. Of course some horses don't start to develop their bodies until they actually start the work so it's also important not to wait too long. I wouldn't wait past the age of 3½ because when they are older their mind set is more fixed, and they can be more difficult to work with.

**Q: How much lunging or handwork do you do with a young horse?**

A: I usually handle them and lunge them for 2 to 3 months before starting them under saddle. This is to ensure that they are used to my presence, my voice, and so that they have learned to balance themselves.

Within a lunging session it is very important not to lunge them for too long, not just because of the danger of physical lameness that can come from overdoing it, but also so they don't get tired and bored. Twenty minutes three to four times a week is typically enough. You want the horse to enjoy what he is doing. We also combine this with making sure the horse has enough turnout, and does some free jumping in between to vary the work.

**Q: What type of equipment do you use when lunging a young horse?**

A: At first we always lunge with a cavesson and not the bridle to avoid pulling on the mouth. It is also important to have a closed arena with a wall, preferably a round pen which also helps the horse to balance without the trainer having to pull and hold the horse on the circle.

The side reins must at first be elastic and giving. When a horse is introduced to the idea of the side reins his natural instinct is to pull against them. It is important that he can stretch his neck so that he doesn't fight so hard

that he goes up and possibly over backwards. After he is used to these side reins, normal leather side reins can be used, but the sliding side reins should not be used until much later in the training. The idea at first is just to get the horse used to the concepts, and not to worry about having him in a perfect frame all of the time. It is very important in the beginning that the horse is free enough to go as his body allows him to, and in a frame that he is naturally built for.

**Q: When you sit on the horse for the first time, do you use an assistant, and if so what is their role?**

A: Yes, assistants are vital. The role of the person on the ground is actually more important than that of the person riding. The ground person should know the horse, should be able to hold the horse firmly, and the horse should be familiar with the voice and their verbal aids. They need to be able to read the horse and react well to whatever the horse is doing. Of course the person sitting on the horse must be a relaxed, good rider that can stay on if the horse starts to jump around.

**Q: Since a young horse just being started isn't doing very much in their riding sessions is it alright for an amateur to ride them, or should a well educated professional always work with them?**

A: This depends on the goals, the horse, and the amateur. I have had good experiences with amateurs riding young horses because they have just ridden them simply, and given the horses time. If the goals for the horse are not very ambitious it is quite ok. This is also becoming a possibility now more and more because we have so many horses that are being bred for rideability. They have such good characters, and they are uncomplicated to work with.

Of course if the goal is for the horse to have a career in the larger sport world and/or the horse is a bit difficult then a professional should work with them. It is really best to obtain advice from a professional, and maybe work with them once a week to monitor the horse's progress.

The reality is that sometimes the only way for an amateur to get a really good horse is to buy them as a young horse. Once they are trained, they are either too expensive or not for sale at all.

**Q: Once the horse understands the basics of stop and go what is generally your focus when you ride a horse that has just been started?**

A: Once the horse understands "Gas und Bremse" (gas and brakes), the horse should go through the poll, have respect for the contact, and you can't do anything without the horse going forward. The focus must be the quality of the gaits which should be active in the hind leg, balanced, swinging through the back, and that the rider can influ-

ence easily with a light contact. The basics of the German training pyramid should be followed: Rhythm, Relaxation, Connection, Impulsion, Straightness, Collection.

It is also very important that the work be structured so that the horse is happy in the work, and that they want to show themselves off as they do in the fields.

**Q: How often and long do you ride a horse that has just been started?**

A: Three to four times a week and the session should be around 20 minutes, but the rider really has to decide depending on how the horse feels. It is important that the horse does not get tired or feel drilled. They should have fun so that their eyes are shiny, and their expression is bright.

**Q: When do you introduce the concept of lateral work, and what are some of the most common mistakes that you see people making when training a young horse to do lateral work?**

A: The first step in this is to simply teach the horse to move away from the leg. You need to half halt the horse so that they don't just move straight through, but a big mistake that I see is when people doing it with the hand. The horse should not slow down in the lateral work. It must be forwards/sideways. This slowing of the hind leg typically happens when the hand is used too much.

When the horse is coming 5 the work with walk pirouettes is started. The horses must stay relaxed when being introduced to these concepts. It isn't important that they do it perfectly at first. Sometimes they'll fall over the inside shoulder when trying it for the first time. This is not correct, but it is ok until they understand the initial idea, and then the correctness of the movement can be worked on when they are relaxed and understand what is being asked of them.

**Q: What do you feel is necessary for the horse to know or be doing before you start work on the flying changes?**

A: Working on the flying changes when the horse is 5 years old is early enough, and the horse must be well trained up to that point. Some test the horse as a three year old and I used to do this, but I don't anymore because work with the counter canter needs to start at 4 years old, and I find that sometimes this is too confusing for the horse. You can see well enough when the horse is free whether or not flying changes will be difficult for them.

The horse must have a good collected canter, and be able to do the counter canter in good balance on both sides. It is important too that the rider can easily counter-flex the neck in the counter canter to show that the horse is truly through the outside rein and is balanced. Some horses need a year to learn the changes, and others two years.

The method of training the changes depends on the individual horse. Sometimes horses learn it easily enough on the diagonal, others need to be ridden towards the wall, out of the counter canter on the circle, or out of the shoulder-in. The trainer has to find the solution that works best depending on the character of the horse, and how the horse is balancing itself.

**Q: Do you feel it is necessary for a young horse to be on schedule with the FEI requirements for the Young Horse tests in order to have a successful career later at Grand Prix?**

A: No. Some horses develop differently, and there are many Grand Prix trainers who focus on different aspects of the training in different stages than what is shown in the FEI Young Horse tests. Many young horses don't have big gaits, and/or might not be ready for the Young Horse tests, but this does not mean that they cannot be trained and developed later for the Grand Prix.

Of course many of the horses that can do the FEI Young Horse tests will be very well prepared for the Grand Prix. They must do 4 flying changes in the 6 year old dressage test now which is very difficult. If they can do this well, they are quite ready to move on from this to the Prix St. George in the following year.

**Q: Do you feel that pushing a horse to be successful in the Young Horse tests could ever cause a problem for the longer term goal of making it to Grand Prix?**

A: If you have a good quality horse that has been trained well then there shouldn't be a problem. The main concern I have is when I see the pressure of showing too much take over. Many owners want to see their young horses go to the National or World Championships, and the trainers respond accordingly, but not always in the best interest of the long term development of the horse.

In Germany it is possible to go to one show, get a good score and then go to the Championships. It is not necessary to show a three or four year old horse anymore than this. When they are 5 or 6 you might need a little more experience to gage the warm-up time correctly or see how the horse reacts to the arenas, but with a very young horse it is better not to worry too much about this. If it doesn't go well, there is always next year.

The problem is not only with stress of traveling to the shows, it is also in how this affects the training. There are days when it's better to focus on the swing of the back, or having the horse relax and be happy. However, when the trainer knows there is a show coming up, too much focus is on having everything be perfect. The focus turns to riding the tests, and not what is really best for the development of the horse. It is better that the young horse just has fun.