

Hans Günter Winkler - Riding for Germany

A Documentary by Wolfgang Bergmann

Hans Günter Winkler - the world's most successful equestrian. Between 1956 and 1976 he won seven medals at six Olympic Games. Five times German national champion, once European champion, twice world champion in show jumping, voted several times "Sportsman of the Year". Unforgettable his legendary ride at the Olympic Games of 1956 in Stockholm, where his wonder mare "Halla" completed the course in a fault-free ride, though Winkler himself was suffering from torn ligaments and could only barely remain astride thanks to heavy painkillers. With hardly any coaching from his side, his mare carried him to the finish. At every jump Winkler's agonised cry resounded. "If you are not prepared to sweat and fight, you should rather not enter an arena," that is one of his principles.

Winkler was born on July 24, 1926 in Wuppertal-Barmen. His father was a horse riding instructor, the riding stables served as playground for the young boy. Even as a small boy he was on horseback, and soon he received his own pony as a gift. But the war left its marks also on him and his family. At the age of sixteen, Winkler was drafted into the "Reich Work Service" (Reichsarbeitsdienst), later he became a soldier. Shortly before the end of the war, he was able to flee from a Belgian POW-camp, suffering from yellow fever. The home to which he returned was destroyed by bombs, his father was killed in the final weeks of the war.

After the war he turned again to his great passion. His success story is inseparably linked to difficult horses - and to his so-called wonder mare "Halla". She was considered to be an obstreperous mare, impossible to ride „a crazy, doomed eventing horse“, as Winkler recalls. Without doubt a tremendous challenge even for an experienced rider such as Winkler. Winkler took it on and guided the headstrong primadonna to an unparalleled series of horse jumping victories. When in 1960 he withdrew Halla from active sports after a victorious ride at the tournament of Brussels, some competitors dared to hope that this would also mean the end of Winkler's career. In vain! Also riding other horses Winkler remained victorious at the Olympic Games in Rome, Tokyo and Munich and impressed a world-wide public time and again. Since his final round of honour in 1986 in Aachen, Winkler has been riding only rarely, and eventually had to give it up completely. His work with young horses has caused him spinal problems. Instead of breaking in horses, nowadays he engages in recreational sports such as tennis and skiing. However, he is still active in equestrian sports. He promotes and trains young equestrians for whom he has developed modern examination guidelines. Furthermore he runs a tournament stable in Warendorf, supports his wife Debby at training and at tournaments - all at the age of 79.

In interviews and with the aid of archive materials, the film illuminates the decisive victories of Winkler. The dramatic highlight is the gold medal of 1956 in Stockholm. His greatest rival, Raimondo D'Inzeo from Rome, as well as Brazilian equestrian Nelson Pessoa describe sportive and personal encounters. His first wife, Inge Fellgiebel, as well as his present wife, Debby, but also his first riding companion, Inge Zimmer, give account of shared experiences.