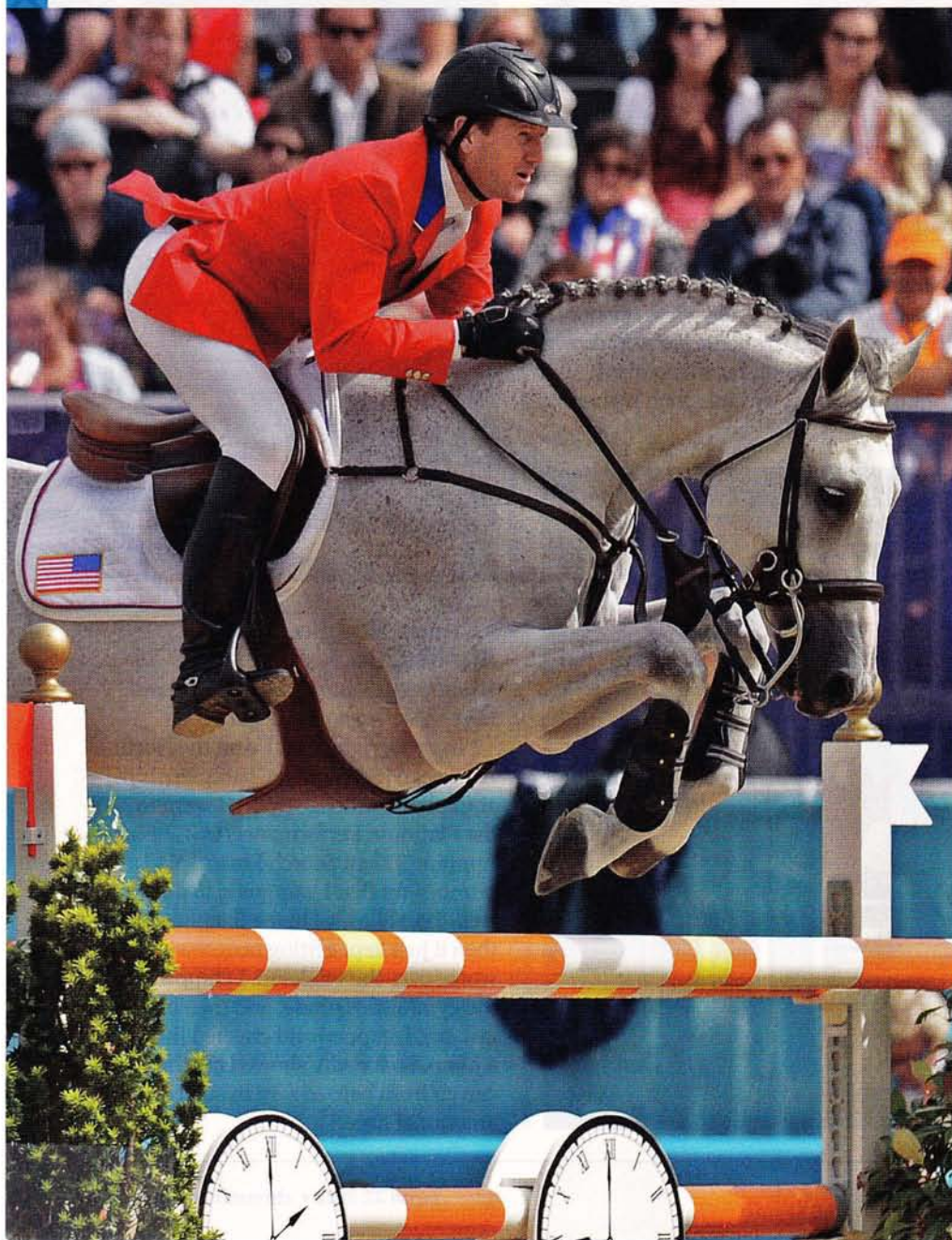


Kids, Don't Try This At Home!

Many of the country's best professionals demonstrate some unorthodox riding styles. Should equitation riders follow suit or stick to tradition?

BY ANNE LANG



Flip through the photos in any recent issue of *The Chronicle of the Horse*, and you'll see it: an increasingly diverse variety of styles of jumping position.

Some hunter riders (ranging from the pre-greens to international derbies, from amateurs to pros) may pivot on their knees, their calves splayed out behind the girth, while others display that perfect imaginary vertical line from head to heel. Some riders thrust unbent arms toward their horse's ears, ducking their heads far to one side. One equitation rider may have elbows jutting away from her sides; another might have elbows forming a straight line to the bit.

But one question remains: Which riding style will please the judges?

Julie Winkel and Kip Rosenthal are R-rated USEF judges, each of whom has presided over many of the country's top shows, as well as having had their own stellar riding and training careers. They discussed their perspectives on the current state of equitation in the hunter divisions.

Sending The Wrong Message

► **WINKEL:** I think that riders are unconsciously copying some very famous and successful hunter riders [who ride in an unorthodox style]. They watch these riders who are at the top of our sport and get away with it, for one reason or another. [Their position isn't] the reason these [unorthodox] riders are famous or why their horses are jumping amazingly for them. It's more that they are like artists: They have a certain style, and they're successful with it.

Unfortunately, other people see that—especially our equitation riders—and they copy it. The [unorthodox style] is never preferred. It's poetic license for a very few amazingly gifted hunter riders. People will copy them, whether it's right or wrong—and the good riders and professionals have to be a little bit aware of that. People are going to copy them because they admire them.

"When McLain Ward rides around a grand prix course, he could be riding in a Medal final," said Kip Rosenthal.

(KAT NETZLER PHOTO)

► **ROSENTHAL:** I have absolutely no idea why this unorthodox style has become the ride of the hunters. Looking back to the days of [equestrian icons] Dave Kelley, Bobby Burke and Rodney Jenkins, I don't remember them laying on the horse's neck, pivoting over the knee and looking down at the jumps. I just don't see how that style helps a horse jump. It's kind of offensive to me. When I'm judging a hunter, I want to be able to watch the horse jump. But when I see what's going on today, I find my eye being taken off the horse and onto the rider. So I'd love to know why so many hunter riders today—pro, amateur, junior or whoever they are—feel as though that improves their horse's jump.

Quiet Riding Is Best

► **WINKEL:** From my perspective, the best jump a horse can give you is completely without interference from the rider. That means no sudden change of balance, no sudden increase of leg or hand, and no abandonment of hand. So all of the things that people are copying are NOT the things that make those top hunter riders get the most out of their horses. It's very distracting [when a hunter rider is moving around a lot], because as a hunter judge, you are following the silhouette or the profile of the horse—and the rider should be complementary to the overall picture. When you have a rider who is jumping up the neck, ducking, swinging his leg and having a lot of shenanigans going on, it's quite distracting from the whole round. That type of distraction is going to cause some negative points, and if there's another round that's equal, certainly the horse that didn't have that kind of funky ride going on up top will be preferred.

Heads Up—Always!

► **WINKEL:** There's never, ever a reason to be looking down over fences. The human head weighs 10 pounds, so you have to factor that in when a horse leaves the ground and doesn't anticipate that kind of a weight change. Eyes looking down take away from a horse's flight, because you're changing your balance at takeoff.

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—JULIE WINKEL

► **ROSENTHAL:** There's no benefit to looking down as you're going over a jump, and I have no idea why people do that. If they're looking down to see if the horse is clearing the jump, it probably won't jump it as well. And it's dangerous, because if you drop your head down, you're basically getting ahead of your horse's motion. When you leave the ground, you should be looking ahead. In the air, you should either be looking at where the next jump is, or ahead in a straight line, so that when your horse lands you have a track and you're going straight. Those who look down eventually end up there.

Now, most professionals can get away with looking down because they have such phenomenal balance that they're not going to lose sight of where they're going next. But unfortunately, juniors and amateurs will watch professionals and copy their unorthodox [habits], thinking that those kinds of rides are making those professionals great riders. However, what makes those professionals great is that they've got a great feel on a horse, a great eye, and great horses to ride.

Crest Release: A Stepping Stone

► **ROSENTHAL:** When I was growing up, we learned the out-of-hand [or automatic] release [hands below the crest, on each side of the neck]. George Morris was the promoter of the crest release, and I think when he was teaching it, it was for riders at a beginner or very intermediate level, so they wouldn't interfere with the horse jumping. But I think advanced riders should be able to ride with their hands on each side of the horse's neck, in order to follow their horses to the ground. The crest release is not an advanced way of riding. In equitation classes today, I'm seeing much more of the out-of-hand release than I've seen in the past—and that's a good thing.

► The Judges

► **KIP ROSENTHAL**, owner of Benchmark Farm in Bedford, N.Y., is an R-rated USEF judge who has judged all of the equitation finals and many top-rated shows in both the United States and Canada. She has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and conducts sports psychology seminars throughout the country. She placed in the top three of AHSA Medal Finals and ASPCA Maclay Finals as a junior, and her students have won major equitation finals. She is a member of the USHJA Hunter Seat Equitation Task Force.

► **JULIE WINKEL** owns Maplewood Stables in Reno, Nev. She is a USHJA Certified Trainer, an Emerging Athlete Talent Scout, an R-rated USEF judge and a CEF judge. She has judged prestigious shows such as Devon (Pa.), the Pennsylvania National, the Washington International (D.C.), the National Horse Show, Capital Challenge (Md.), the Hampton Classic (N.Y.) and many others.



Christy DiStefano, shown here in the 2009 ASPCA Maclay Final, demonstrates many elements of the classic equitation position that judges like to see. (MOLLY SORGE PHOTO)

Conversely, there are riders who should first be working on their lower-leg position so that they develop the upper-body control necessary to advance to the automatic release.

Elbows In, Please

► **WINKEL:** Actually, I don't see [jutting elbows] as a trend so much today. Years ago, there was a very top equitation rider who later became a very famous grand prix rider and international rider [who rode with their elbows out], but again, I think it was a copying thing. It's certainly detrimental to the elbow-to-mouth connection because it interferes with the straightness of the rider's arm, and therefore the contact is not as genuine and natural. But if I had to choose between a rider who has her elbows out too much and one whose elbows are in too much,

"I don't want there to be any stiffness in the horse," said John French, shown aboard *Small Affair*. "By being very stiff and unmoving over the jumps, you can create stiffness in the horse as well." (LISA SLADE PHOTO)

► **WINKEL:** I would love for the release to be below the crest of the neck, in a straight line to the horse's mouth, IF someone can do it correctly. Because that's the ultimate goal, riding out-of-hand. The crest release is an intermediate method, to teach the rider how to bridge the gap between a mane release and the automatic release.

However, a lot of people are being taught how to use an automatic release before they're really ready, and the

result is a "backward" release, meaning that there's a backward rotation as the horse is leaving the ground—or no release at all. That, to me, is probably the biggest glaring fault that's going on in equitation. But every rider develops at a different rate, so I think it's very important for trainers and coaches to recognize when a student is ready to progress. A lot of very good riders are stuck at the crest release; they never went on to the automatic release.

► Judges' Pet Peeves

► **KIP ROSENTHAL:** Riders who are stiff—in their backs, their arms or their hands. I hate stiffness. The non-release over jumps is my other major pet peeve.

► **JULIE WINKEL:** No release [of the arms over fences]; twisting in the air to try to get a lead; riding in a full seat; having a horse behind the bit; falling back in the air on a horse's back; and riders who are overly stiff and "pose-y," rather than natural. And as far as executing a course: not understanding the questions the course has posed and having no plan—not being a thinking rider.



► In Defense Of "Unorthodox" Styles

Peter Pletcher and John French are two of the country's most accomplished hunter riders, yet each rides with a style that is frequently classified as unconventional.

Pletcher, owner of PJP Farms in Magnolia, Texas, described himself as a really soft rider. "That works to my advantage. I'm very loose, and I ride with a style where I try to be one with the horse. To do that, you have to allow your horse its freedom. For me, that means riding loose and letting the horse adjust to my style as opposed to forcing the horse to do what I want it to do. My style is freer for the animal."

But this so-called unorthodox trend didn't just emerge in recent years. "I don't know that it's changed all that much," he said. "Riders like Allen Smith, Charlie Weaver and even Rodney Jenkins had their own style, too, which I think was very similar to the style of me, John French and Scott Stewart. We three have a unique, yet similar, style. Scott's style is a little more connected than John's and mine, but he's very soft on a horse, also."

Pletcher said he's aware that some riders try to emulate him. "If someone's trying to copy what you're doing," he observed, "it's a form of flattery, which is good in a sense. But you have to know your limitations. I don't necessarily teach the equitation style, because I think that's too stiff for the hunters. But I do like my riders to ride with more connection, at least in the beginning, instead of riding loose. There aren't many people who have the gift that a few of us have in riding, and our style doesn't work for everybody."

As for judges who feel that a "loose" rider detracts from the overall image of a hunter going around a course, Pletcher stated: "There definitely are extremes. I agree with judges in the sense that if a rider is TOO loose and flopping off the side and falling forward, I don't like that, either. That's not what I mean by being free and loose. I mean riding free and loose so the horse can move underneath you,

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—PETER PLETCHER

without the constant control on its mouth and the flexion.

"My balance is a lot better than most people's," Pletcher added, "so if I lean off to the side, it's not getting in the way of the horse's jump. And the judge is still able to judge the horse and not so much of what the rider's doing."

French, of Waldenbrook Farm, Gilroy, Calif., believes his riding style shouldn't be pigeonholed, because he tailors his ride to each horse. "If [the horse is] built a little more uphill, I might ride in more of a forward seat and stay over longer after the jump, to try to create the look of the horse dropping its topline and using its head and neck more," he said. "But there are other horses that are built a little more downhill, or they're a little spooky, so you need to ride them with more leg to hand and more sitting in the tack."

"I don't think you can say, 'This is the way this person rides.' Every horse rides a little differently, and you need to vary your seat accordingly," added French. "You might even need to alternate your seat several times during a single round."

French admits there are circumstances where he or another skilled pro might choose to ride with minimal contact, even appearing to lay horizontally on the horse.

"With some horses," he explained, "you want to create a slowness off the ground. In the hunters, you want a horse that looks relaxed and slow off the ground, so as you get closer to the jump, you take your leg off, letting the horse jump the whole fence by itself, without you legging it or pushing it. That's probably one of the reasons why you might see my leg swinging back, or why I might end up too far forward over the jumps. It's because I don't want there to be any stiffness in the horse. By being very stiff and unmoving over the jumps, you can create stiffness in the horse as well."

French believes in "do as I say, not as I do."

"My style of riding, or Peter's, is not something that you would want to copy until you're a lot more advanced," French stated. "First, you need to learn the proper basics. The best way to ride every horse is something you figure out later in your riding."

As a rider continues in the sport, French said, "I think the [traditional] equitation positions are good, in some ways. But in both the hunters and equitation, I see kids who only ride equitation [as a style]. They never learn to be quite as soft and relaxed in the body. I like to bring riders along so they have a real feel for two types of riding: one where they're more concerned about position, and the other where they're more concerned about how to make the horse move its best."

With his own students, French said, "I work on their position, but I also try to teach them ways of making the horse look its best. And sometimes that calls for less leg and more release."

Learning to know which type of ride will be most effective on any given horse comes after years in the saddle and riding thousands of different horses, French concluded.



I would go with the rider who has her elbows out a little bit too much, because in my opinion, that rider has a softer connection than a rider who is too tight with her arms. The elbows are directly related to the position of the rider's hands, and you find that a rider who has her elbows out has too flat of a hand, and a rider whose elbows are in too much has too vertical of a hand.

A hand that's too vertical is generally going to be stiffer than a hand that's too flat.

► **ROSENTHAL:** When you ride with your elbows out, you're not following the line of the horse's mouth. I prefer to see a rider who finds a line from the horse's mouth through her fist to her elbows, because then you're riding the length of the horse. When you jut your

elbows out, you're not following your horse's release in the air, and you're inhibiting your horse's jump. I want to see a rider who follows the horse to the ground, and I don't know how you can do that with your elbows out.

It's More Than Just the Jumps

► **WINKEL:** Riding between fences, I prefer a half-seat. That's the traditional way of riding in the hunters, because it allows the horse the maximum degree of freedom. It lets the horse use its back, head and neck in flight, and between the jumps it allows the horse to carry itself in a beautiful balance. Often, I see riders using a full seat, causing hollow-backed horses with high heads. It just seems so obvious to me that if they would just get up off their horse's back, the horse could lower its head and neck and relax its back. This creates not only a better jump, but also a better overall picture. There are times to use a full seat, such

"Riders like Allen Smith, Charlie Weaver and even Rodney Jenkins had their own style, too, which I think was very similar to the style of me, John French and Scott Stewart," said Peter Pletcher, shown here aboard Copperfield.

(MOLLY SORGE PHOTO)

as in an equitation class where there's a tight rollback turn or a deep corner, square turn, that sort of thing. But the way I teach and judge is that I'd like to see riders in a half-seat or light seat 90 percent of the time. And the upper-body position should be the same, all the way around: in between the jumps, at the takeoff, during the flight, the landing and the departure.

► **ROSENTHAL:** In equitation classes, when you're riding through lines and related distances, I think a rider should be in a light seat, riding with the motion of the horse. The smaller the turn, the more the rider should open up his hip angle to help the horse stay engaged and connected from the back

end to the front end. Equitation courses are a series of formulas, just like in jumper classes. So it really depends on what the course is asking. If it's asking for lines that are related, forward and smooth without short turns, then I think the rider should ride with the motion and light in the saddle. But if a course asks for short turns and fences off the corners, then a rider should be a little deeper in the seat to help the horse stay engaged behind.

Don't Abandon The Basics On Jumpers

► **ROSENTHAL:** In jumper riding, the smoother you are, the faster you are. If you really want to learn how to ride jumpers well, watch the top grand prix riders. Usually, their styles are more traditional than those of a lot of hunter riders today. When you're riding a big jumper track, you'd better be in the center of your horse, and you'd better be balanced. You're not going to get away with throwing your body off to one side,

pivoting on your knee, or looking down.

When McLain Ward rides around a grand prix course, he could be riding in a Medal final; it's the same with Beezie Madden. Those riders are beautiful riders; their basics are excellent. McLain rides in a little bit of a deeper seat, Beezie rides in a little bit more of a forward seat, and they each ride their horses depending on their own style of riding and the questions that are being asked. Jumper riders definitely have their own styles: Anne Kursinski and Leslie Burr Howard each ride in a very forward position; McLain rides in a more European position, and they all ride phenomenally.

► **WINKEL:** I think [good equitation] when riding jumpers is so important. If you look at the riders at the top, they really care about position, and they work at it all the time. They're crazy about having upper-body control and deep heels. That makes all the difference in the world, and I think having a great equitation foundation is all of it. 🐾