

The way to the top...

Fingerspitzengefühl ...and a Bit of LUCK!

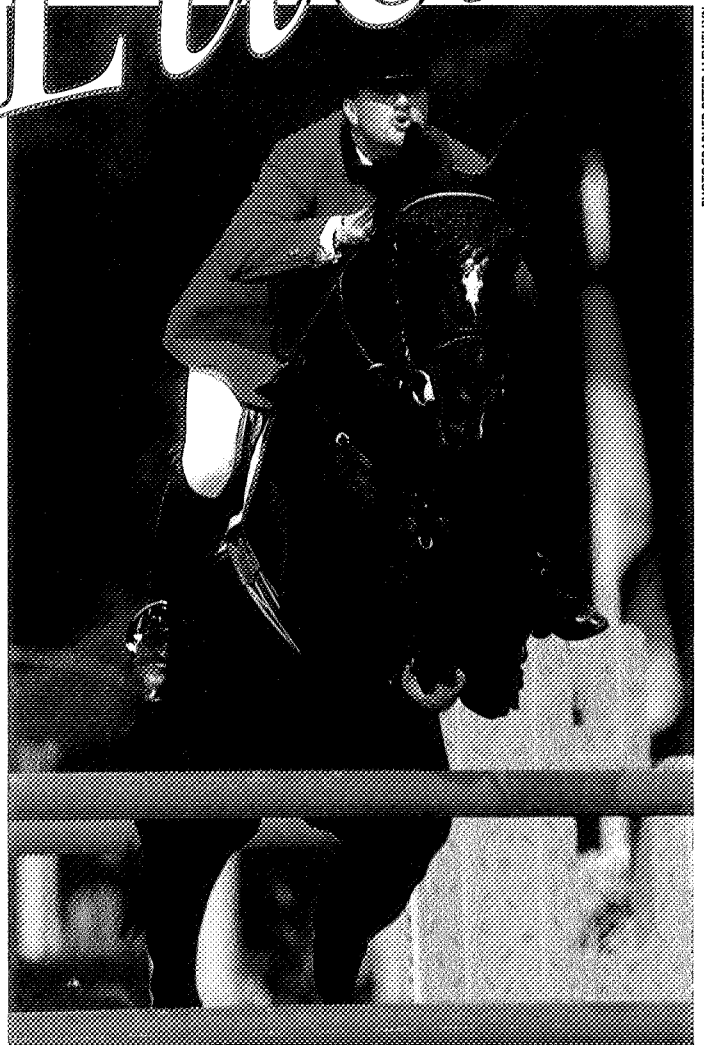
How does a top rider train his horses and other riders? What is their philosophy on good training? To find out, Anita van Adelsbergen spoke to leading riders Jan Tops and Otto Becker at the international showjumping event in Neuendorf, Switzerland.

Jan Tops | Jan started riding at the age of six. In 1981 he became European Young Riders' Champion, riding Nargus. He rode his first Nations Cup for Holland in 1982. He is an international rider as well as a very successful horse trainer and dealer. He rides for the Mexican-owned La Silla stables, and is married to Canadian rider Tani Tops-Zeidler. Jan is such a successful horseman that almost every week, one of his current or former horses wins a Grand Prix. Reason enough for us to find him, to see what we can learn from this professional Dutchman.

"Well, before we start I should point out that there are no standard rules on training horses or riders. There is no system that you can use. It all comes down to feeling, to the right touch. And then it also depends on what kind of horse, or what kind of rider you are training. Even the nationality of the rider is important. There is a big difference between a German rider, for example, and a Latin rider. Franke Sloothaak keeps a horse round and on the bit by using control in the canter, whereas Nelson Pessoa has other techniques to do the same. Like I said, there is no set system, it all comes down to feeling: as the Germans say, "Fingerspitzengefühl", and of course let's not forget luck. You need some of that too."

So feeling is the keyword in Jan's view, and as he rightly pointed out, it all depends on what kind of training relationship you have with a rider or horse. "Whether someone is training with you for three months or three years also makes a difference. If a rider is with you for a longer period of time, you have all the time you need to make sure that the basics are there and accounted for. That way, you can get much more pleasure out of the combination and that is important. But again, you need to know as a trainer how to approach different situations, riders and horses. For me it all comes down to the results. We have got a Grand Prix winner every week. When people buy from us, they not only get the horse, but also the know-how that goes with it."

That know-how has definitely paid off. To give some examples, Jan used to own John Whitaker's horses, Flower and Heymen, and still co-owns Randy. He used to own Renville (James Fisher) and the young horses in Rodrigo Pessoa's stable also come from "Stal Tops". But to list all of his successful horses would take a whole →



PHOTOGRAPHER PETER LLEVELLYN

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book, so let's go back to Jan's training philosophy.

"We buy and sell approximately 200 horses each year and the thing is, if you put money into it, then it will prove how much you really know about horses. Because, if you do not have winning horses, then you will end up broke! See the results and then you will know if you are successful or not. You have to look at the horses and if you face a problem, you need to find a way to solve it. The horses that I am riding at the moment, Top Gun and Operette, I have had for 10 and seven years, so I know the horses and I have had time to build something up."

In Neuendorf, Jan was training his wife Tani. What advice does he give her before she goes in the arena? "Again, it depends on the horse and on the course. If she is riding a new, young horse I would tell her to ride a nice round, but not to go too fast. The speed you can save for later in a Grand Prix. If you take it nice and easy, the horse and rider will benefit from it in the end."

Does he feel that at the moment there are any solid combinations in top jumping?

"That is very hard to say. It would be like talking about the weather, you know. It is good in California, but it is also good in Mexico. It is the same in jumping. For example, Hugo Simon and ET are solid, but so are Rodrigo Pessoa and Baloubet. There are so many good combinations in the sport today that you really cannot pick one out. These riders are only examples, but I could have easily mentioned others as well."

Finally, we spoke to Jan about his philosophy of life. What are the important things in his personal and business life?

"I enjoy what I am doing very much. Whether I am winning a major show, or whether my wife or one of my former horses wins a Grand Prix. It all gives me satisfaction. In my personal life, I am happy that I can take my family to shows. After all, that is all that matters: family, good friends, and health. The rest comes and goes."

Otto Becker | Otto started riding at the age of seven. In 1976 he became German Junior Champion. He rode his first Nations Cup for Germany in 1984. He is currently riding at Paul Schockemoehle's stables, where HRH Princess Haya of Jordan →

