

The road to the auction

Holger Hetzel's Sport Horse Sales has been a fixture on the auction calendar for many years now, and each year, the Who's Who of the equestrian world find their way to the beautifully organised and decorated auction. But what actually goes into hosting a world-class event of this calibre? We speak to General Manager Anna Lehmeyer about the road to the auction.

Preparation makes perfection

"The day after the auction, we start on next year's auction," Anna begins. "We have a meeting to discuss what was good and what could be improved, and put all of our experiences together." Holger also immediately starts looking for new horses. Then two months before the auction, the actual preparation begins again with production of the auction videos, and photos of the selected horses. "It is a fascinating time, to see the selected horses jump, and see how they will be doing," says Anna.

All across Europe

Holger travels all across Europe to see the best horses for selection; the renowned rider and coach goes to all of the breeders and top jumping yards to get an impression. Out of these hundreds, he will make the best selection, together with trainers Christine Dorenkamp and Laurens Houben, also part of the selection committee. They will look at the horses, their history, and how they are to ride. It is Holger who will then drive all over Germany and Europe to go and see these horses.

Keeping in top shape

"Generally, this selection process takes from January to September," Anna continues. "Still, sometimes we will already have some young horses in our stables that we thought were too young or green to go into the auction the previous year. So we will keep them in our stables for one and a half to two years, until they can go into the next auction." Holger, his daughter Laura and riders Laurens, Pia-Marie Schröder then take over the training of the horses.

Management is key

These new horses will be used to specific management systems, but Hetzel Horses operates his own system. The horses are under professional care. "The horses have a complete vet check on arrival; this is very important to us," Anna explains. "Then they will go into our management and training system, with perfect nutrition and care by our stable manager Gudrun Ulrich. It is incredible to see how these horses transform when they are in our system with the optimum diet and training; sometimes, they are completely different horses after four months. When they come in very green from the breeder, you will look at them and think, 'Ah yes, nice,' and then four months later, you cannot imagine this is the same horse. These horses have a separate auction stable with 20 boxes, separated from the sport horses. It is purely a matter of convenience to have all our auction horses together in one barn; that way, when a client comes, it is very easy to show them all the horses on offer. As soon as a horse is selected, they go to the auction stable.



Photos by Maïke Wallrafen

The team; Gudrun Ulrich, Sophie Hattensperger, Yanis Kemper, Lara Sophie Zähle, Christine Dorenkamp, Laurens Houben, Anna Lehmeyer, Marie Hillebrandt, Holger Hetzel, Julia Böger, Alexandra Pinkert, Gisela Hetzel, Pia-Marie Schröder and on the horse, Laura Hetzel.



Two amazing days

Making videos and pictures is the first step. "These are always two amazing days, since we usually have never jumped the auction horses that big before. For the videos, we will jump some of them over 1.50m fences, and you can start to see the horses' real character," Anna enthuses. Laurens, Tobias Thoenes and Holger's daughter Laura are the three leading riders, and Holger will always be there on the ground, of course. "We also have our long-time cameraman Klaus Ohneberg, who has been with us since the beginning of the auction, and our stable photographer Maik Wallrafen. This is our main team, and it is like an auction family. I will also be there, making some notes as Holger is giving his impressions of the horses," Anna explains.

Filled with joy

So, what are the main concerns for the video days? "Rain!" Anna laughs, "Everything else is usually very well arranged. We have good footing. The horses have to be healthy, of course, that is always the main priority. All the rest is just a lot of fun for the whole team. We start at 08.30 in the morning and usually finish at 18.00, and that whole time is just incredible and filled with joy and wow-moments."

The real work begins

"After these two video days is when my real work starts," says Anna. "I do all the texts and select the pictures for the catalogue and website. It usually takes around three weeks to get all of that finished. After that, Holger will look at the invitations for the auction and signs all the invitations himself. That will be around 800." The catalogue will have to be sent out as well, and from that moment, all the horses will also be online on the website. The press work starts about five weeks before the auction. "After the invitations have been sent, the clients start coming in to try the horses. I also have to arrange all the suppliers, caterers and such for the auction, together with Christine. It really is a very busy time."

Keeping welfare a top priority

When the buyers start coming to try the horses, how does the team keep the welfare of the horse in mind? It must be taxing for these young horses to have so many different riders coming to try them out. "They are in a very strict management system," Anna begins. "We do not jump them so much, as we already know they

The always cheerful Anna Lehmeyer.

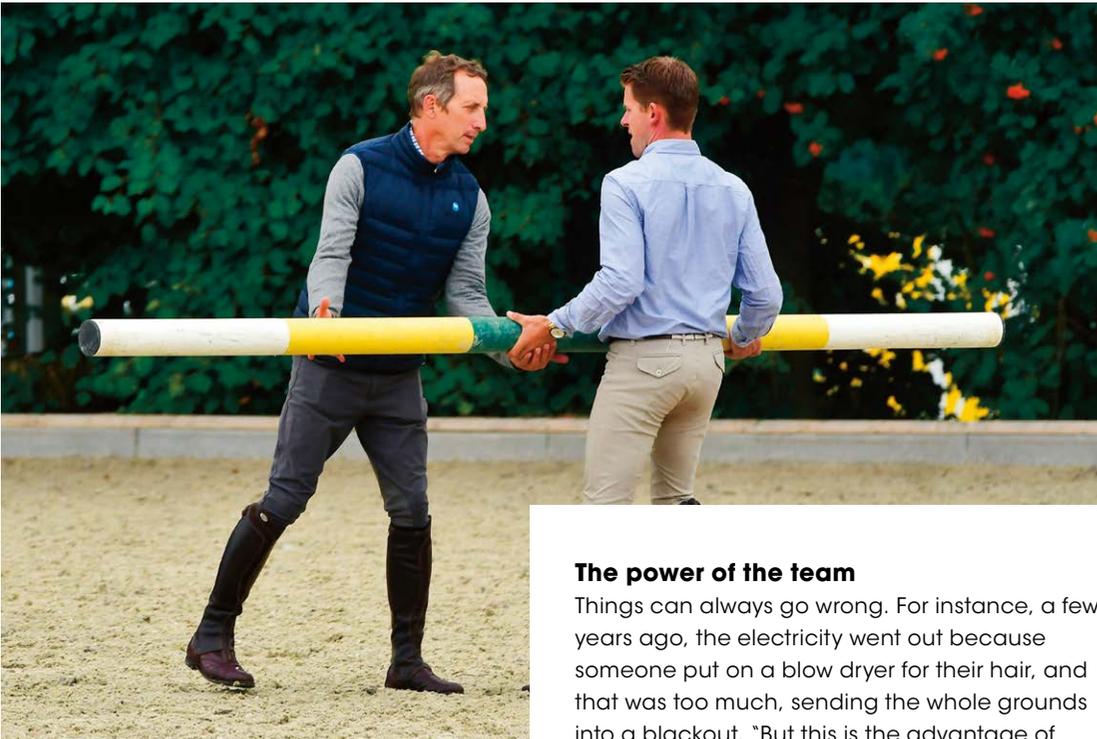
have a lot of quality and are good. Every visit of a client starts with a meeting with Holger in the office. We will ask in-depth questions about the client's riding experience, goals, aims and abilities. If we don't know the client, we ask them to send us a video of their riding skills, and then Holger will know which horses will be a good match for each individual client. Holger is an expert in creating the right horse/rider combination.

Intensive guidance and a warm welcome

In addition, Anna says everyone has to make an appointment, which also allows Holger to ensure the horses are not jumped so much every day. "He is really looking after their welfare. Of course, we also have a lot of videos of the auction horses that we can show the buyers, so the horses do not have to jump so much with the clients. A client can come for a day or a few days. We love interacting with the clients and guiding them intensively. It gets hectic three weeks before the auction, but for us, it is essential that the clients feel welcome and feel at home here."

Making the horses feel at home too

After the auction videos have been made, Anna and Christine will start the meetings with the service suppliers, catering, electricians and so on, to discuss what they would like to introduce this year. After that, planning starts; the actual build-up begins around one and a half weeks before the auction, with all the lights, décor, and the kitchen tent. "In the meantime, the horses are still trained in the indoor arena. We have a very big indoor, so we ride in one half, and the auction is being built up in the other half. On the Sunday before the auction, we have an official brunch to present the auction horses. About 100 guests are sitting there, and the horses will get familiar with the atmosphere, like the big screen and so on. We do everything to make the horses feel at home."



Holger Hetzel and Laurens Houben working on the fences.

A golden team

"We have a very small team, and I think that is very special," Anna continues. "There are not many of us, but we do great things." Everything surrounding the auction is super organised, but it is not flashy. Anna explains that the teams want the people to feel at home, and an atmosphere that is too overwhelming does not contribute to this. "We think it is better just to have a nice experience with good people, good horses and good food."

And then... auction night is here

Every buyer immediately gets a signed contract on the auction evening itself, and the invoice will be sent by the auctioneer the day after. When this is paid, they can pick up the horse or the team will bring the horse to their new home. "This does mean we are sometimes crying here in the stables when a horse is sold. We have been working with the horses for such a long and intensive time; it gets a little emotional for us. During the auction evening itself, we are proud and happy to see the horses get sold, but for sure, it is also very emotional."

Staying in touch

The team stays in touch with all of the auction horses for the years after. "We keep on top of the results, we receive videos and thank you messages. And we are always open to questions about the training, or to give help. We have even had buyers that knew nothing about horses but still wanted to own such a beautiful animal. They are then able to stable the horse with us and leave it in training here. That is also always an option," Anna tells us.

The power of the team

Things can always go wrong. For instance, a few years ago, the electricity went out because someone put on a blow dryer for their hair, and that was too much, sending the whole grounds into a blackout. "But this is the advantage of having a small team; we can quickly get together, sort the problem and keep going. The most important thing is to keep smiling; don't stress and a solution will present itself. Knock on wood, nothing serious has happened so far, but the small problems are straightforward to overcome when you have such a good team." In total, the team consists of 25 people involved in the auction; 15 people in the stables and the office, and then another 10 service suppliers.

Highlight

"The most special moment was probably the most expensive horse we ever sold at our auction," Anna recalls, "This was Dacantos (by Dallas VDL), three years ago in 2018. We almost made the million. That was exciting; we were so thrilled, we all had tears in our eyes. That is the reason why we do the auction." There was another memorable moment in 2013, with the first auction in the new big indoor arena. Before that, the auction had always taken place in the small indoor, with a big tent. But the auction was getting bigger and bigger, so in 2013 the new indoor was ready, with a new atmosphere; another goosebumps moment for the team.



Laura Hetzel is presenting the horses during the brunch, three days before the auction.

Like a second family

What makes the team so special is enthusiasm, says Anna. "We all have so much passion for the horses and the work that we do. I think otherwise it is not possible for just 15 people to put together such a big event." In the three weeks leading up to the auction, when all the horses are in full training and all the clients are coming to try them out, the team has some very long days. But everyone is motivated and has enthusiasm for the horses and the sport. "That is what makes it special. We have a very young team, but an outstanding team that feels like a second family. That is something that Holger wants and succeeds to create. He is a family person, and he loves it when everyone is happy. When you are happy, you can do your best job. Otherwise, it just doesn't work."

The future of the sport

"The night after the auction, we first celebrate life and that everything went well and then we all have a quiet December. All the horses will be leaving for their new homes, so things wind down in the stables for Christmas," says Anna. Then the planning for the next auction starts, looking at what the future holds. "I think that professional sport is getting more exclusive; and then there are amateur riders," Anna states. "For us, it was always important to have great amateur horses as well as horses for the elite sport in our collection. So we have Grand Prix or Olympic horses, and we have horses for junior or amateur riders who want to have a great time competing happily." ■

