

Islay Auty as riders from all over the world have come to know her – imparting her considerable knowledge in a firm and precise manner



The standard of local riding instruction

by Izak Hofmeyr

Anyone wanting feedback on the level of local riding instruction can do a lot worse than to ask Islay Auty for her impressions. SA Horseman had the opportunity to speak to this world-renowned trainer and coach after a coaching tour she conducted through the country at the invitation of the SANEF Instructors Plan.

“There is no doubt that you have a whole bunch of extremely enthusiastic and passionate people in your riding industry. I also saw some very nice horses and competent riders. In general, however, I would place your standard at about 15 years behind us in the UK. We, in turn, are quite a bit behind countries such as Germany and Holland.

Islay Auty is perhaps best known as the author of a number of equestrian books written for the British Horse Society (BHS). A riding instructor for most of her life, she in latter years became increasingly interested in training riding instructors, especially after becoming a Fellow of the British Horse Society in 1995.

Perhaps the biggest challenge we in South Africa face, she pointed out, was the lack of exposure due to the difficulty of competing on the European circuit. The only way to counter this would be to send riders over to gain experience in Europe and the UK and to invite well-respected instructors over for clinics and tours.

“In my travels all over the world I often find that people expect to be at a lower level than what they actually are. In a secluded environment it is often difficult to find a realistic benchmark against which one can measure oneself. I found exactly the same when working with some Pony Club instructors in South Africa. It is so easy to start focusing on the weaknesses rather than the strengths if there is little exposure to what is happening in the world. I don’t think there is anything wrong with what you are doing, you are just behind us due to the opportunities and exposure that we get.”

Looking at her CV, one cannot help but being impressed. Apart from being *chefe d’ quipe* to the British Pony Dressage Team, she is also director for BYRDS (British Young Riders Dressage Scheme), responsible for developing policy for

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the exhibitors and the guest sellers of all the various horse breeds who with their support and participation made this expo such a success.

I would also like to thank all the buyers and people who attended the day, we so enjoyed having you here.

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developing dressage riders under the age of 25 in Britain. This includes identifying talent, developing training standards from a regional level right up to national standards and then through to international level. Islay currently serves on the Executive Group for International Equestrian Qualifications.

Some 12 years ago she gave up her share in the riding school where she taught and took an honours degree in education. In 1995 she did her Fellowship of the British Horse Society (FBHS) and started to make her living from freelance teaching.

At about the same time the BHS approached her about updating three of their publications, namely *The Horsemaster's Notebook* by Mary Rose, the *Stable Management Manual* and the *BHS Equitation Handbook*. These she revamped and updated over the next few years.

The BHS then decided that they needed a series of exam books to support their Instructors Examination System. So she wrote the manuals for Stage 1, Stage 2, Stage 3, Preliminary Teaching and Progressive Riding Tests. These books all related to the BHS examination system based very much on the exam syllabus. Later on followed *Teaching Riding* and *Learn to Ride*.

International standards

Travelling regularly to all parts of the world, she is in a good position to compare standards. Germany, she says, is quite simply in a different league. They have such a strong and well-established system of breeding horses and then producing the young horses into a system where their riders are trained from a very early age in a very organised system of development. Whether they are dressage riders or jumping riders, they are all taught the rigid basic foundation of an established position and a clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve when they ride a horse.

Training top riders and breeding top horses go hand in hand, she pointed out. Because the Germans produce top quality horses, riders develop a much more fundamental feel and awareness of how a horse should go well. In Britain, in contrast, there is a strong tradition of training cross-country riders, with their strong hunting and racing tradition.

There are two fundamental differences to consider, she reflected. The one is the

type of horse used in the two countries. The Thoroughbred is essentially a racing horse with a long forward-moving stride, while the Warmblood is bred to have a bigger and upward type of movement. The second difference is the culture. Germans are happy in a disciplined environment where they have to walk the line. British people are individualists, wanting to do their own thing without being told what to do.

She made an interesting observation while discussing the difficulty of long distances in South Africa.

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“Being an island, everything is relatively close together in the UK. This leads to the availability of competitions virtually every day of the week. From a dressage training point of view this is actually not a good thing, for competing and training don't really go hand in hand. The competition culture tends to train for the movements that are prescribed in the test, rather than establishing a sound foundation that looks for a holistic outcome that will better the general level of the horse's training.”

This, she says, could well be one of the reasons why Britain does not do as well in showjumping as they used to. “For horses to develop into really top class contenders, they need to be fundamentally very well trained. Our horses often lack that foundation.”

One of the challenges facing local horse breeders in South Africa, she said, is not only breeding really top class horses, but also matching these with the right rider. Again she used Germany as an example of a successful recipe.

“The Germans never put inexperienced riders on young horses. Their young horses are produced by people who have experience and who really can ride. The result is that these horses are being ridden forward properly and are never shut down in their movement. The results are evident.” SAH