

NEDA Spring Fling

by Kimberley Brown Edelmann

The 2009 NEDA Spring Fling promised to provide an excellent opportunity for dressage riders, trainers, judges, and enthusiasts to learn more about the Training Scale from a world recognized expert. Those who visited Apple Knoll Farm in Millis Massachusetts during the three day clinic given by Herr Christoph Hess of Germany got all that was promised and more.

This was Christoph's first visit to New England. As he has done all around the world, Christoph shared his thoughts on how to apply the Training Scale to improve both the rider and the horse by using a combination of humor, kindness and consideration towards horse and rider, an impressive arsenal of training exercises, some animated footwork of his own, and images and visions of ideal work to which we should all aim.

When Christoph first heard that NEDA had lined up horses from Training Level to Grand Prix for the Spring Fling, he was skeptical. But at the end of the first day, he was delighted with the high calibre of horses presented and their riders, all of whom he considered "Top Class". With the seven horse / rider combinations selected for the clinic, Hess was happy that he was able to demonstrate to the enthusiastic audience the classical training of dressage horses from their early schooling through to the Grand Prix work. Hess was also very impressed to see three FEI level horses, none of whom were bred specifically for dressage, doing excellent dressage work.

Day 1

Day one was enlightening! Christoph began by introducing the riders and audience to key fundamentals about horse training. We were reminded many times to consider the "nature of the horse", an animal who loves to be outside, in the fields, grazing, and moving with a long open body and neck.

With this in mind, regardless of the level of training of the horse, Hess asked riders to warmup in the horse's preferred gait (trot or canter) on a long contact, in a light seat, with shortened stirrup leathers, encouraging the horse to open his whole body. Riders were also encouraged to loosen their own backs, looking all around, not just focussed on the horse, letting their shoulders and arms swing a little, all with the goal of finding their balance on the moving horse. Hess was quick to point out that a horse can not balance himself under a rider until the rider has brilliant balance in the saddle. Hess believes that work in short stirrups, even very short stirrups, helps the rider find that balance.

As each rider put in a mile or more of forward light riding, Hess invited the audience to listen to the sounds of the horse's breathing, or "schnauben", and his footfalls. Lightheartedly, he likened these wonderful sounds to the music of the Boston Symphony Orchestra!

As each partnership settled down to work, Hess quickly assessed what was good and what could be better, as measured against the expectations of the Training Scale. Where improvements were needed, specific exercises and movements were employed.

We were advised to look for what is good in the horse, and what is not so good, on a daily basis, and to try to make improvements on the biggest problems first. We were reminded that above all else, the rhythm of the gaits is most important to protect and maintain. Suppleness demonstrated by a swinging back, relaxed paces, and elasticity of the movements was number two on Hess's checklist. Third was the development of the nice contact between horse and rider with the horse seeking the bit.

Throughout the training, forward riding was used to refresh and reward. When the training was done, riding on a long and loose rein was encouraged, allowing the horse to move with complete freedom, and finally into a calm, relaxed, and satisfying walk.

Day 2

Each horse and rider returned on the second day, starting their hour with Christoph with another body opening warmup. Again, the audience watched and listened to the music of each horse. The work for Day Two focused on areas which needed strengthening as part of the preparation for the next level of work.

Hess stressed that as the trainer of the horse, each rider must push the boundaries of what the horse is currently doing, but only in a positive manner. When schooling new work, the horse must be encouraged and never punished for trying. Supporting this, Christoph was quick to give lavish praise to each rider when they demonstrated positive training work, encouragement, and gentle correction and redirection to the horse. "Top Class!" was heard often.

As Hess encouraged the partnerships to reach outside of their current comfort zones with exercises aimed towards the next level of work, "no problem", was cheerfully voiced by Hess whenever momentary blips occurred. Each horse was presented with challenges, then rewarded once again with freely forward movement.

On a couple of occasions, during moments of new work and positive stress, Hess reminded the audience to listen to the horse before them. Pauses in the schauben, the horse holding its breathe, can be an indication of the deep concentration of the horse. Returning to the horse's comfort zone, the music always returned, sometimes preceded by a hearty snort!

Day 3

For the final day of the NEDA Spring Fling with Christoph Hess, the riders were invited to ride tests. Accordingly, Hess put on his judging hat and spoke to the riders, trainers, judges, and dressage enthusiasts in the audience using judging terminology and scores for overall impressions. He encouraged the audience to participate, providing scores and thoughts about the tests presented, allowing for additional discussion and reflection on the Training Scales and how they relate to competition.

Hess encouraged judges to always look to the body language of the competition horse and to be generous in the score for the horse who does his work happily as compared to the horse who works like a slave. He was pleased to add that all seven horses were happy in their work.

Minor Adjustments

Throughout the weekend, Hess made little finetuning adjustments to the riders. These included the shortening of stirrup leathers to help achieve a lighter seat, bringing the stirrup irons a little bit away from the toes to encourage more flexibility of the ankles, and thus the knees and hips, and he asked the riders to point their toes towards 11 o'clock and 1 o'clock to help loosen the knees while also putting more of the lower leg in quiet ready contact with the horse.

Hess pointed out that when riding with a whip, the horse may spend too much time looking at it, worrying. The horse can become stiff just due to the whip being there. Carrying a whip, the rider also can become stiff in their arm. So, riding whips were handed to Hess for safekeeping until actually needed... Which was,

quite interestingly, not very often.

While using the whip behind the leg, one horse reacted with a break in his rhythm. Hess used this opportunity to restress the need to protect the rhythm and then shared his views about where to apply the whip. Each horse has their own preference in this. For this horse, when the whip was applied again, this time at the shoulder, the correct response was given. He went forward!

Exercises

The audience at the NEDA Spring Fling watched literally dozens of exercises used to improve relaxation, contact, impulsion, straightness, and collection.

The repeated influence of shoulder in and shoulder fore positioning at both trot and canter in many exercises, making the inside hind leg more active, carrying more weight, soon became apparent. For the work to be successful, however, Hess pointed out that the horse must be honest to the rider's inside leg which in turn allows the rider to use correct aids. The exercises had the dual affect of helping the riders use correct aids, as well as helping the horses respond correctly.

Some exercises included work in posting trot or light trot aka "Leicht Traben". These included shoulder in with give and retake of the reins, and half pass. Whenever sitting work lost impulsion, riders were praised for returning to leicht traben. Renewed impulsion was always the result.

Surprisingly, Hess also included one handed riding in some of the exercises. With reins carried in the outside hand and the inside hand resting on the thigh or patting the horse, the horses had to find their own way through the movements, guided by the seat of the rider. Riding with one hand provided the additional benefit of subtly positioning the rider more onto the inside seatbone.

In my notes, I recorded 36 exercises, unique combinations of movements in various gaits and paces, and each with a specific purpose at that moment in the training. Some examples include:

- Stretching trot serpentine with very light contact
- Shoulder in trot into canter
- Trot 10M circle in corner, half pass to X, 10M circle, shoulder in on centerline
- Canter 20M circle on long contact with varying lengths of stride
- Spiralling in concentric canter circles 20M to 8M and back out again
- Shoulder fore canter into half pass, shoulder fore on centerline or quarterline, flying change well before turn
- Canter 6 loop serpentine with flying changes, and small circles when touching the long side
- Canter quarter pirouettes in a large square pattern
- Passage into rising trot with a long rein and back into passage
- Piaffe into forward rising trot on a long rein

Pearls of Wisdom & Snippets

In the spirit of education, Christoph Hess spent three days speaking directly with his audience as well as the riders. We were treated to numerous concepts and insights. Watching the audience, I could see a lot of note taking going on, bits of whispering and discussion, and lots of head nodding in appreciation of Hess's comments and the high quality riding being demonstrated.

Some of the quotes I captured include the following.

- Shorten the stirrups and ride like a showjumper! It's good for the horse's back.
- The horse will let the rider know when it is time to sit the trot.
- If a horse prefers to warmup in canter, allow it. Better not to fight.
- To improve a horse, start with what he does best, then transfer the good feeling into other work.
- Do not try to fix 2 problems at the same time. Pick the biggest problem first.
- Use different positions in the horse when training, not always just the dressage competition position.
- Never punish a horse who wants to look around. Work with the natural curiosity.
- Horse & rider must trust each other to work with a long rein contact.
- Fix contact issues early while they are small, otherwise they get worse at each level of training.
- Übersteichen is good for the horse and a good test of his balance and happiness in the work.
- The rider is the physiotherapist for his horse. His job is to help the horse be happy and well in the body.
- Use impulsion to get collection.
- It is much easier to go from big steps to littler steps than the other way around.
- Too fast is a smaller problem than too lazy.
- Sally Swift was right! Ride from the middle of your body.
- Use your body feeling to make transitions by swinging into the new feeling.
- Fixed eyes lead to a stiff body. Look up! Look around! And smile!
- Start flying changes when counter canter work begins. This is easier for the horse.
- For upward transitions, think "Formula One".
- Riding forward will fix more than 50% of all problems.
- When the horse leaves the arena, he must be happy.
- There is no formula for an exact training programme. Each horse is different with a unique history.
- "I don't do anything to you, you don't do anything to me" is not good training. The rider must be the pilot. The horse can be co-pilot.
- In tempi changes, do fewer of high quality than more with risk of introducing mistakes.
- A good dressage horse has no set size, breed, color, or sex.

Hess's Challenges

After three intense days of dressage work, riders and auditors went home with lecture material written by Christoph Hess, lots of new ideas and concepts, reinforcement of prior learnings, and some interesting challenges.

Yes, Hess invited everyone to go home and try cantering with one rein and doing shoulder in on a long rein. He encouraged riders to go trail riding, do some training on hillsides, to work with cavalletti, and to simply get out of the dressage arena once in a while. Hess likes to see happy dressage horses who are great fun to ride.