

the DRESSAGE SIMULATOR



THE **ULTIMATE** SCHOOL HORSE

By Kelly Sanchez

Mention that you're going to try out a riding simulator and invariably someone will ask: "Like the mechanical bull in 'Urban Cowboy'?" Grand Prix dressage rider and trainer Barbro Ask-Upmark waves off the comparison. She believes that the dressage simulator she's imported to California is the perfect schoolmaster and the closest thing to a push-button horse. For Ask-Upmark, the apparatus has practical applications for the beginner as well as for the competitive rider who wants to school upper-level movements before trying them out on the real thing. "You have to learn to drive a Volvo before you drive a Ferrari," she says with a smile.

Sculpted of black fiberglass, the British-made dressage simulator (Ask-Upmark has named hers "Luke") stands 15.1 hands high and operates at five speeds controlled by the legs and reins. Lateral motions replicate a horse's side-to-side movements while sensors give detailed feedback to both the rider and the instruc-

tor. Sensors in the mouth, head and neck measure the amount of tension in the reins and regulate pace while three sensors on each side signal the effectiveness of the rider's leg aids. Additional sensors beneath the saddle indicate down to the centimeter how the rider's weight is distributed. Though it sports an enviably lush mane and tail (both real), the simulator could hardly be mistaken for a real horse, but that's not the point, say its fans.

Trainer Rebecca Dolan, who works out of Moon Valley Farm in central California, calls the simulator "Wii on a horse. It diagnoses where your weaknesses and asymmetries are—like whether you're putting your right leg too far back in the canter depart," she explains. "And it's a very accurate reflection of where you are in the saddle and how much you use your reins. As a trainer, you can stand right beside the rider and touch them to correct a banging leg."

Using the simulator's specially designed software and interactive screen, you can select a ride through grassy pastures or along a road (com-

plete with the sound of clip-clopping hooves and birds chirping) or perform a dressage test. Three options allow you to watch the ride in real time from the rider's, judge's or bird's-eye view to assess position, effectiveness and accuracy. Rides can also be recorded and played back for in-depth analysis.

The device is the brainchild of



Kelly Sanchez

Pam Orisek rides Luke.



Courtesy, Barbro Ask-Upmark

This “horse” is sensitive, and it never tires.

Bill Greenwood, of England’s Racewood Simulators. His first foray into the equine simulator market was in 1990, when a jockey asked him to create something that would help him recuperate from a broken wrist. Greenwood, who designed and built carousel horses, came up with an “equicizer” that reproduced a horse’s movements and enabled the jockey to get safely back in the saddle. The idea caught on, and Greenwood has since developed racing and polo simulators that are sought by everyone from the British Racing School to the Sultan of Oman. Greenwood is now working on a prototype for a show-jumping simulator that he hopes to debut at the end of this year.

Ask-Upmark introduced Greenwood’s Ridemaster Pro simulators to select riding schools and barns in the United States. “I’ve used them with riders who have fallen off or who are terrified to canter,” she notes. But she and other dressage riders wanted more sensors, particularly in the seat. So Greenwood conceived the specialized dressage version. Ask-Upmark uses it herself to fine-tune the Grand Prix Freestyle she’s putting together.

The virtual horse neither anticipates nor second-guesses its rider, which can

take some getting used to. “This horse doesn’t lie, and some riders can’t take it,” Ask-Upmark acknowledges. “It will do the right thing when the rider does the right thing. If you don’t steer, it will go straight into the fence.”

What the simulator lacks in actual momentum and centrifugal force (it doesn’t do extended trot or passage), it makes up for in stamina. As Ask-Upmark likes to say during a simulator lesson, “We have all the time in the world—this horse doesn’t get tired.”

Pam Orisek is used to riding what she calls “big, extravagant movers,” and she wasn’t sure if she’d find the simulator realistic or useful. But after her first ride, she was smitten. “On an FEI horse you can only ride so much, and you almost never get to ride your trainer’s horse,” she says. “You don’t want to wear them out just trying to figure out a particular

thing. You have to have an independent seat and quiet hands to ride this horse—if you’re busy with your hands, the simulator will stop. You can learn and refine your aids on the simulator and then go back and do it on the real horse.”

Orisek’s sister, Mary Narayan, an Intermediaire I rider, who describes herself as “a normal, type-A dressage person,” wanted to practice canter pirouettes and tempi changes. “When I got on the simulator, my hands were moving all over the place. I have a very difficult horse and I’ve been tight on him because of safety.” Regular simulator sessions have improved her performance on her 10-year-old Rhinelander gelding. “I’m now riding between my seat bones and my hands,” she says. “My horse is more suspended and more forward.”

Costing between \$50,000 and \$70,000, the dressage simulator isn’t cheap (leases are also an option). But for serious riders and trainers whose priority is maintaining their dressage horses for the long term, the simulator might be an effective way to pursue their dreams. 🐾

Luke’s 1936 Mechanical Predecessor

Electric Horse with Five Gaits
Used for Indoor Exercise



“Some of the benefits of horseback riding as a form of exercise can be obtained indoors with the aid of an electro-mechanical horse which not only provides fun for the children but sport for grown-ups as well. At a touch on the reins, the horse can be induced to break into any one of five gaits ranging from a trot to a gallop.”

Photo and text courtesy of *Popular Mechanics* magazine, published May 1936.