



MAXIMUM MAX: Genesis of the World Cup

As reported by John Quirk

Half the fun of having Max Ammann as a friend and colleague is the give and take, however I think one should stay on the serious side, when covering the important story of Max's creation of the World Cup of Show Jumping.

Therefore, we will start with an update on the current campaign to see that Max is properly installed in his rightful place among the nobility of Europe. After all, a Frenchman with the title Baron Pierre de Coubertin created the Modern Olympic Games, and a fellow Parisian titled La Comte Roland de Maille gets credit for the

first show jumping World Championship, and people were all the time kowtowing to them in deference to their titles.

In contrast, just plain Citizen Max Ammann, a visionary Swiss financial and equestrian journalist, created the extraordinarily successful World Cup that has changed the face of international show jumping, but nobody has showed up waving titles in his direction, an omission we hope to correct.

Max's friends and admirers, who are legion, believe, based on his "I Am the King" manner at his World Cup riders meetings and press conferences, that Max can out-royal any of those French pretenders and should, at the very least, be dubbed Count Max von Berné (after the Swiss city where he lives) or the Earl of Ammann. Max has given his assurance that he will accept, if the offer is made, although he has suggested that a down-home title such as President of the Bank of Zurich will work just as well. Probably just a Swiss joke on his part.

Winning Against the Odds

We think you should know at the beginning of this tale of the "Life and Times of Maximum Max" that at age 19, Max Ammann, a young man who liked horses, lost the use of his legs with paralysis apparently resulting from a spinal injury during his service in the Swiss Army (who didn't compensate him with so much as a Swiss Army knife) and has walked with immense difficulty and only for short distances for the past 45 years. The word "undaunted" appears to have been invented for Max, who so suddenly found himself inconvenienced, but has never considered himself handicapped.

You can have your own thoughts in learning that Max has had this obstacle to overcome in his drive to remarkable success, but don't bother to feel too sorry for him. His stamina is astounding, he has the work ethic of a National Football League head coach, he has logged more international flight time than the rest of us put together, and, in particular, he always

At left: America's Olympic gold medal winner and all-time equestrian hero Bill Steinkraus (left) served as Chairman of the World Cup Committee for 23 of those years. Switzerland's Max Ammann created the FEI World Cup™ and served as FEI World Cup™ Director (or Dictator, as some claim) for 25 years.

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makes it to the center of the ring for the presentation of awards.

By now, Max's triumph over adversity isn't an issue one way or the other. What is significant is that the horsemen who know Max best, including those who wrote about him in the World Cup 2003 Silver Anniversary program, judge Max strictly on his performance and admire him and his accomplishments without reservation, so long as admiration doesn't mean you have to agree with a stubborn Swiss person all the time. That is one answer to the question, "Who is Max Ammann, this extraordinary man?"

Max and His World Cup

In hindsight, Max's major achievement looks easy, in the way that great inventions such as the safety pin look easy after someone else has thought of them. Max's World Cup was such a good idea that it is only a mild exaggeration to say that his new show jumping event flowed seamlessly into official existence without hard labor and to the tune of immediate worldwide approval, support and applause.

In 1978, Max Ammann, this 40-year old Swiss newspaper editor, not as prominent as, say, the famous riders of the era, but a recognized figure in the European show jumping world as the founding president of the International Alliance of Equestrian Journalists and organizer of the International Jumping Riders Club, came up with the concept of a World Cup of show jumping as an annual indoor world championship, the climax of the European Indoor Winter Circuit, with a system of qualifying events worldwide. This radical innovation was to change and re-shape the sport of Grand Prix show jumping.

History Channel

Show Jumping was an Olympic event for the first time at Stockholm in 1912 with cavalry officers from various and sundry nations leaping and sporting over peculiar courses and jumps, in that long ago time when an American Indian named Jim Thorpe, America's greatest athlete ever, won both the Pentathlon and Decathlon.

Two major wars and a handful of skirmishes later, following WW II, to be

specific, the World Championships, held outdoors in the even years between the quadrennial Olympics, had taken residence as the Number Two show jumping event on the international calendar, and there were also the Nations Cup competitions, which were genteel and upper crust in the sense that, like the Davis Cup in tennis, there was emphasis on Team and Flag and the Right People, which, I hasten to confirm, I am not knocking, just defining.

Max Ammann's World Cup was different. National pride would always be there, since Merkind comes with built-in Chauvinism, but the World Cup would distinctly differ from the Olympics and the World Championships in that this was a competition between individuals, not teams, between riders who qualified by winning the most points in World Cup qualifying trials in the show ring, instead of being chosen subjectively (and perhaps politically) by selection committees.

Equally important, this was an event that would be contested every year, instead of hibernating for four years, as do the Olympics and the World Championships. Not only are the riders and horses kept busy, there is a significant added attraction in this annual competition. While horses which compete in successive Olympics are a rarity, it is routine for horses to compete in, and sometimes win the World Cup in successive years. The World Cup is a "now" event, not something four years from now.

Thus it was that in 1978, 64 years after the first Olympic equestrian competition, Max would say, standing in front of a famous monument to William Tell and speaking to all the world, "I have a dream." Yes, Max is the one who said it first and made it famous. Would we lie to you?

Bringing the Dream to Life

Max Ammann, a one-man organizing committee, sought advice from two of the all-time great names in show jumping, first, Germany's Paul Schockemöhle, a top-of-the-line Grand Prix rider and a powerful spokesman for the sport on the European scene, and, second, America's Bill Steinkrow,

1968 Olympic Individual Gold Medal winner, an all-time Hall of Fame rider, a Renaissance Man in every sense of the sobriquet, and a living icon, who, I tell you unabashedly, represents for me everything that is best in the equestrian world. With the active support of these two giants, who not only provided key advice as to the proposed international league system of qualifying, but made promotional contacts on behalf of the project, Max couldn't miss.

Next, Max took his proposal to the appropriate officials at the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) headquarters in Switzerland, who listened and said, "Cool!" or a facsimile thereof, such as, "This is a promising concept, Max," and proposed that he present the idea to Prince Philip.

Yes, that Prince Philip, the president of the Fédération Equestre Internationale, His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, Queen Elizabeth's husband, who promptly invited Max to dinner at Windsor to talk it over. Max's long time close friend, British reporter Alan Smith, has speculated whether at that dinner Max offered to select the wines from the Prince's cellars, and we concluded that of course he did, for who at Windsor that night could be more qualified to select the wine? We shall have to remember to ask Max what he chose, which was probably not a good Chianti with lava beans.

Anyhow, the Prince listened to Max's presentation and said, "Cool," and I can't help thinking that he just might have said exactly that, this handsome, dashing prince who has always looked more like a king than did even Ronald Colman (what do you mean, you don't know who Ronald Colman is?) and whose plainclothes bodyguards always said, "No photos, please," while the Prince was careful to present his best angle to the cameras and unfailingly smiled personally to our Tish when she raised her Nikon.

At this point, Max had the support of Bill Steinkraus, Paul Schockemöhle, a gaggle of important horse show producers, FEI Secretary General Fritz Widmar, and Prince Philip. There was the missing link, of course. If you, the reader, have

ever organized a major international horse show, you will recognize that, even with all this glamorous, mighty contingent that Max had gathered together, there was the absent ingredient, perhaps the most important of all and the most difficult to find, the sponsor.

Surely, the stars were in conjunction, or collusion or collusion, or whatever it is they get in when they are backing a winner. Paul Schockemöhle told Sweden's most powerful industrialist about the Swiss fellow who had this great World Cup plan. Erster Pehr Gyllenheimer, chairman of Volvo, who must have been sent by Odin himself, exactly what was needed for Max's ambitious project. The only person in the world who looks as much like a genuine king as Prince Philip, Pehr Gyllenheimer, like Philip an ardent horseman, with his multi-national corporation already the sponsor of an international show jumping competition in Volvo's home town of Gothenburg, promptly invited Max to his mansion for dinner, which included those Volvo officials in charge of the corporation's sports sponsorship programs.

I tell you from long observation that Max would make a great poker player, showing neither elation nor dismay at the hand dealt him, but, this one time, he must have smiled ear-to-ear when the White Knight came riding into the project hell-bent for glory under the blue and gold banner of adventuresome Sweden. It is not recorded whether Max selected the wine that night, but with the Swedes being maybe one generation removed from Vikings, they probably drank vodka straight and in tumblers, not shot glasses. Pehr impatiently listened to the conversation for a few minutes, then suddenly stuck out his hand, and said, "It's a deal," and thus began a twenty-year sponsorship of the World Cup worldwide, one of the all-time great producer/sponsor relationships.

There was the final no-brainer decision to make. With the concept complete, support from the riders and show managers confirmed, the official stamp of approval from the FEI, the blessing of the two Royals, Philip and Pehr, and now a major sponsor



in hand, Max was appointed World Cup Director, a position for which it would seem he was born and bred, a post he has held from the beginning and from which he retired in 2003. A World Cup without Max Ammann? For a very long time, people will say, "I don't know, ask Max, he'll know."

And, as for Max? Max Ammann lived happily ever after.