

Scaling New Heights

Robert Dover

& Everest



Chris Hector interviews the dressage world's most flamboyant personality.....

There's no denying it. Robert Dover is loud, brash and opinionated, but equally there is no denying that Roberts' opinions are thoughtful and intelligent contributions to the sport, and that he has the guts to say what he thinks.

There is also no denying the fact that Robert is one of the world's great trainer/riders, with a string of truly international horses to his credit.

Now luckily for the world of dressage, Robert is on track with a new one, the giant Hanoverian, Everest.

"The horse has been in my stable on and off since he was three years old. He had been sold by one of my clients to another one of my clients, this was a beginner rider who took the horse home as a five year old and after five months decided that it was too much for him, so he decided he would like to sell it, first have it trained, then sold, and so sent the horse up to me... I've had him now for two years, and when I came home from Atlanta, I had a little more time on my hands and I started to get a little more serious with the horse, and he bloomed into a really wonderful animal."

"He is eighteen hands high. He is more rideable and more simple than anything I have ridden. And because I've had him in my stable for years, he's my horse basically." "It's lovely because the lady who helped me with a horse to ride at Atlanta, Jane Clark, bought the horse for me. He is mine, for the first time I don't have to do it quickly with the idea that I might lose the horse after one season!"

Is that distressing, the feeling that every time you get a really good horse going it could be out of your stable next week?

"That's happened to me for so many years that I've got used to it. Sometimes

you just have to look at it from the perspective that you have been so fortunate to have the horses for the important events, and not think that you deserve to have them for any longer than that. Still the luxury of having this new horse and knowing that no-one is going



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to take it away or sell it, gives me that desire to bond with the horse in a stronger way. Everest just had his very first outing in three and a half years, I did a Grand Prix demonstration at the Tampa Invitational, and he was marvellous."

I could never understand the suggestion that you might retire after Atlanta...

compared to say, Dr Neckermann at his top, you are just an adolescent...

"In all honesty if anyone said I might retire, it wasn't me. I was the one saying,

I'm not stopping on THAT note. After Atlanta I said I am going on until at least Sydney 2000. I'm very hopeful that this horse will be ready for Dublin, and I'll have a shot at Australia."

What is the buzz for you - riding at the big competitions, or training the horse at home?

"I like both. I love the training and bringing the horses along, but I must say, when you are on a winner, it's nice to go into the ring with it."

Who has been the major influence on your own riding and training?

"My first training was from Colonel Lundqvist, that was the training that I have created a philosophy around.

Colonel Lundqvist was the coach of the US dressage team in the latter part of the 70's and the early 80's, then he died. He was a Swedish National Champion, and had been to the Olympics as a rider, and also as a fencer. The biggest key element of the philosophy I gained from this is

loving horses, beyond that, trying to make the horses look like they are happily doing things of their own volition, that is a key to training in a winning way.

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opposed to forcing the performance."

There has been a lot of controversy over the 'deep and round' methods, where do you stand...

"For me the key to riding is adjustability. Making a horse deep depends on the particular individual, if he is made in such a way that making him deep makes him more on the aids, more adjustable to the will of the rider, then that's what works for that particular horse. The next horse might need to be kept up all the time. I've

had some horses that you could not make keep without ruining them. I've had others that have to be ridden deep to keep their brain and their back muscles soft and up."

You have always been a rider that tries to be involved in more than the world of horses and horse competitions. Do you think that is important to keep what you do in perspective?

"For me that is important. I don't judge others on whether their lives should be more or less full, but for me it is important that I have a life beyond horses. I like to ski, I like to work out in the gym, I like to travel a lot. For me that is very important. If other people find happiness by being constantly around horses, then that's what makes them happy, and that is what they should do."

Do you see yourself becoming more and more a trainer of others rather than a competitor?

"In all honesty I've probably been more in a teaching role than a competitive role over the past ten years. I spend more of my time teaching and training, and organising other riders but fortunately I seem to have the right horses at the right time to compete in the important competitions. So this year, we have our American Championships, and we also have a team of riders coming over to Europe I will not be taking part in those competitions, however I'll bring my horse along and do some small Grand Prix, then hopefully in the winter, start the selection trials for Dublin - then hopefully bring the horse to Europe in the Spring to get some more experience and exposure over here."

How competitive will the American team be at Dublin?

"Oh we'll still be very strong. The lovely thing about the States right now, is that we have put into place a national developing rider program to enhance the depth within our up-and-coming Grand Prix horses and riders, so we ensure our future in the sport. We have three trainers, Gunter Siedel, Steffen Peters and myself, going around the United States and training through our Team

Funding the up-and-coming Prix St Georges and Grand Prix riders and horses."

Do you have any sort of horse retention program to keep your good horses with your good riders?

"We don't have that, it's such a difficult thing to put in place because of the prices for good horses these days. However we are fortunate in that we do have some very very nice people sponsoring our best riders now, and those horses are under no threat of being taken away."

"We have a lot of very fine young horses coming up through the ranks, in my barn I have maybe fifteen to twenty horses of real quality with different riders. Not only is that fortunate for me, because I enjoy training those people and their horses, but it is fortunate for our country that we have selected very good young stock over the last fifteen years. For the most part they are horses that we have imported as three or four year olds and they are now coming into their own at FEI level, and many of them are just awesome horses."

"When you are talking about this quality of animal, you are still talking about a freak, and you can breed thousands of them and just come up with the one. So I prefer to come to Europe, where I can take my students around and look at maybe two hundred horses in a small area, and hopefully find two or three horses for them."

"The key is more in the selection, and that's where people still do not do the best job they could. They go and spend a fortune for a horse at an auction, but I believe I could find a better one just going around the countryside, finding the horse maybe in a jumping barn..."

You are not obsessed with particular bloodlines, you'd rather look at an individual?

"I only look at individuals, which is not to say that bloodlines are not meaningful. Everest is of similar blood to Louise Natthorst's Walk on Top, Woermann/Absatz. When I look at it I do find that many of the horses I select are very well bred on dressage lines; but I

also find horses that are bred to be jumpers, who are a freak of nature, they move incredibly and have the brain to do dressage."

Thinking back on your great successes in the Volvo World Cup Freestyle finals, you always used music that was well known and fitted your choreography to those themes, today all the music seems to be synthesised and lacks any of the drama of the music you used...

"I think that what has happened is that the kur has stopped having the quality of telling a story. I wanted not only a theme, but I wanted to tell a story in my freestyle. I wanted to take people away for six minutes on a ride with me. Now, riders have determined that the rhythm is of greater importance than the theme of the freestyle. You have a situation where basically you could beat a stick on a trash can, as long as it went exactly with the rhythm and put a little humming behind it, and you have the freestyle!"

"However, until you have the situation where top quality riders and horses are able to do a freestyle in such a way to tell a story, and have the quality to win, you won't beat the combination with fantastic riding and music that is synthesised. It is easier to take a video of a ride and give it to someone who builds a freestyle around it in a sound studio. Like Anky's Song Sung Blue, what worked with that, was that it worked exactly, piaffe, passage, Song Sung blue, exact. To me what is not so interesting about the Song Sung Blue Kur is that it didn't take you away anywhere, I didn't have any emotions about it, other than to watch how wonderful the horse went and the rider rode. In all probability we will see it come full circle to having something more artistic than just synthesised music." And Robert Dover is just the rider to bring that circle round once again, and I pray that I'm sitting in the audience when it happens.

