

KYRA KYRKLUND: NOTHING MERE ABOUT THIS MORTAL

By Karen Robinson

At this year's World Cup Final, where she achieved one of her best results since winning it in 1991 with Matador, Kyra Kyrklund made a wry comment about mere mortals like herself not being able to challenge the likes of "Anky or Isabell." Kyrklund is probably the only person in the dressage world who would put herself in the same category as other "normal people" competing in the sport today. Few, if any riders, coaches or judges could say that they have not been influenced by Kyrklund's many words and deeds spanning an international career nearly three decades long. As a trainer, competitor, coach and author, she has influenced the sport globally and on many levels. The competitor in Kyrklund shows no signs of slowing down, either. When she and Max canter down centre line in Hong Kong this August, it will mark her sixth Olympic appearance.

COACHING HER PEERS

At the 2006 World Equestrian Games in Aachen, Kyrklund coached eleven of her fellow competitors; at last year's European Championships she had eight students alongside herself. Very few top riders coach at the same events where they are competing and training more riders than two team coaches at a world championship seems an almost superhuman feat. It is partly explained by the fact that Kyrklund shares her coaching duties with husband Richard White. "We could never do it if we weren't two," she says. "We both know what the other is doing with each of our students. If Jan [Brink], for instance, starts shortly before me at a competition, Richard can look at Jan and me at the same time."

She recalls that in Aachen there were often three headsets in use at one time. "It's better if there is one student and one coach, but it's not always possible, and our students understand that." Kyrklund sees her riding and her coaching as complementing one another. "Coaching helps me in my riding and the riding helps me as a coach. I have seen it happen to quite a few trainers, that the day they stop riding for one reason or another, they very quickly forgot the feeling." And while some coaches have found a way



Photos: Dirk Caremans

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to teach at a level beyond what they achieved as riders themselves, for Kyrklund it's important to not only ride but compete. "As long as I can do both, I will do both."

WHAT IS CRUELTY?

Accusations of alleged abuse have provoked much recent debate and media attention, and roll kür is a topic that just won't die. Kyrklund said at the 2007 Global Dressage Forum that "there are no bad questions." At the same time, however, there are bigger questions that she thinks need be addressed. "It has to be decided what is cruelty to horses. Is it cruel to ride them? Is it cruel to have a dog in the house or to milk a cow? We have taken animals in so we have a responsibility to them. The horse wouldn't have survived these past thousand years if it hadn't been such a good servant to people." She says it's the sport and recreation potential that gave the horse continued purpose after it was no longer used for transportation or in the military. She has observed over the years that what is acceptable treatment is continuously changing, and that horses are better cared for than ever in their past. "The moral limits are moving all the time." Some perspective is useful, too: "Roll kür can be misused in the same way as riding the horse too high or keeping a horse in the paddock all day because you don't want to muck out the box." Kyrklund believes that the sport already has the necessary safeguards to ensure ethical treatment of competition horses. "There are FEI stewards and judges at the warm up. I think people shouldn't be that worried because there are those whose job it is to see that horses are not stressed or abused." She adds that if abuse were a serious problem in the sport, then "there would be more yellow cards or red cards." She also says the pressure to ride horses responsibly at competitions extends beyond the show grounds, to everyday training. "You have to train in such a way at home that you can warm up at a show and people can look at it."

Three Is Good

Coming from a small country like Finland gives Kyrklund a slightly different point of view on the new Olympic format than those from the "big" dressage nations. "I was all for it. I think that especially because

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