



In 1977 Michel graduated from the National Equestrian School, home of the Cadre Noir in Saumur, France before gaining international experience in the USA and Germany as a rider and trainer. In 1988 Michel was long-listed to represent France at the Seoul Olympics and during time spent in Europe received further training from Commandant Saint Fort Paillard (France), Willi Schultheis (Germany) and Jürgen Koschel (Germany).

Fluent in French, German and English, Michel has become a highly respected trainer, teaching numerous riders of all levels across Europe, up to Grand Prix at CDI International level. This includes 3 years as resident trainer to Suzanne Lebek, the former European gold medallist, Young Rider, Team Champion, in Braubach, Germany. Michel was voted "1995 UK Dressage Trainer of the Year," and is a member of the International Dressage Trainers Club. He is also

currently on the British Dressage panel of trainers eligible to judge Potential International Dressage Horse classes. He officiated several times at the Championships for 4 and 5 year old horses. In 2005 Michel became the UK National Para-Equestrian Dressage Squad Coach and has so far taken his Team GB riders to win team gold medals at the 2005 European Championships, the 2007 World Championships, and the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games.

Michel & his wife, Mette Assouline have also long been established as experienced producers of dressage horses, combining the German, French and Scandinavian training techniques according to special requirements. They also have considerable experience in training riders from Novice to Grand Prix level. Their different training backgrounds provide a huge pool of techniques from which to draw upon. Among the top international riders they have supplied, are Carl Hester with

Escapado, and Jane Bredin-Gregory (UK), Marietta Almasy (France), Claudia Aulenbacher and Michael Klimke (Germany) as well as Ursula Travers (USA), and Polly Hodges (UK) with 2 international Young Rider Team horses.

How did you first get involved in becoming the Paralympic sport coach?

I was approached almost 4 years ago, in early 2005, by the British Federation about coaching the Paralympic squad for the next Paralympics. It was a big chance, because I knew they had already done well. They won the team gold in Athens, so there was some pressure, and it would be a disaster if I took them on and we did not do as well. The first year I took them on, I really had to help them improve the quality of their horses because I knew the FEI was just starting to endorse the sport, and I knew that that would increase the requirement of the quality of the horses. Then we had to raise the bar with their

MICHEL ASSOULINE

GOLD MEDAL PARALYMPIAN COACH

By Sue Akehurst, England

MICHEL ASSOULINE; SQUAD COACH, AND DAVID HUNTER; CHEF D'ÉQUIPE, LED TEAM GREAT BRITAIN PARA-EQUESTRIAN DRESSAGE TO VICTORY AT THE 2008 BEIJING PARALYMPICS GAMES. THEIR TEAM WON TEAM GOLD AND CAME HOME WITH A TOTAL OF 10 MEDALS, AN INCREDIBLE 5 GOLD AND 5 SILVER. IN THE TEAM COMPETITION ALL QUALIFYING SCORES WERE WELL ABOVE 70% WHICH WAS A HISTORICAL FIRST FOR ANY COUNTRY. GERMANY WON TEAM SILVER AND NORWAY TEAM BRONZE.

▼ 2008 Hong Kong medal ceremony



training and improve the quality of both their riding and the training of the horses.

How does the training of the horses and the people differ?

In my book it doesn't differ, because the judging is the same as in Grand Prix

dressage. The criteria of judging is exactly the same, and the protocol marks at the end of the test, with rider mark and submission. The judges try not to look at the rider, they look at the horse, so you can train the horse in the same way you would train it with an able bodied rider.

You work hard on making the horse engage, and light into the contact, so that everything looks harmonious, and they don't look as though they are labouring. This is hard because if the rider has got a strong disability, it can look as though they are labouring if you are not careful, but it is a matter of finding a way to make it not look so. There will be little practical issues; for example, Lee Pearson has nearly paralysed legs, so has hardly any movement in them, and is in a wheel chair. A rider like that, with a strong weakness, can ride, if he wants to, with 2 whips, and teach the horse to take more from the seat aids, and hopefully towards a result as good as with an able bodied rider. With those top riders you will find that when things go well, it is as impressive as with an able bodied rider. They find a way to make it work for them, and it has got that final achievement of lightness and throughness.

How are the riders put into the grades?



▲ *Michel riding Louis Feraud champion of Hickstead CDIO Dressage Grand Prix Master League*

There are officials called profilers who will assess each rider to determine their disability level, which is how they are graded. It is a continuous process to be checked because, for example, a rider with Multiple sclerosis (MS) sometimes gets worse and has to be downgraded. So the riders are checked frequently, and they have to carry a card at all times to prove that they have been checked and graded in the right way; there has to be specialist assessors for that. We have 4 grades from 1 - 4, Grade 1 being the most disabled category and Grade 4 the least disabled. Grade 4, for example, means that when they do their freestyle they are at Prix St. George level, where as in Grade 1, it is more of a walk/trot test because they are more disabled.

In the Paralympics, do the competitors compete only against other people of the same Grade?

Yes, when they are classified at, say, a Grade 2, they will stick to that Grade, and medals will be awarded in each grade. Grade 1 has 2 subdivisions, 1a and 1b, then 2, 3, and 4. So yes a Grade 4 rider will compete against only another Grade 4 rider. In effect there are 4 different Olympics, as you have the 4 different grades.

How do you choose your horses for the Paralympians?

Well the horse is generally the same as for able bodied riders. You need the same quality as a good dressage horse. They

have to have good paces, obviously a fantastic temperament but the quality as such in the ring has to be as good as an able bodied rider's horse. You might think maybe we can have a horse with a nice temperament, and it does not have to be as good, but yes, it has to be as good for a competitive level. Competition wise, you need a really good horse, otherwise you are just not going to compete against the top horses. The pressure is getting the right horses.

Most of the horses on the team are German, Hannoverian or Westphalian for example, you do find that German horses, generally speaking, will have a slightly more suitable temperament for Paralympic dressage, but really it is a question of taste. Some people will say the Dutch horses are a little hotter, but it depends really as always on the blood line. There is a good horse everywhere. Considering statistics, in dressage I think the top 9 horses are German. Certainly the German horses have been the most successful of all the breeds. So you tend to go down that route, because it is a safer or more proven route to find that good horse. I tend to buy at 4, keep them with the breeder, and bring them on so I know the history from the beginning and there are no hidden facts, possible injuries or anything.

Do you feel that the Paralympics is growing and how do you see the future of the Paralympics evolving?

You will always have riders disabled as a result of injuries and with medical conditions such as MS. Maybe one day we can cure that disease, and others, so thankfully there will be less of these. But equally more people are getting into sports that are disabled. It used to be thought that if you were disabled you wouldn't feel like taking up sports, or there just wasn't the opportunity. Not just in equestrian but all sports. But the mentality is changing. By taking up a sport, disabled people can keep active in life which helps them to feel they are still a part of things. Otherwise they can get depressed. Being able to ride also gives them a sense of independence as opposed to being, perhaps, stuck in a wheel chair. It gives them a sense of thrill and a sense of speed, and of mobility, that I think is very good. Regarding spectators, in the Hong Kong Paralympics we had a record. In total, over the 3 days, we had an attendance of 30,000 spectators. This

TEAM RESULTS	
1 - GREAT BRITAIN	220.470
2 - GERMANY	204.092
3 - NORWAY	202.788
4 - DENMARK	200.704
5 - NETHERLANDS	198.428
6 - ITALY	195.743
7 - CANADA	193.035
8 - AUSTRALIA	190.729
9 - SWEDEN	186.755
Team GB: Sophie Christiansen & Lambrusco III - Grade 1a, Anne Dunham & Teddy - Grade 1a, Ricky Balshaw & Deacon's Giorgi - Grade 1b, Lee Pearson & Gentleman - Grade 1b, Felicity Coulthard & Roffelaar - Grade II, Deborah Criddle & Pavaroti - Grade III, Simon Laurens & Ocean Diamond - Grade III.	

shows that it is probably the fastest growing Olympic sport.

Looking to the future, what goals are you working towards currently?

Well we don't want to go down! This year we have got the European Championships in Norway, and in 2010 we have the World Championships in Kentucky. Then of course the challenge to help the Paralympians get their next gold in London 2012, and it's hard. There is pressure from the Germans; the Danish have got a good team, and the Dutch. Norway also is very good, so the pressure is on. Things can change rapidly though, when you have a good trainer, who resources good horses, and you have the riders, it is very likely you are going to achieve results. So you have to be aware all the time that you can get beaten!

It would be good to see more countries getting involved in the sport, for the sport as well as for disabled riders...

Yes, I think so because if a good rider has an accident, rather than giving up everything, they can continue with a disability at a competitive level. I think it is great that we still have the chance to offer that. It is growing, you see more and more participants in other countries but it is important that the other countries continue to develop, and that people are aware they can continue in the sport. **HT**