



LOOKING BACK

A Mysterious Tradition: Horse Show Plaques

Though their origins are undocumented, stable plaques add the finishing touch to a successful show barn.

By Nancy Jaffer



In a gleaming array of shapes, sizes and hues, metal stable plaques tell the tale of the shows where a proud rider, driver or team has competed: Aachen, Germany; Geneva, Switzerland; Spruce Meadows in Calgary, Alberta; and many other hallowed destinations.

They are succinct emblems of experience, testifying to participation, unlike the colorful stickers from Paris, Rome, London or other foreign locations that used to be slapped on suitcases in the days when going abroad was deemed exotic and well-traveled luggage became a status symbol.

Though you may see stable plaques in private stables, they are also on display in the Wheeler Museum at the United States Hunter Jumper Association headquarters in Lexington, Kentucky, and in the rotunda of the United States Equestrian Team Foundation in Gladstone, New Jersey, where they serve as historic badges of honor.

Awarding horse show plaques to competitors began in the latter part of the 19th century, but the specifics have been lost in the mists of time. Inquiries to officials at Aachen, the horse museum in Verden, Germany, and the National Sporting Library in Middleburg, Virginia, brought few answers.

Britta Stuhren, of Verden's Deutsches Pferdemuseum, was able to learn only that "Plaketten" were part of the German horse show regulations as early as 1922. The oldest plaque in this museum is dated from 1937 from a Berlin show.

Noted equestrian historian Max Ammann, the creator of the FEI World Cup

show jumping series, had more information.

"I talked to Alban Poudret [sports director of the Geneva show], whose grandfather rode before World War I in international competitions," said Ammann. "He told me that he has some stable plaques won by his grandfather from 1907 and 1908. This confirmed what I believed—that such stable plaques were introduced very early on in the history of the equestrian sport, which began in the '50s, '60s and '70s of the 19th century.

"Who introduced them, in which country first and when exactly, I have no clue," Ammann continued. "In all my decades connected to the equestrian sport, i.e. since 1945, nobody ever raised these questions. A fair guess would be that stable plaques were introduced around 1880."

United States Show Jumping Coach George H. Morris, who began competing internationally more than a half-century ago, is familiar with the plaques.

"It's a European tradition. Lots of stables in Europe are covered with stall plaques they've won," said Morris. "It's like our ribbons or trophies; they go with the ribbons. It's a sign of accomplishment."

Most stable plaques are stainless steel and are attached to stable walls with nails or screws. Many are placed outside a winning horse's stall or decorate the walls of tack rooms and offices.

Lizzy Chesson, director of High Performance show jumping for the United States Equestrian Federation, said that the first-through sixth-placed riders generally receive a plaque during the prize-giving ceremony.

"I have to carry them back from the Eu-

ropean shows at the end of the weekend, and when we have a good show, they're really heavy," said Chesson with a smile.

Today's plaques sometimes retain their steel tradition, but others are made of composite or even plastic. "They used to be really, really heavy," said former United States team chef d'équipe Frank Chapot, who noted they're often thinner than they used to be, likely a reflection of rising costs.

On this side of the Atlantic, Spruce Meadows organizers award the plaques to carry on the European tradition and also display their winning plaques throughout the stable complex. "Spruce Meadows has very close ties to Germany through the Hanoverian Verband and Albert Kley, the riding master at Spruce Meadows," explained Lisa Murphy, who is involved with Spruce Meadows exhibits.

As one might imagine, Rodrigo Pessoa—three-time FEI World Cup Show Jumping champion, Olympic gold medalist and World Show Jumping Champion—enjoys an abundance of stable plaques.

"We cannot keep them all," said the Brazilian rider, who competes in the United States and abroad. "There are only so many walls you can put them on. What they are starting to do in Europe now is instead of giving them for every class to every competitor, they give one per rider for the whole show. It's a memory, but it's smarter, because you don't spend so much money."

Do you have information regarding the origin of stable plaques? If so, we'd enjoy hearing from you. Please contact Managing Editor Tricia Booker (TBooker@ushja.org).

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