

Olympic USDF National Dressage Symposium

What better place to go “back to the future” of **dressage** than Orlando, Florida, home of Universal Studios, Disney, and the 1996 USDF National Dressage Symposium? Imagine all within a stone’s throw: Mickey, Goofy, Shamu, and more than 750 dressage addicts encamped at the Grand Cypress Equestrian Center for two days of exquisite lecture and demonstration. Founded on the spirit of the Violet Hopkins National Instructors’ Seminars and graciously sponsored by **Footings Unlimited**, the fifth annual Symposium was conducted by four of our past American Olympians.

The combination of Hilda Gurney, Michael Poulin, Jessica Ransehausen, and Robert Dover proved to be a magnificent representation of the level of knowledge and experience that home-grown talent can bring to a National audience. These four together were intense, dedicated, articulate, and deeply interested in sharing their insights.

But if you gloss over their words as though they are just the obligatory dressage Clichés - You know, “Suppleness, submission, round up the usual suspects”- you will miss out! Try to read them as these four Olympians feel and believe them and try to discern how they translate to how you and your own horse should relate to each other.

The Symposium was primarily a visual experience. More than a dozen exotically sculpted horses were brought together with their talented riders to demonstrate the principles under discussion. I wish you could see what we saw, for instance, when Hilda said of a First Level horse’s canter lengthening and transition back you will be able to see it. This year’s Symposium videos, available in the spring, will have hundreds of prime examples to burn into your mind.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS

As you would expect from this quartet, both Symposium days were chock-full of an insistence on the importance of THE BASICS. Michael Poulin began Day One by quoting the object of dressage from the FEI Rules: “... the harmonious development of the physique and ability of the horse... making him calm, supple, loose, and flexible but also confident, attentive, and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with his rider.”

An entire session conducted by Jessica Ransehausen was devoted to developing the rider’s seat. “Too often,” she stated, “judges see riders trying to compete who are unsteady, out of balance, or out of harmony with their horses.” Classically there are two lines which must be maintained: First, the vertical line from the rider’s shoulders, through the hips, to the heels. Second, the straight line from the rider’s elbow, through the hand, down the reins, to the horse’s mouth. While experienced riders can make momentary adjustments to these lines if a horse is trying to dive or lean, a good rider will not get stuck there, but can quickly return to those correct alignments. Jessica stressed that it is critical to make these alignments second nature to the rider as early in his or her education as possible. You shouldn’t be surprised that all four staunchly recommended a lot of preliminary time on the lunge line and without stirrups to establish a strong, balanced, independent seat. Robert Dover added his personal experience of learning to ride on the lunge for two-thirds of a year before he was given the reins. He also strongly recommended vaulting for children learning to ride.

Hilda Gurney emphasized that riders routinely grip too much with their thighs. The leg, she said, must instead become long and enveloping. Being able to take your knee up and off the saddle while the lower leg remains hanging in the vertical can spread the rider’s seatbones and relax the ligaments in the hips.

Riders also get out of lateral balance on their horses. Sitting off center or collapsing through a hip conflicts with a horse’s ability to travel straight. It is difficult enough to balance a horse when a rider is sitting well. It’s almost impossible otherwise.

In addition to correct alignments, it is also mandatory that a rider's seat allows the aids to be used effectively. The rider must be completely independent with his body parts: able to use one leg more than the other and able to separate the use of his torso and hands from that of his legs.

Going back to basic relationships, Jessica asked her demonstration rider to show walk to halt transitions on the twenty meter circle, using the rider's upper body to govern the horse's balance. At this stage the important thing was not perfect roundness but rather the horse's response to the rider's body weight. This response later applies in the use of half halts, in riding through corners in balance, and even in the rarefied world of transitions, from piaffe to passage. Having the horse respond to the lifting of the sternum, widening of the shoulders, and a momentary closing of the fingers enables the rider to soften in the downward transition, lets the horse reach to the bit, and not lock up.

As the horse understood these preliminary exercises, they were then used to show the half halt. Initially Jessica called for a "hesitation half halt," that is, one in which the rhythm is clearly broken at a chosen spot as the horse seems to pause for a split second as he readjusts his weight to the rear. These were shown both in trot and canter. Jessica showed how subtle the difference in the application of the aids has to be for a horse to distinguish between this hesitation and an actual transition.

CHEMISTRY VERSUS FORMULAS

Through the first day each presentation reinforced the previous one. Each of the four clinicians had his or her own imagery, but it was clear that their efforts pursued a common goal. For example, while all four at various times would list their basic recipes for given movements- a turn on the haunches or a shoulder in- each in separate ways emphasized the more complex interactions that become internalized by all good riders.

In his session Robert Dover postulated three basic sets of aids: the three driving aids, the three bending aids, and the regulating aids. In Robert's schema, being able to "marry" these three sets of aids within the time frame of one complete breath is the essence of a half halt, and as he said, "In dressage, half halts are EVERYTHING." Of course, half halts are not administered arbitrarily or by rote. Robert: "the minimum aid for the maximum amount of result." In a similar vein, Michael Poulin observed at one point, "That was too much half and not enough halt," and in another case where the horse dropped behind the leg in a downward transition "too much halt and not enough half."

Michael discussed the "steady, ready leg"- that every part of every half halt need not be explicitly given if the horse doesn't need it or is able to supply that part of the equation himself without the rider's intervention. Robert added the "Less is sometimes More" concept. At times too much of a driving seat and a strong lower leg will make a horse drop his back in a downward transition. Instead, a "stilled seat" which slightly lightens as the thighs close, coupled with a milder lower leg can give the horse room to bring his back up and step through from behind. In all cases Robert reminded us, once your aids produce the effect you want, they must be relaxed immediately. An aid which gets stuck, loses its meaning. Along these lines Michael added, "The rider must know the correction, know when to use it, but most important, know when to cease its use."

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HORSE

Suppleness, Straightness, and Collection were the three major themes of the first afternoon. Each was granted an individual lecture session, but it was clear that the clinicians are less compartmentalized about these qualities in their normal training. Michael Poulin: "A horse which is unsupple is uncomfortable to ride... The main factor which limits suppleness is tension, whether it comes from resistance, inattention, or just lack of relaxation... The horse's back is the area where this lack of suppleness is most commonly seen. It is evidenced both by tightness and eventually by impurities developing in the horse's rhythm."

Lateral suppling exercises loosen the horse and teach him to bend, but care must be taken in the amount of bend asked for. Asking for more than a horse can give at a particular stage in his development, unequal bending through the length of his spine, or trying to force a “bend” by pulling on the inside rein will all interfere with the horse’s balance and make him less supple.

Hilda Gurney added that a correctly ridden horse understands the concept of “Inside/Outside.” Even when tracking straight up the centerline, they are ridden from an inside leg to the opposing outside hand and are able to position themselves infinitesimally to the chosen “inside” with a soft, inviting rein effect that doesn’t restrict the freedom of the inside hind leg. This “Inside/Outside” concept carries through from the most basic exercises like work on the twenty meter circle to serpentine, shoulder fore, and shoulder in. Michael used the shoulder in to renvers combination in his session to get the horses up in front of the seat and leg and feeling more pliable and in lateral balance.

Producing a straight horse not only means making the fore and hind legs track in line, but it includes taking a creature which in nature is asymmetrical, and developing him to be much more bilaterally equal in strength, flexibility, and dexterity. Furthermore, Hilda opined that straightness in the canter is not a natural condition for most horses. They routinely track with their haunches in, especially to the right. Only by being able to ride the horse in a shoulder fore position can the rider overcome this tendency. Thus, we induce a special kind of “crookedness” to make them be truly straight.

Leg yielding was shown as a good way to teach the horse to stay in lateral balance and not fall over his outside shoulder. Since it requires no collection, it can be done properly in the Working gaits and, in the trot, either rising or sitting. Hilda reminded the riders to be alive with their aids and to be willing to move their legs around as needed within the movement rather than just lock them on and apply them like a recipe. She also got the horses out of the movement and back into the proper alignment if they popped a shoulder or trailed their haunches.

Robert talked about longitudinal suppleness, and we saw it enhanced through reinback and counter-canter. Michael in his session observed that the reinback can often be in trouble before you start if the rider doesn’t send the horse forward into the halt from behind. The rider, of course, must avoid just pulling his horse back but can use the leg and whip to encourage him to go “forward in reverse.” The aids are usually given in the rhythm of the horse’s diagonal pairs as you wish them to step back. The counter-canter along the rail with a special mind to aligning the forehand and quarters and helping the horse carry himself made the rhythm of Shelly Francis’s young horse much more marked and cadenced and seemed to free his back.

Riding Guapo, an eight year old Dutch stallion, in the afternoon session, Robert combined all that had been discussed thus far into the next topic: collection. Before any collection can be achieved, the horse must be put on the aids. It must accept the demands of the leg and seat to work from its hindlegs through the back and the topline and into the hand, establishing an elastic connection. The horse should “rest quietly in a friendly way against the snaffle part of the bridle,” analogous to the way a small child might hold your hand crossing the street- neither exaggeratedly dragging on your hand nor letting it go entirely.

Robert also emphasized the need to maintain “the thought of forward” within the collection. “Collection is always an addition,” he said, “never a subtraction of energy.” The collection must always remain alive in extension and vice versa, that is, the balance achieved in collection must remain present when the horse extends. Likewise, when the horse collects, he must retain the forward thought he learned in extension. “Adjustability is everything in dressage.” Robert also added that the horse must be able to stretch out and down at the rider’s pleasure. Being able to do this is a check of the horse’s desire to come over his back, a desire which should be present even when the horse is invited to work up in his most collected frame and balance.

The key to producing collection is in being able to perform successful half halts. As the horse engages his quarters and steps further under his own mass, the quarters are lowered and his weight is displaced to the rear. And “every failed half halt which doesn’t achieve its goal,” according to Robert, “is just a chance for you to make another one.”

The horse was asked to make many shortenings and lengthenings to test his suppleness and connection. Robert attributed this “rubber band exercise” to Col. Ljungquist, his old coach. He likened the horse to an accordion sitting on a smooth tabletop. If you hold one hand on either end of the accordion, you can slide it back and forth over the table and move it from place to place, but you can only make music if you make the accordion (or the horse) expand and contract!

PROGRESSIVE DEMANDS BY LEVELS

On Day Two the clinicians outlined the specific requirements and standards of each level, movement by movement. Developing and preserving the purity of the gaits is uppermost at all levels, but particularly so at Training Level where the horse is most impressionable. That’s why posting trot is permitted in the early tests. Hilda pointed out the difference in the quality of the young horses’ trot, even with two very scopey, talented movers when their riders were allowed to post.

She also showed how priorities differ not only from level to level, but also from horse to horse and within the same horse as circumstances vary. A Training Level halt, for instance, should above all be immobile and relaxed. The transitions in and out of the halt should be smooth, and a step or two of walk isn’t penalized. Square is nice, but Hilda observed she could give a seven at that level even to an unsquare halt. When one of the youngsters showed a marked tendency to shuffle or sway at the halt, Hilda said not to make any effort to square him up. “Don’t try to over-correct him. Just teach him to stand still first, even if he’s not on the bit.”

Establishing reasonable expectations was a theme which she carried on throughout. When one horse shied repeatedly at a blanket hanging over the rail, she spoke of the conflicting needs on the one hand to de-sensitize your horse to its potentially spooky surroundings while trying not to overface it by demanding more than it should be expected to cope with.

Looking at First Level lengthenings, Hilda “scolded” one rider, “That would have been a great one at the auction but a judge would kill you for it!” Why? Because the rider had asked for too much and had lost the horse’s back and his rhythm. Later, though the lengthening was less extreme, when the horse stayed in rhythm, didn’t hang in the hand, and stayed more open in front, Hilda rewarded her with praise and a higher mark. A point which the new tests emphasize is the need to show good transitions both before and after the lengthenings. These require a large degree of attention and self carriage. As Hilda said, “90% of lengthening is the balance before it.”

In the Second Level session, Jessica reiterated the importance of creating energy and having it travel in the right direction. You must never have to “pull it backwards,” but rather bring it forward under control. Jessica talked about the difference between riding the old fashioned heavy type Warmbloods versus the lighter ones with more Thoroughbred attributes. With the sensitive demo horse in question, she supervised many half halts to make the horse “stay back and wait for the aids.” Through the warm-up some half halts had to be obvious “hesitation” ones as she had described the previous day. Others were much smaller and discreet. Jessica observed that the half halts which Robert was able to make during his demonstration eventually became so slight as to be invisible. “They just made the horse look more airy.”

For the free walk she advocated the longest possible stride and frame to produce the most relaxed walk, but at the same time the maintenance of “a little bit” of contact. This keeps the horse more mentally involved throughout the free walk and facilitates the transition back to medium without unsteadiness or loss of rhythm.

She also felt that a critical point for many Second Level riders is the moment of the shortened walk right before the canter departs. Riders must practice showing the differences between the walks and must practice making the horse comfortable in changing from one walk to another. When the strikeoff can be relaxed, confident, and gathered, the first strides are very much like what a true collected canter should feel like. At this moment the horse's balance is extremely important. He must compress for the depart but wait for it in front, not want to barge against the hand and lose engagement.

During the release of the inner hand on the twenty meter circle, for the horse to maintain the carriage and inner positioning, he must be clearly on the outside rein and be independent in his balance of the inner rein. If he is correct, the horse "should feel good about the release."

In the counter-canter work the rider must avoid over-bending the neck with the inner rein or using so much outside leg that the quarters are pushed out of line towards the rail. The horse must not quicken his stride or lengthen it. The rider should try to ride the same stride and motion with his or her hips as in the true canter. The hips should move towards the horse's mouth, not diagonally as in a half pass.

In general, Jessica warned against the temptation to move up the levels too rapidly. If the figures of the test seem to come too quickly to you and make the horse struggle from one movement to the next, you are probably trying to compete above the level where you belong. Hilda added that she thought Second Level is the most difficult level to show: "Either you're really on a First Level horse and he has trouble with the counter-canter or he is far enough into his Second Level work that you're starting his flying changes and confusing his expectations of counter-canter that way.

In the Third Level session, Michael Poulin reiterated his version of the chemistry of the aids. You cannot just give the aids; "the horse must receive them with understanding." To Michael, too, the half halt is the key thing, and he insisted that the rider must acquire a good seat before the half halts can work.

The flying change is introduced at Third Level. Michael's riders showed the three preliminary kinds of lead changes, namely, change through the trot, simple change (through the walk), and the "quick change" where the horse is brought back to walk for a brief instant and then strikes off immediately on the other lead. Demonstrating the change through the trot, Michael reminded the riders to "think forward to canter but forward within the rhythm." Hilda added a useful schooling exercise for horses that anticipate the new lead: to proceed on the diagonal in canter, make the downward transition near X and immediately begin a ten meter circle in the direction of the new lead. This allows you to balance your horse, make him wait for the aids, and positions him for the new lead which you can take up as you finish the circle and continue the diagonal.

For the flying changes themselves, Michael explained that the aids tend to differ slightly from one trainer to another. In his own system when changing leads from left to right, for example, he will give the aid as he imagines the horse landing on his left fore. At the same time he makes a half halt in that left (new outside) rein to keep the horse up and back while the horse is free to jump through on the new inside.

Robert discussed the half pass, which first appears at this level. Typically, a horse which is otherwise trotting nicely will lose the cadence to his trot when asked to make a half pass. Robert suggested riders think less of the lateral displacement and more of riding the horse forward to the outside rein in the movement. It is best, he said, to visualize an imaginary wall on the diagonal and to ride travers towards the focal point at the end of that line. Michael warned against riders getting over-involved with their inner rein to make the bending.

Collected and extended walk also are introduced in the tests at this level. Michael advised riders not to drop the horse in the extended walk but to keep riding the horse forward through a long frame to the connection. "Nonetheless," he said, "don't ride the horse more forward than the rhythm that exists," or you risk damaging

the walk. In both walks “you must listen to the rhythm and don’t get in its way too much.” Robert Dover added that the horse must “know the friendliness of the hand” to want to reach to the bridle and make a good extended walk.

Robert showed some of the Fourth Level requirements. Carrying on from his description of half halts from Monday, he demonstrated their sequential use to prepare and guide the horse’s balance through the counterchange of hands in half pass. For training purposes he encouraged riders not to try to hurry this movement through too small a space. Instead he took three or four strides to complete the straightening, change of aids, change of bend and balance, and change of direction. Through this he showed the “dictating” inhaling portion of each half halt followed by the “rewarding” exhaling portion.

At this level the “rubber band” training exercise from Day One came into play in the actual test: on the diagonal, Medium Trot, 6 to 7 steps of Collected Trot over X, and then Medium Trot. In one trial when the horse dropped his back slightly, Robert reminded, “Don’t try to hold his head down. On to the next half halt!”

With the walk pirouettes Robert demonstrated common problems: the rider getting too much on the inside rein and blocking the hindleg, causing the horse to lose rhythm or even to step out behind and turn on the center. All four clinicians spoke of the need to have “eyes on the ground” to give reliable feedback about what the horse is doing in this and many other movements. Even Olympians, they assured us, cannot always feel if every halt is square or every flying change clean.

FLYING CHANGES

Tuesday afternoon’s schedule allowed special attention to be devoted to the harder movements in the FEI tests: the changes, pirouettes, piaffe and passage. Hilda Gurney described the complications of an inexperienced rider trying to “put the changes on” a horse. So often it will take a professional a year’s worth of training to fix the disaster created by a novice in this situation. It is much smarter, she said, to get your horse ready for the changes and then send him out to an experienced rider for a few months to get them established correctly.

Hilda listed these preconditions before changes should be attempted:

1. A straight canter and the ability to ride a balanced shoulder- in at the canter;
2. Good canter/walk and walk/canter transitions;
3. A well established, controllable counter-canter;
4. The ability to adjust the horse’s flexion left and right while holding him straight on the line with seat and leg.

Once these preconditions have been satisfied, you may proceed to trying the flying change. Said Hilda, “There are a million patterns to use, and the right one may vary from horse to horse.” One which she likes is to proceed on the short diagonal (for instance, F towards E) in left lead canter. Then past the centerline, walk. Take the horse in right travers at the second quarterline to teach him to be willing to jump off the new outside (left) leg. And then make the depart to the right. After several repetitions, instead of the walk transition, make the half halt and give the aids to change. Hilda added that you must be able to “neutralize” your aids before you give the aids for the new lead without the horse anticipating and changing ahead of you. You must be able to hold the original lead comfortably without having to exaggerate the aids. Then at the time of the change, while your weight, hands, and outside leg bring the horse over to the new lead, the new inner leg lightens slightly to let the inner hind come through. As soon as the change is complete, the inside leg can become active again to sustain the jump in the canter.

Changing cleanly is Hilda’s first priority for a horse learning the movement. As it gains experience, the changes must also be straight, relaxed, fluent, and expressive. The horse must land in the same rhythm from which he took off. A horse which hurries will have trouble when he gets to tempi changes.

Hilda had her riders demonstrate the “Inside/Outside” concept on the quarterline: first riding left lead canter in shoulder fore, then straightening to a flying change and riding counter-shoulder fore on the new lead. She uses the quarterline a lot because “it’s a place you can keep repeating.” Using a diagonal, you automatically change direction and have to alternate which lead you’re training. Staying on the same hand when you work the quarterlines allows you to make a change, walk and reward, and then simply pick up the original lead and repeat the exercise as desired. Also because quarterline work does not appear in any of the tests, your horse can make mistakes in practice without them making him be nervous about a place in the arena where he’ll do them in competition.

Hilda also recommended using the change of lead from one counter-canter to the other. Once the horse has the basic idea of changing, this pattern helps him wait for the aids, preventing him from wanting to change early in front. “Early in front and late behind look the same,” she said, “but they come from different causes.” Changes which are early in front result from anticipation; “late behind” is usually a disobedience to the leg.

The riders were next asked to show a flying change from true to counter-canter along the rail on the long side of the arena, then, if the change was quiet and the horse stayed in balance, a change back to the true lead. This was done without any attempt to count a specific number of strides between changes. Any time the horse got tense or tried to rush, the rider was asked to hold the lead. Only when the canter was correct did Hilda ask them to make the flying change. These were all exercises Hilda felt the horses should be able to do while they were showing Second Level. Then by the time they got to the tests in Third Level calling for the changes, they would be comfortable enough with the concepts to score well.

It is only logical to proceed to tempi changes when the horse is quiet and confident in the above exercises. Four-tempi first appear in Fourth Level Test 2. If you make a counting mistake in these and the horse gives you a “5” instead, Hilda advised not to compound the problem by making a “3” in the next change. Then the judge will count two mistakes. The rider must feel the mistake as it happens and start each count to four from the end of the previous change.

Hilda felt that three-tempi are often easier for horses than fours. But as the changes come more frequently, it is especially important for the rider to stay quiet in the upper body and keep the shoulders square to the line. The quicker the changes come, the easier it is to make mistakes; so it is crucial that each individual change is ridden correctly and that the quality of the canter itself is maintained. “By the time you ride two-tempi,” she explained, “you change, he changes; you change, he changes. There’s no time in there to recover from an error.”

In her experience it often takes a rider who already knows how to do two-tempi a year to learn to do good one-tempi on a horse that is already trained to do them! Likewise, it can often take a year for a rider who knows “ones” to be able to put them on a horse who can already do the “twos.” When riding one-tempi, the rider must first “go with the change” but then must start to give the aids for the next change before the first one has really happened. “If your timing isn’t right, your aids for the second change will accidentally stop the first one before it takes place. Hilda used Shelly Francis and Pikant, who had just won the Grand Prix Special at Clarcona the previous weekend, to show the progression through the “ones.” First, repetitions of “one/one,” where the horse makes a single pair of changes- over to the new lead and then back in successive strides. When this can be done consistently, the next step is “one/one/one.” To make it easier for the horse to understand adding the third change, it can help to make the sequence at the end of the diagonal. This lets the horse make the final change onto the true lead with the corner to assist him. “From here, you’re home free,” she said as we watched Pikant produce fifteen beautiful “ones” on the diagonal.

PIROUETTES

Jessica showed a variety of ways to approach the pirouettes. In each, her primary requirement was to produce compression in the horse without him losing his forward thought. One exercise she recommended was to practice shortening the stride on straight lines to the point where the horse would practically canter on the spot for a few steps. Preliminary strength-building exercises included canter spirals and riding very small circles from the track along the long side of the arena. She also advocated work on the square, using the line across the arena towards the wall as an opportunity to shift the weight back for a rudimentary quarter pirouette. Between the quarter pirouettes she suggested short pieces of medium canter to keep the demo horse she was working with from thinking backwards in the turns. And not every quarter pirouette needed to be the same size. "It's fun to adjust them," she said. "Play with the exercise and with the degree of collection the horse can sustain during the turn."

As for the pirouettes themselves, Jessica listed these reminders: 1) Pre-establish a small inner bend; 2) Maintain the rhythm, keeping the front end jumping up nicely; 3) Be sure your seat and hips ride the same rhythm all the way around the turn; and 4) Ride in your mind ahead of where you are and use your eyes to find your way out of the figure on the same line from which you entered.

Robert added that while it is correct to think of slowing the horse's speed over the ground to practically nothing, you don't want to get the horse's legs moving too slowly. In that case, the pirouette will look labored and the rhythm can be lost. For pirouettes the canter tempo should almost get faster as the horse jumps up under himself from behind.

Michael commented that once he comes onto the line for the pirouette, he chooses an imaginary "gray spot" on the ground and sets his horse up to put the pirouette on that spot. As he approaches, if the horse doesn't feel ready for the turn, he moves the gray spot farther ahead and plans again. That way he never turns before the horse is balanced, supple, and carrying himself. He also noted that when schooling a horse that tries to drop onto his forehand and turn too fast, it can be helpful to make the pirouette from the counter-canter, turning towards the wall. This way the wall itself will back the horse off and make him shift more weight onto his haunches. "A side benefit," Michael noted, "is that this method keeps you out of the horse's mouth."

PIAFFE AND PASSAGE

Michael led off this session with a listing of his prerequisites: correct collection and a confident horse which understands the driving aids, straightness and half halts. The horse must make good canter/walk transitions and offer a good Collected Walk, in which he can be pushed up actively through the neck into the outside rein. "A horse gives the absolute most of himself in these movements; so it's the rider's duty to give him the best opportunity to do them."

This degree of collection can produce a claustrophobic reaction in some horses which may hollow them to one side. This is different from a crookedness due to lack of suppleness. Michael cautioned against starting passage before the horse has learned the piaffe. This, he said, makes it harder to train the transitions between them later on. For piaffe he doesn't sit either especially light or heavy. He does nothing special with his hands other than to support the normal rhythm of his half halts. For piaffe his legs are a little back; for passage they are more forward.

"Don't get suckered into using force. Some strong riders can get by with a lot of whip and strong half halts, but they're not really making piaffe, AND that kind of approach can require a year or two to repair the damage they cause," he warned. "The horse must never do the piaffe from tension."

Both Robert and Michael mentioned that with younger horses being introduced to piaffe-like steps, they try not to make a big deal about it. Michael said he just “throws it into the lesson” when he thinks the horse is ready. Earlier, when Robert was on a medium level horse playing with half steps, he said triumphantly, “See, this horse doesn’t even know he’s doing it.” As Michael worked from the ground with Tuni Full on Pomerol, Hilda added her agreement, emphasizing not holding the movement too long in the beginning and encouraging the horse always to feel successful in his efforts.

Michael spoke of assisting the horse from the ground with the whip: “There are a lot of place on the horse where you can tap him to bring him to life- the belly, the croup. the legs, even sometimes the neck, but you must ‘feel his body in the whip’ and always avoid too much strength.”

CHOOSING A HORSE FOR DRESSAGE

While dressage schooling can improve almost any horse, if you mean to bring a horse all the way through the levels to a successful Grand Prix, the raw material you begin with makes a huge difference. In discussing which characteristics should be most sought in a young FEI prospect, Hilda said that ones with the ability to do exceptional piaffe and passage should be most highly prized. She cited a recent Swedish study of elite Grand Prix horses which discovered common conformation traits whose presence in horses as young as three months can be predictive of their ability to perform these movements as adults.

Tops on the list is the horses’ positive Diagonal Advanced Placement or DAP. In these horses when the trot is observed with an extremely slow motion video camera, the diagonal pair of legs does not strike the ground at the same time. In a desirable horse with a positive DAP, the hind leg of the diagonal pair will actually hit the ground before its partner.

Two other predictive traits which the study found in the elite horses are the forward slope of the femur and the length of the upper arm of the foreleg (the humerus). Hilda said that the length of the cannon bone is relatively insignificant, as is the slope of the shoulder itself and whether the horse is moderately long or short backed. “Look for horses that have an upright neck set up fairly high,” she suggested. If you have the choice, also pick a horse that is thin in the throatlatch, has a fairly large mouth, has a high enough wither to stabilize the saddle position, and has fairly open stifle and hock angles, that is, a fairly straight hind leg. Don’t buy sickle hocks. You do want a horse that overtracks, but extremely long gaits are not desirable because they are often too hard to collect. The trot stride should swing naturally with good bending of the joints of the hindlegs. Don’t pick a horse that travels wide behind. In the canter the horse should bring his hindleg well up under the girth. Said Hilda, “Look at the walk and trot but BUY THE CANTER.”

Jessica added to this list of desirable qualities the importance of choosing a good temperament. Michael encouraged trainers to match horse and rider temperaments: some riders need a quiet horse they can push, others do better with a hot horse or one that goes on his own. Hilda insisted that riders should not consider buying a horse they can’t sit to. “The heart of a horse is a wonderful thing,” added Robert, saying that some deficiencies in conformation can be overcome by a horse that wants to work for you.

PERFORMING IN THE SHOW ARENA

Once you’ve done your homework to the best of your ability, many riders want to take their skills to the show ring. Robert reminded the audience, “This is your chance to ‘show off.’ Too many riders go around the arena just staring at their horse’s neck. But really good dressage has a lot to do with emotions, unexplainable feelings that make dressage an art and not just a craft.” So Robert’s final warm-up has a special goal. He already will have stretched the horse long and low, done the ‘rubber band’ exercises, and checked in on the horse’s difficult movements that day. Then in the last warm-up he tries to create a ‘presence’: a mood and an appearance that says

to the judge, "I'm happy to be here and I'm ready to take on the world." Then he can relax the inner rein, sit still, and let the horse be the star.

As Robert rode through several of the tests, he did the "play by play." As he rode up the centerline, for instance, he explained his horse was feeling a little out of balance, "He's a teeter totter! ...But act like it's not happening... I'm dealing with a lot of things but trying to look unfazed and unobvious." His detailed narration helped the audience realize the amount of mental preparation and tactical decision making that is required to produce a polished performance. "Knowing your horse, figure out his pluses and minuses before the test. Then once you're in the ring, gloss over his problems. Sit up there and be proud of what's right, and with your "presence," tell that judge you're waiting for your nine!"

FINAL IMPRESSIONS

Before this year's Symposium, some of us wondered just how well four personalities as strong as Jessica, Robert, Hilda, and Michael would fare together. Happily, they found many, many points of convergence both in their theories and in their practical experiences. Robert summed up their mutual goal by saying, "There is probably no perfect horse, but we can seek the most perfect harmony and relationship with the horses we have."

The 1996 Symposium closed with Michael's reading of this quotation from the Spanish Riding School:

"The exhibition of this most noble form of horsemanship is not just educational showmanship. This is an art form. Classical riding is an ideal which has maintained its purity throughout the centuries and has been cherished by skilled practitioners so as not to lose its clarity. The high ethical values are derived from human virtues, without which, they would mean nothing. Humanity, respect for God's creatures and nature, tolerance, honesty and self criticism, modesty, and a sense of proportion: this is what people can learn about life from the riding arena.

"This type of art is not abstract and dead. It is a living, breathing work. Among the fine arts, it can best be compared with music. It is creative like music, but its creations are movement.

"The moments of this art pass by. What remains is a memory, an emotion..."