

Conversation with Anky van Grunsven
2000 Olympic Individual Gold Medallist - Dressage

Interviewer: Melvin H. Cox, Senior Producer, SportsQuest International
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00:00:19:25 **Anky van Grunsven:**

You'll start with an easy question?

00:00:21:27 **Melvin Cox:**

Yeah, it is....it is...ok. We're going to do something else. Um...

First of all, let me ask you the most important thing. How is Bonfire?

00:00:32:25 **Anky van Grunsven:**

Bonfire's great! He's 21 now and still fit. (I) ride him five times a week like fifteen minutes, twenty minutes and for the rest he's in the fields with a little Shetland pony, having fun.

00:00:46:03 **Melvin Cox:**

Last night when you, when you showed the tape of the Olympic Games... I have the tape at home; I watched it a week ago. But, every time I see it, I still get chills. And so there's just such a respect for what you and Bonfire were able to accomplish at the last Olympics in Australia.

How can you ever top that?

00:01:09:12 **Anky van Grunsven:**

I don't want to top what I had with Bonfire. I don't want that, I think its impossible and I think it's special what we did together.

And, the only thing that I try to achieve with my other horses is to have a lot of fun as well, and to see how far I can get.

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Melvin Cox:

Well, that's wonderful!

I remember years ago, when you won the World Cup, my daughter was very young. She's twelve now. She was probably five or six; I'm not quite sure... I remember a conversation we had, and I'll tell you this story and then ask more serious questions, but I remember I said, "Kimberly come here, come here, I want you to see this horse dance", it was Bonfire.

And she said, "Oh Daddy, horses can't dance". And I showed her the tape of your wonderful World Cup performance, and she says, "Wow, Daddy, that horse is dancing...."

00:02:03:21

Anky van Grunsven:

He was...

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Melvin Cox:

So, again, on behalf of all the parents of all the kids that who've been inspired, "Thank You Very Much!"

Anky, can you tell us a little bit about...Dressage in particular is very, very big in Europe, and certainly, in your case, you've become quite a celebrity in your own country. But, yet we, we look at riders that have been riding here in North America, both in Canada and the United States for many years who don't achieve... they're not even known in their own communities.

Why do you think that Dressage has such an appeal to so many audiences in Europe, and not here in the United States?

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Anky van Grunsven:

To be honest, I'm not sure about (the) answer to the question.

I do think that if I look at Holland. Holland is not such a big country. And there are a lot of people that work with horses in Holland, and because it's not a big country, it's easy for us to travel all over the country. And then, it's more competition in the country.

I think some of the problems in America is maybe that America is as huge as Europe, but not every town or country in Europe has so much horses as Germany, or England or Holland do. And I think (that) in America you have um - probably a lot of people riding horses, but maybe they're more into Jumping. And if into Dressage, then there's one on the East Coast and one on the West Coast, and I think because you're so big it makes it more difficult to make it big in the country.

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Melvin Cox:

Now, do you think that television, and obviously we're here anticipating the launch of HorseTV. Do you think that more television would make a difference in bringing the sport, first of all internationally, but more particularly in the United States?

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Anky van Grunsven:

I think 'of course', because that's what happens in Holland is that - I did not just win, but we had a lot of press. Because if I win and nobody comes to look, and nobody writes about it and nobody puts it on television, then nobody will know and I won't get famous. The only way to get famous is television, radio, newspapers, magazines - and in Holland that really, yeah, that really happened, actually at the same time. And I must say, you need a couple of people that are really into the sport with the heart. And, they have to pick it up, and then you need (that) somebody does do well, because if you have somebody that wants to write about it and nothing special happens, then it doesn't work. So it has to come together, and in Holland it really did.

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Melvin Cox:

Why are so many of the very best international horses bred in Europe? There are certainly very good bloodlines here in North America, but they don't seem to be having the success internationally that the European horses, particularly the European Warmbloods, are having at this time.

00:04:02:23

Anky van Grunsven:

I think in Europe they have big breeding associations that are really on top of it all the time to see if they can breed the better Jumper horse the better Dressage horse, and it's a lot going on in breeding in Europe. And, I think it's less over here, and it's also less in Australia, and they don't even breed in Japan I think with the

horses. So, I mean it's really central there. And, you can ask why is soccer very famous here, but in Holland it isn't. Every country [looks off-camera to Tineke Bartels – for clarification]

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Anky van Grunsven:

So, you can say like in America, you have other sports being very big, like football, but we don't have that at all in Holland, and soccer is very big in Holland, and it's not over here. So every country has its own tradition, as well I think, in sports.

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Melvin Cox:

Is ... Going back to the question in terms of European bloodlines, is there a particular bloodline that you are particularly attracted to, or have favor towards at this time, for producing Dressage horses?

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Anky van Grunsven:

Um, to be honest, **my best horses are bred as Jumpers.** So, I can't really give you an answer to this one. Cause um, **Gestion Salinero is, his full brother is jumping international.** So don't ask me too much about the Dressage bloodlines.

00:07:01:21

Melvin Cox:

That's ironic.

I'm going to ask the same question that I asked (Tineke Bartels) earlier, in terms of Dressage being seen as more of an elitist sport in the United States. Is there something that we can do to break that down? Is there something that comes to mind in terms of how you bring more people, first of all bring more people to the event, and also create more of an atmosphere of interest about the event?

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Anky van Grunsven:

Put it on television, explain what it is, and then make people come. What they do in Holland, I think it is very good, we also have big competitions like in the middle of the city, and then when nobody has to work, and then they advertise big on it and entry is free. So you get already many people who think, "Oh, let's go and see what it is." And that already helps I think. And then the other thing is that, especially in Dressage, you have to explain a little of what it's all about. And if you do that then people will see what horses do. And I think the Kur to music really helped our sport a lot, because, maybe you don't even understand, but you know what you think is

pretty, and you know which music you like, and I think that's very good for the sport.

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Melvin Cox:

Again, the dancing horses...

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Anky van Grunsven:

Yeah, you get the dancing horses...

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Melvin Cox:

Last year, you suffered a very serious injury. And here, a year later, you've made a recovery and you are now, I understand ranked number two in the World Cup standings. Can you tell us a little about the injury and the process that you went (through) to come so quickly - to come back from such a devastating injury so quickly?

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Anky van Grunsven:

Yeah, um I fell off my horse, it's very original, broke my leg and (it) took four and a half months before I was riding again. And, then, um, then I started a little bit again, and I built it up, did do the Dutch championships. (I) won. And then had one more competition, and then I wanted to go to the European championships, but then my horse was injured. Nothing special, (it) took two weeks. But, that was exactly the Hickstead European Championships week, and then right after that, I really had problems with my leg, because of all the iron that was still in my leg, so I got operated (on) again. And, they took everything out again, and that was very good, because then after that I can really go on for my way to Athens. Because, first we thought maybe leave the plates and everything in until after Athens, but now I'm really happy that it's all over and done and (we) can look forward again.

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Melvin Cox:

How has the injury changed your training routine?

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Anky van Grunsven:

Um, the injury, yeah, first it changed my training routine - I couldn't train any more, so that was the first thing. And then I had to build up very, very slow. I started with um, you know, ten

minutes, then fifteen minutes and so on. And, um, so far I'm not completely back to the full riding. It's like now four or five hours, it used to be much more. And, um, but for the rest, it's really good. It was just a quiet year, and I could rest a lot. So now I'm back, and I can go back to work hard again.

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Melvin Cox:

Well, all of us around the world are very relieved that, very happy to see you back in competition. We certainly wish you a continued full recovery.

You have some very talented young horses, I understand, in your barn. And, you've spoken a little bit about Gestion Salinero. Can you give us just an overview of some of the horses that you have - tell us just a little bit about their personalities, their gender and where you got them?

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Anky van Grunsven:

Yeah! At this moment, I have two Grand Prix horses.

And the first one is **Gestion Salinero**. He is, yeah, bred as a jumper. He came to my barn when he was six years old, and he was of an American lady. And, um, she owned him, and then Sjef, my friend, was training him, and then after a year, he said to me, "Oh, you should sit on it", and I sat on him and I thought "WOW".

And then, I really wanted to have him. A, um, I could buy him off this lady, Tess Guilder, so I'm really happy that I could, and um, so he's my, um, yeah, my Grand Prix horse, he's ten years at this moment, and he's done a real fast career. He did only a couple small tour competitions, and then the year that I broke my leg only four competitions or so. And then this year, um, yeah, I only did one yet, but for the World Cup he did do really really well and he's really, yeah, my future hope.

The other future hope I have is **Gestion Krack C**. He is twelve years old now. He is a breeding stallion. I had him in Jerez (Spain) at the World Championships, and um, he, I was eleventh there, but he was very inexperienced - he only went for half a year of Grand Prix. And I think he's (a) really good horse. And, he's beautiful and has nice gaits. But he's also (an) approved stallion. That means that in the summer he has a double job. And it sometimes makes it harder to train. So, I have to be careful with him, because, because of the double job.

And um, but both of them I try to qualify for Athens, and then see which one is better at that time, and....

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Melvin Cox:

I've got a couple (of) questions in terms of the business side.

You have the line of clothing that has been very successful, and you also now have the Anky saddle, which is being, I guess it is distributed through Pessoa.

Can you give us just a little bit of information, first of all about the Anky saddle, how that came about, the development of it and what you tried to build into it, into that particular saddle, I understand that it's a very deep seated saddle, we can talk a little bit about that, and then we'll ask some questions about the clothing.

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Anky van Grunsven:

Yeah! Ah, so, the saddle, I'm not, I don't know all about it, because I'm not a technical person. For me, it's more important that my feeling is very good. So, what we try to achieve with the saddle is that its comfortable, soft, 'cause you have to sit for hours, and um, I want to have the feeling that I sit in the saddle, and not on top of the saddle. So we worked on that, and then now we have a couple of new saddles, with different leathers, so it looks different and also like little bit more expensive, or less expensive, for people that you can have a nice comfort seat, but maybe the leather is different. And, what is very important to me is also that your legs are very comfortable and...

Yeah, I think it's the comfort is the most important thing on the saddle and then how and technical and what that is for me up to the saddle maker, because he's more clever in those things than me.

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Melvin Cox:

How did that all come about?

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Anky van Grunsven:

Sjef, my trainer is also better businessman than I, and he, yeah, he arranged all that and he took care of everything, and I just sat on it and felt if it was right.

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Melvin Cox:

How's the clothing line?

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Anky van Grunsven:

The clothing line, that's more fun. It's going really well. In Europe and Japan and Australia, we have seventeen countries at this moment, and we really want to go to America as well, and see how we can distribute and everything. And for me, it's a lot of fun because it's getting bigger and bigger and getting better and better. And, it means that I have to go shopping, and really have to think about the shapes of the clothes and the colors and the sweaters and the jackets and the breeches and I like it. I like fashion, so it's um. They call it work...

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Melvin Cox:

It's really not!

When we talked to you three years ago, you told us that the manufacturing sites were in Portugal, in Tunisia and in Poland. Are these still countries that you're working with?

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Anky van Grunsven:

Yeah, but we also still look if we have other possibilities so where we go. At this moment, we don't go to Poland.

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Melvin Cox:

So, just to Portugal and Tunisia?

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Anky van Grunsven:

At this moment, yeah...

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Melvin Cox:

Are there plans for your clothing to reach non-equestrian markets?
Are you planning to market your clothing outside of the horse world?

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Anky van Grunsven:

Yeah, in Holland, we started outside of the horses with the clothing line, and we went to a couple of golf shops, because it's not just for riding, it's casual, functional outdoor wear. And, in the golf shops it starts up now, but people have to um, they have to get to know it. And, what we see in the equestrian sport is that people when they wear it, they like it, so they come back and buy new, because they think it's comfortable and nice and that's how you have to grow. So, that is what we try now. In Holland it started in the golf shops.

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Melvin Cox:

That brings me to another question in terms of the equestrian sports as a business. And, I think a lot of people who love horses and who have ridden since childhood are very slow to begin to see the equestrian sports as a business. I know earlier we talked about some of the business aspects. When did you first begin to develop an awareness that, that there was a business world beyond riding?

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Anky van Grunsven:

To be honest, in the beginning when I started, my dad had to pay for everything. And when I became eighteen, then he said to me, "OK, go ahead, do the business!" And I thought, "Business, I'm not into, um, I'm not good at it!"

I'm, you know everybody has his good and bad things. My bad thing is, I can't, I have nothing with counting. I forget it immediately. But then, you have to feed the horses and the farrier comes, and you have to pay for a lot of things. So you have to start thinking about it. So, I started think and see how I could, you know, earn money so I could pay for my horses.

But, my, my big change was when I met Sjef, my boyfriend, because he can do money. And, he's ten times more clever than I in that, so he's actually, he's the one that is thinking business wise and arranges the things, and I just do my horses.

00:18:10:02

Melvin Cox:

Are you still reading the Harry Potter books?

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Anky van Grunsven:

I just read the last Harry Potter book. And, I'm so, it was so, I was so upset that I had it finished. Now, I have to wait for another one.

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Melvin Cox:

Who are you favorite, who are you favorite characters in Harry Potter?

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Anky van Grunsven:

Oh, my favorite characters. Yeah, of course, Harry Potter himself. And, "Hamolie", that's the Dutch name for it. I don't know the English name....

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Melvin Cox:

Hermione

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Anky van Grunsven:

Hermione, yeah, exactly! I must say that I saw the both movies as well.

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Melvin Cox:

Well, Harry Potter's very big in our house, obviously with my daughter being twelve.

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Anky van Grunsven:

What does that say about me?

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Melvin Cox:

Well, I, I'll admit to reading all the Harry books myself.

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Anky van Grunsven:

Oh, good!

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Melvin Cox:

I'm a lot older.

The last questions, Anky, I want to ask involves your role, first of all as a terrific sports person, but also as a role model for hundreds of thousands of young women around the world, a great ambassador for our sport. And, here in the United States, there is an on-going controversy in terms of just what responsibility a successful athlete has to his or her fan base and/or community, and also to the sport in general. Can you speak to those points?

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Anky van Grunsven:

I think it's very important, that I always, no not always, but, I really realize that people look up to me, and want to do things like I did them. And, so for me it's very important when we have competitions and all these kids are waiting for autograph, I always will give them the autograph, no matter what happens. Because, I think its very important for them as well, because they admire you.

The other thing is that in Holland at this moment, I'm working with the Ministry together to do a raising in sports, and it's a European thing (that) they started this year, to make children do more sports. Because, I don't know what it is here like, but in Europe really, they sit there with the computer and television and....

And I think it is very important that children are in sports, not just because it's good for the body, but it's good for the mind, that they learn to compete, and learn to win, and learn to lose, and do it together and be fit. So, for me, it's very important that I do think like that. It's not, no, its not important for me, but I realize that I can help with doing things like that, and I like that. Because, I think, if you are like me – I have a very nice life, because I am talented in something. And, then for my feeling, you have to do something back for that. And, I'm glad that I can do things like that, so that I can help other people with it again.

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Melvin Cox:

I'm sure that all of your fans worldwide are very grateful that you feel that way.

My last question is about, again, on the same subject in terms of the responsibility that a superstar athlete, such as yourself, has really in sort of speaking out against on the imperfections of the human condition – ugly things like, like war and injustice.

Should athletes become more involved in the world, or should they just take the tact of, “Well, I’m going to keep my mouth shut, so that I won’t offend the sponsors?”

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Anky van Grunsven:

I think too many athletes are only busy with what they do themselves. And, I think if you are an athlete, and you can do something for something else, you should do it; but on the other hand, I always really think about what I want to do and what I don’t want to do. Because, your heart has to be in it as well, and you have to be, I think you have to be fully behind where you go for. Your heart has to be in that as well. If you doubt it, don’t do it. But, if you are sure about something that you can help, then you should do it.

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Melvin Cox:

Anky van Grunsven, you are a true gem, you are a wonderful ambassador for the equestrian sports and I thank you very, very much for taking this time to spend with us.

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Anky van Grunsven:

Thank you. You are welcome!

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