

ANOTHER UNAVOIDABLE RANT

Excuse me, I'm feeling unbearably passé as I drag my sorry carcass each day through Oldies Radio reveries from the middle of the last century. I should be out there at the dressage barricades (or at least teetering on the cutting edge). But across my Samsung SyncMaster™ 2233SW HD quality 22" display monitor (with 5 ms (GTG) response time, 15000:1 dynamiccontrast ratio, and 300cd/m2 brightness) the other day came information about a special clinic being shilled in the Deep South. And, I'm sorry, I thought the brave new world it offered was just *TOO* goofy for me! It began:

_____ will provide instruction using her "Dressage Simulator."

Like our airline pilots do their simulator-training, she will employ a life size sensor-imbedded mechanical dressage horse with a variety of computerized screens that you "ride." It even does lateral work, pirouettes, tempi changes, and will crash through the arena fence if you don't give your aids properly to control it. One of the best things I think it does is it has screens to tell you all of the pressure points you are applying to the horse - how straight or crooked you are sitting in the saddle, if your aids are stronger on one side or the other, if the timing of your aids is correct or out of sync with the stride of the horse. It teaches you to perform all the required movements in a dressage test: leg yield, shoulder in, half pass, flying changes, pirouette, passage, piaffe, and collected & medium paces. *The rider can repeat centre line, diagonal and any other movements indefinitely, with no anticipation from the horse. Unlike a real horse, the simulator won't anticipate practicing movements.* [My italics added]

On a certain level I see why this notion has some appeal. It IS a lot easier to find someone who'll let you on their mechanical horse for \$130 than it would to find a similar person to lend you their FEI horse. And, if you're still at the "flopping around" stage, no poor real horse will have to bear the brunt of your floundering.

But viscerally, to the Horse Simulator I react the way the Wright Brothers' neighbors must have felt in the years before Kitty Hawk: "If God had meant us to fly, She'd have ..."

My first fear—both unfair and uncharitable since I've never laid eyes on this device or its promoter—is that it probably isn't all that realistic. While masses of rote physical repetition are necessary to learn basic skills like posting or maintaining a following contact, the whole nature of the sport (art) as riders move into more advanced work IS ABOUT COMMUNICATING. Because horses are NOT the same every time, because they do move varyingly not only because you might be sitting off center but *because sometimes they just might feel like it!* And that's much more what riding is

about. The feedback loop, behavior modification, nuance versus recipe. The Horse Simulator proudly denies you the worry over such esoterica.

My second fear is more serious. What if it IS realistic? What will become of The Children if the essence of riding mutates to “virtual riding”—a total corruption of the inter-species bond that (I hope) drew most of us to our fascination with horses in the first place? Like Dick Cheney, “*It’s better because it doesn’t have feelings*”? It just makes me uneasy when “virtual” gets equal billing with “real.” It’s Why-go-to-France-if-I’ve-been-to-Epcot? reasoning. Next thing, middle school health teachers will be handing out life-sized inflatable plastic dolls to the boys. You know, so they get it all right before it *counts*. Sorry, somehow it wouldn’t be the same!

But worst of all, what if virtual riding is *Beyond Real*? It’s bad enough when your regular living, breathing equine partner is balky or disobedient. But it would be way over the top if I have to face my Virtual Horse in his synthesized voice telling me, “I’m sorry, Dave. I can’t do that ...”