

INSIDE DALHEM

Swedish Warmblood breeder Hans-Yngve Göransson shares his formula for success.

By Kyle Karnosh





Photos by Krister Lindh, Gustav Göransson and Thomas Walker

Dressage Olympian Jan Brink rode the Swedish Warmblood stallion Briar in a long and consistently successful partnership at the international Grand Prix level. The pair participated in three Olympic Games and eight World Cup Finals. They won four medals at the European Championships and have been Swedish champions seven times.

As the breeder of this world famous stallion, Hans-Yngve Göransson has received much attention. At his Dalhem stud farm in Fuglie, outside of Trelleborg, the southernmost town in Sweden, his breeding program continues with the same methodology that has proven successful for decades.

The Dalhem Method

Göransson's philosophy is to let horses be horses. He firmly believes that box-stall isolation is bad for the mentality and strength of the growing horse. "Young horses that are isolated and treated so carefully so that they won't get hurt are being killed with love instead of letting them be horses," he says. "They are always worked on perfect, flat footing. Everything must be just so. They are like hothouse flowers. Take them out into the real world and they may wilt."

At Dalhem, all horses live outside on grass 24 hours a day until the winter weath-

OPPOSITE PAGE: Hans-Yngve Göransson and his wife, Kristina, at Dalhem with their two children, Gustav and Katarina (blue jacket), and a friend.

THIS PAGE: The Dalhem horses are turned out in all weather and live communally inside. Each horse gets special attention.

er becomes too harsh.

The farm produces about 10 foals a year. After weaning, the youngsters are divided into groups by age and sex. During the winter, each group comes into the barn and shares a large communal stall, as is common in many European studs. During their time inside, they are



LEFT: A famous duo: Jan Brink and Briar at their third Olympic Games. Briar was the highest-ranked dressage stallion by the World Breeding Federation of Sport Horses for many years.



RIGHT: Dr. Cesar Parra rides Agastrofos, a 9-year-old stallion by Briar and owned by Parra and Wellington Farm, at Grand Prix.

handled, separated from the group and the older ones are free-jumped several times a month. “This gives us a chance to evaluate them not only physically but for temperament and trainability as well,” says Göransson. Groups are turned out simply by opening the right combination of gates. “This is a big time saver as opposed to turning each youngster out individually.”

Young stallions are kept together until they are 3- or 4-year-olds. “Naturally, the stallions play and have nicks and scrapes, and some people don’t like that,” says Göransson. “But they really use their bodies and become well-muscled, developing their joints and tendons. Plus, they get good socialization. The uneven ground helps them develop balance and strength. Of course, if there is any serious fighting then they are separated.”

The young horses are brought in

and separated when they are started under saddle and go into work. When the youngsters are ready to show, it is in moderation. “When Briar was young, we only did about three competitions a year,” says Göransson. “I think the young-horse competitions we have these days are good, but one needs to look at the individual and his growth to determine if it is right for the horse. It is too easy to get caught up in going from one show to the next, especially with a talented horse for which things are easy. You must pace him so as not to burn him out. Too much too soon will kill the spirit of the horse.”

Göransson believes in a variety of work for his horses and includes galloping on a racetrack and jumping, even for dressage horses. This variety is especially important for upper-level horses that already are quite skilled. “It’s more a matter of keeping them fit but

not bored,” explains Göransson. He tells how Brink regularly worked outside the ring with Briar, and it kept the stallion guessing. One day, he might go into the ring and just warm up, jogging for 10 minutes or so. On other days, the pair would do intensive ring work. Still other days would find them riding outside in the woods. “This way, the horse never knows what he will be doing in the ring—a light, relaxing jog or some heavy work—and he doesn’t associate the ring with constant hard work.” Göransson believes in getting young horses outside and having variety in their work.

Breeding a Champion

Göransson grew up on a breeding farm and has been involved with breeding horses all his life. Briar was the culmination of a lifetime of careful bloodline selection based on competition results. The line that produced Briar started in 1926 with the importation of the East Prussian mother line that produced the mare Diana (also the grandmother of Amor, an important stallion in Dutch Warmblood breeding). That mare line was then crossed with such Swedish luminaries as Drabant and Gaspari to produce the mare Medea, purchased from Flyinge, the Swedish State Stud, by Göransson’s father in 1971.

Looking to add some elegance to their mare, the Göranssons chose the imported stallion Illum by Hanoverian foundation sire Der Löwe xx, a Thoroughbred. “At the time, there was a strong nationalistic tendency in breeding,” says Göransson, “and we were heavily criticized for using a foreign stallion and a half-Thoroughbred as well.” The resulting mare, Mickaela, became one of the foundation mares of Dalhem’s modern breeding program.

In choosing a stallion for Mickaela, Göransson looked to the Swedish stallion Krocket. “This was in the early 1980s when the fashion was to use stallions from abroad,” he notes. “This time

An American Trainer in Sweden

I was already a fan of Jan Brink and Briar when I met the Göransson family about four years ago on a trip to Denmark. I was looking at horses and visiting family who live there. Molly Gengenbach and her husband, Joe, who represent Briar and Okeanos in North America, introduced us. I had already purchased an amazing foal by Briar, and after making the short trip to Dalhem Farm in Sweden, it was clear to me that there was something different about the place. The energy was just so good. That's the only way I can describe it. Later, when an opportunity arose for me to become Dalhem's head dressage trainer, I was on the first plane to Sweden. But my decision was not easy. I had a successful business at home with wonderful clients and friends and family. In the end, though, I couldn't ignore the opportunity.

I ride 11 horses each day. They are athletic and kind and I love each one. So far, I've competed Aretos, a 5-year-old homebred stallion by Briar (who is pictured as a foal on the cover of this issue). We made it to the Swedish Breeders Cup, the most prestigious competition for young horses in Sweden, held at the National Stud in Flyinge. In the final, we scored in the top 20 out of 43 of Sweden's top 5-year-olds, and Aretos had been under saddle for less than a year. We have other horses coming up the ranks I am excited about, too: Mentos is a 6-year-old approved stallion by Okeanos, Diomedes is a 6-year-old approved stallion by Belissimo M, Mulios is a 7-year-old stallion currently schooling Grand Prix. And there is Okeanos himself. He is owned by Dalhem and is currently in training with Brink.

I could write a book about my boss, Hans-Yngve Göransson. I've trained at some of the world's top barns, and I can honestly say that Hans is among the best. His love, compassion, dedication and energy toward all the horses are truly inspiring. His ability to look at a mare and choose a stallion to complement her is unparalleled to anything I have ever seen or read about. Hans's wife, Kristina, is a kind and empathetic person as well. I will never forget the first time I was at Dalhem. Hans and I walked into the stallion barn, and every horse stuck out his head to see who it was. Hans went to each one (about 40) to say "hello" with an affectionate pat on the head. He told me, "If someone greeted you on the street, and you didn't say 'hello' back, that would be rude. It's the same here." That really stuck with me. To this day, we all make an effort to stop and say hello to every horse.

If you walk into the main barn here, you'll see stallions, mares and foals. They all go outside every day, no matter what the weather, and they love it. There is a natural pecking order and a certain peace among these herds.

All horses are bridled in the stall and then brought out in the aisle, where they learn to stand to be groomed, tacked and later washed. For the stallions, this routine is especially useful because it gives us a wonderful opportunity every day to really interact with them, and it teaches them to stand still. We have one set of cross ties on the property, and they are rarely used. I didn't really appreciate this at first, but after going to my first competition here in



Courtesy, Dalhem

Thomas Walker rides Aretos.

Sweden with a group of young stallions, I wouldn't do things any other way. Our horses have learned to behave well and be civilized. And many of these guys are breeding stallions.

The training at Dalhem is individual among the riders. However, we all share the same feeling about not boring the horses with arena work. We are fortunate to have hundreds of acres of farmland to ride on, and most of our work is done outside, away from the arena. All the horses are jumped at least once a week. In the winter, one day a week all the horses are free-jumped no matter what their stage of education.

And the weather? Most of my extended family lives in Denmark so I am somewhat used to the weather. But coming from Nipomo, California, where the weather is always nice, the winters in Sweden are a bit harsh. But the horses and the Göranssons make it all worthwhile. I am looking forward to the future and am excited to be representing the United States here in Europe.

Thomas Walker is a USDF gold medalist. Among other awards, he won a team gold medal at the North American Junior/Young Rider Championships in 2008 (thomaswalkerdressage.com.)



Mentes is a 7-year-old approved Swedish stallion bred for dressage and jumping.

we were criticized for using a Swedish stallion. Krocket was fantastic, a really good stallion," he remembers. "Eddie Macken was jumping him in the warm-up at Falsterbo as a young horse before he retired to breeding, and everyone stopped what they were doing to watch. He was so impressive."

Krocket was a grandson of the imported Hanoverian stallion Utrillo, who was one of the top producers in Sweden. He also had Thoroughbred blood on the dam's side. Unfortunately, Krocket was not used much by other breeders. Göransson believes two factors led to this: "It was at the turning point where shipped semen was becoming the standard, and the owners of Krocket only stood him for live cover." Also, Krocket went straight into breeding instead of having a competition career, so many mare owners never saw him. Both of these factors caused him to lose mares, and he never had much impact on the Swedish breed as a whole. But for Dalhem, the stallion produced two mares that Göransson kept for his program. One was Charis, the dam of Briar. For her, Göransson chose Magini,

a local stallion he had been watching for several years. Magini, a Utrillo grandson, had good gaits and jumping ability and seemed to stamp his offspring. Briar was the result of that breeding and the rest, as they say, is history.

"Frequently Briar is [criticized] because he is a Swedish stallion," says Göransson. "But if you actually look at his pedigree, you will see he is a truly international horse with a mixture of Swedish, Hanoverian, Trakehner and Thoroughbred blood." Briar is now approved by the Hanoverian, Oldenburg and KWPN registries, among others, and he has 10 approved sons in different registries. He breeds more mares abroad than in Sweden. In 2011, he stood in the Netherlands so he could be more accessible to Europeans during the recession. Standing in Holland means an easier and less-costly process for customers. Briar is also one of the few stallions whose fresh semen can be shipped to the United States from Europe (Tailwindsfarm.com).

Following the Trends or Not

As a longtime breeder, Göransson says he is disappointed in what he calls "the

fashion" in breeding. "Breeders want the new young stallions from the stallion shows, and they breed to a handful of the high-scoring stallions at the approvals even though they are totally unproven in sport. It's sad that the top stallions in sport do not get as many breedings as the current hot young stallions. Many times the top stallions at the approvals with the flashy extended trots are not seen in sport, at least at the higher levels. The stallions that don't score quite as high are often the ones who are successful in sport."

Another current trend he sees is breeding for a black color. It may be fashionable, but Göransson wonders how much it matters in the competition ring. He equates fashion breeding to women wearing short skirts: "It may be quite elegant and attractive, but it is not practical to wear to work in the snow. At Dalhem, our fashion is to get maximum result in sport."

Also currently in fashion is the trend toward breeding for specialization in either dressage or jumping to the exclusion of the other. Göransson is not a fan of this approach. "It sounds good," he says, "but in practical reality, it is not successful. The horses selected for dressage specialization tend to have a big, expressive gait, but it's not adjustable. These horses do well in the 5- and 6-year-old championships and then they are never seen in upper-level sport. If you actually look at the pedigree of the successful upper-level horses, eight out of 10 will have jumping blood in the pedigree."

Why is jumping blood important in the breeding of dressage horses? "Dressage horses above all else need adjustability, and that is what a really good jumper is able to do in between the fences," Göransson explains. "Of course, there are many horses that can jump but have poor gaits, but the really good jumpers have a quality canter that can adjust forward and back. They have reac-



Courtesy, Dalhem

LEFT: Jan Brink rides Okeanos.**ABOVE: Hans-Yngve Göransson jumps one of his young horses.**

tion capacity in the gait, and they also have free shoulders that enable them to lift their front legs. These are the ones that are good for dressage breeding.”

Thoroughbred blood in dressage horses is also something Göransson sees as important. “Today, it is generally agreed that some Thoroughbred in the pedigree is good, but still no one wants to be the one to use it in the first generation. As a breeder, if you are willing to take the jump, it can be to your advantage since no one else is doing it.”

Göransson says it’s easy for breeders to feel overwhelmed by all of the stallion choices they have. Here is how he advises them to narrow down the field: First, select stallions with good gaits and free shoulders. Next look for those that also jump well to get the adjustable gaits you want. Then, out of those, select the ones with proven performance bloodlines. Finally, choose the ones of good type that score high on rideability. “By then, you will find that the choices have been greatly reduced,” he says.

Göransson is also a believer in selecting for durability. “Do you realize that the average age of a competition horse in Europe today is only 6 to 7 years? Before he retired at age 18, Briar had been ranked number one dressage stallion in the world by the FEI for 10 years. When we chose to retire him, it was because

we wanted to go out while he was still at the top, not because he had any soundness issues. The stallions in his pedigree, Magini, Krocket and Illum, were all going strong into their late 20s. It is important to select a stallion for durability and soundness as well as other factors.”

Briar and Beyond

Briar has been successful as a sire with at least eight offspring in international competition. Great Britain’s Emma Hindle has purchased the 10-year-old Briar son Brisbane as her ride for the London Olympics this year. The hope is that another strong contender will give Great Britain a shot at a team medal on their home turf.

Meanwhile, Dalhem’s breeding program is working to produce the next generation of performance horses. “We have been very fortunate to have excellent results line-breeding on our foundation bloodlines,” says Göransson. “With some bloodlines, it can be disastrous and the negative aspects will be magnified. For us, the more we do it, the better it gets.” Since so much of his stock is related, Göransson has brought in new blood with the Swedish stallion Nocturne and then crossed the resulting mares back to the lines of Briar. “We have eight full or partial siblings from this cross and they’re all really good

jumping and moving,” he says. Indeed, one of these is Dalhem’s young approved Swedish Warmblood stallion Mentés. Another is Agastrofos, a Briar son who debuted at the Grand Prix level with Young Rider Kevin Kohman and is now with Dr. Cesar Parra in Florida.

Göransson used Flemmingh—a Holsteiner and sire of Krack C and Lingham—before the horse became so well-known. He crossed the resulting mare with another German rising star, the Rhinelander stallion Belissimo M, whose proven international competition bloodlines appealed to him. This resulted in his young stallion Diomedes, currently starting his competition career. “We don’t care where the stallion is from or about any political nonsense,” says Göransson, “only whether the stallion can give you what you need for your mare.” He has high hopes for the competition careers of his two young stallions as well as Okeanos, a stallion whose pedigree is almost identical to Briar’s—their dams are full sisters. Brink has been competing Okeanos and is just starting his Grand Prix dressage career.

Göransson says he will continue with the breeding and raising philosophy that has brought him this far. And, like all breeders, he is looking forward to what his next crop of foals will bring (dalhem.com). 🐾