

## ► DRESSAGE

BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

**JEREMY  
STEINBERG**

# What Are You Learning At Your Clinic?

*Our columnist reflects on what is, and isn't, taught at most major clinics.*

**T**his spring I taught a clinic in San Antonio, Texas, with a new group of riders and was blown away by the amount of interest. What started out as a two-day clinic scheduled in 2016 quickly turned into a three-day clinic, then four days, and there was still quite a waiting list of people wanting to ride.

I asked them why they wanted me so many days—why the interest in someone who isn't big into showing these days, who kind of keeps to himself or at least is trying to other than being outspoken about what I think is right and wrong? And I have no issue taking away your stirrups whether you're 12 or 68! The answers involve themes I've been hearing more and more recently when I travel.

I've often asked, when people come to me with problems, what other clinicians are teaching. I'll have riders show up wondering how to fix their pirouettes when they have a four-beat canter or how to get better scores on their half-passes when they can't sit the trot.

These problems would seem to have simple solutions, but the fact is they get asked—and more often than not, they get asked after the riders have just ridden with big-name trainers. For those of us who teach clinics, what are we teaching our riders? For those of you who take clinics, what are you really learning?



## Making A Difference With Homework

When I was working for the U.S. Equestrian Federation, one of the biggest issues was: How do we reach as many riders as possible while still doing quality work? The challenge is getting across the country to everyone and actually making a difference in their riding since we are only able to see some people a few times a year. How can you really make improvements with someone if you only get to see them quarterly?

In this discussion, there was always agreement that you couldn't. Two or even three days wasn't enough to make a difference, but I always disagreed. It didn't—and still doesn't—make sense to me that you can't give a rider enough homework, information and knowledge that they can go practice for a few weeks at a time and return to marked improvement. This work we do on horseback isn't about instant results anyway, so how can it be possible to make any kind of life-altering change in a weekend without really “teaching” a rider a certain feel or understanding? They can take it home and practice and practice it

enough so that it becomes muscle memory and is easily repeated, so they are then ready for the next step. If they are smart people or good riders, and most all of them are, the theory will carry them for weeks.

## The Theory Behind The Ride

I often get told by riders their horse was “awesome” or “amazing” in the clinic with so and so, but when you ask what they learned or how they can apply that skill set at home, they don't understand how they came to that place in the ride. They are “traffic directed” and not taught to think or feel, so when they are left to their own devices over the next few weeks they feel as lost, if not even more so, after the clinic because now they're disappointed that they can't recreate the results.

Is it that the clinician doesn't understand how to, or that they don't think they should, leave the rider with the understanding of the work they did in order to reproduce it? Or is it more important to get the horse or rider to a level of work regardless of the rider's comprehension or ability?

You can drill basics ad nauseam



**What are we really teaching riders in clinics, and what are they really learning?** ARND BRONKHORST PHOTO

and break a sweat or educating them on why a piaffe is actually a relevant exercise beyond it being just a cool and fun thing to make a horse do.

I ask riders some pretty basic questions on what is involved in certain movements or the origin or purpose of a movement. In regard to piaffe work it's striking to me that so few people seem to understand how to work the horses in hand anymore. Instead, they insist the way to train their horses to piaffe is through the passage. I don't need to beat that concept to death, as I have already been pretty outspoken about it, but at least once a weekend I find myself saying to someone that we should be working their horse in hand and "teaching" the horse to actually piaffe, and they say they've always been told their particular horse can't learn to piaffe that way and needs to go at it through the trot or passage.

Funny how there are so many "one off" and exception horses these days. They seem to be becoming the rule, or at least we are trying to convince riders that the rules have changed. Worse is when I personally walk up to a horse, who's been trained by the piaffe and passage expert, and the horse immediately starts bouncing and jumping up and down in place, or better yet, rolls its eyes at me and runs off before I can even get close. Where is the education when the horse is either panicked or shooting in the dark at the right answer?

I have one rider in particular who has struggled with trying to teach her horse piaffe and get him to Grand Prix. This horse has been a very successful junior horse, young rider horse and Intermediaire horse but has struggled to make the transition to Grand Prix. The rider has ridden in clinics with top people, USEF-sponsored clinics and training sessions, and has taken part in many educational events. Not once has anyone ever offered or asked to see her horse work in hand or teach her how to do it. Over the years, this horse has finally learned to piaffe and is working his way into the Grand Prix in no

small part because of the in-hand piaffe education we've worked on.

Why has no other clinician stopped to give her these skills and take the time with such a difficult, yet talented horse to help make the transition to the next level? Instead they've just gotten him rearing under saddle, telling the rider it isn't possible to teach him to piaffe. Is it because it's not easy work, or do they not have the skill set to teach that? Is it that they don't have the time or can't be bothered if it's not easy? She has in effect been given up on and told to sell her horse by many top trainers, and in the end, she's learned a valuable life lesson. That lesson, however, isn't that she was as good as they all touted her to be, since in the end when her horse couldn't perform, her role models and idols all gave up on her and him. The life lesson was about working hard and struggling, using her brain and thinking it through, and she now gets to enjoy the fruits of that labor. She also learned her idols were not who she thought.

### **Giving Riders A Chance**

As clinicians, it's our job to go beyond the traffic directing and score improving and focus on the actual teaching.

When I was growing up, in the program I was in, there were plenty of days when my own teacher would be so hard on me I left the barn in tears. I remember those days vividly, holding back the tears until I was out of the arena, on the trail cooling out, where no one could see me. I also remember clearly the next lesson or over the next week, being systematically built back up. My teacher had it down to an art and applied the rider pressure exactly where and when it was needed.

Far too often I hear of clinicians making riders cry or feel bad, as I'm sure they were also brought up in a similar environment, but they lack the understanding that they're not there the following week to build the riders back up again. Those trainers, as was I, were in a "system" with a regular instructor who knew how to bring you down and in turn bring you up as part of their

with no understanding of how to proceed past that point, but there is also a point at which you shouldn't advance without certain basic skills. Do clinicians and trainers really understand the line they toe in that regard, or is it one that just gets glazed over for more exciting movements and conversation pieces?

It always surprises me that riders of all levels don't seem to be given some of the most basic concepts in their training at clinics, considering the cost and expense as well as the usual prestige and stature of the clinician.

I remember saying to a few of the riders at my San Antonio clinic that they needed less education on how to find a sponsor or ask for money and way more education on how to sit the trot. Another one was, "Let's put your sports psychology sessions aside for a moment and teach you what dressage is."

The goal of dressage is not the show; the goal is the lightness. It seems very strange to me to tell any rider, but young ones in particular, to quit school, focus on riding, find a sponsor and become famous instead of just telling them to cross their stirrups





A piaffe isn't just a "cool and fun" thing to do, says Jeremy Steinberg, shown training Claire Seidl on TS Wicked. Clinicians should be teaching why it's relevant as well as how to train it. PHOTO COURTESY OF REBECCA ASHTON/THE HORSE MAGAZINE

process in creating a great rider. In two days it isn't possible to fill those shoes and make that swing, so we are far better off finding other ways of explaining ideas and concepts.

It does no good to make a rider cry or feel bad, embarrass them or frustrate them if we don't have the skills, time or empathy to bring them back to their feet. Being humbled is part of being around a horse, but so is being overjoyed by the simple successes of the struggle. Clinicians shouldn't forget that.

I'm the first person to tell people and the kids especially they are not and cannot all be winners. It isn't possible. Some of us lose, and some of us win. Some of us are good, and some of us are not. To some riders it comes naturally, and to others it doesn't. We're not all equals on levels of opportunity, finances, ability, time and so on, so comparing ourselves to others and thinking we all have an

“Since when did advising someone to drop out of school become the thing to do?”

equal shot is ridiculous.

But as trainers and clinicians it's our *job* to teach and work with the riders in a way that gives them as many chances and as much information as possible. We have to teach them like it is possible and make every effort to get them to the next level of riding and understanding, regardless of background or ability and even more so, regardless of checkbook, never mocking or humiliating them along the way.

One of the amateur riders in the audience a few weekends ago told me she is just a beginner but wanted to

ride in my next clinic because I was kind. I laughed and said, "You must not get out much." She said she's attended a lot of clinics in the last few years and has been too scared to ride with anyone because they were so mean to the students and/or horses. That's sad. Too often I hear from riders, young and old, they didn't like riding with so-and-so because they were mean to them or would never ride with so-and-so, because they made someone cry.

I've heard one clinician comment how much she doesn't actually like teaching and only does it for the



money. Another who is often teaching kids says she doesn't even like kids. I know of an Olympian who, if you're sitting beside her listening to her teach, she'll actually bad mouth the student in the arena to the student sitting beside her, like you're being let in to some on the down-low conversation about the horse and rider in the arena, like they're not even there. Does that student listening to the negative comments not think the same happens to her when she's in the arena riding?

A German friend of mine often makes the comment about how miserable it is for him to teach adult amateurs, but he has to make a living, so he puts up with it. I know there are many jobs out there that people have and don't like, but it's different to dislike a corporation you work for because of a disagreement in practice, policy or standard, versus disliking your clientele and saying so—or worse, thinking they don't realize you say it or think it. Somewhere along the line, if you don't like what you're doing, those around you will notice. When they do and find other help down the road, you can't be upset with them for doing so.

I heard another youngish rider tell me a few weeks ago that she was told to drop out of school to pursue dressage, and if she did, she'd be the next Charlotte Dujardin; he could make that happen for her. All she had to do was just focus on riding, set her "priorities" right and put her trust in said trainer. That's a tall order, one that seems like a fairy tale. Who buys into that?

How can someone claim to produce something they have 1) never produced before; and 2) since said trainer is not the trainer of Charlotte Dujardin, how is it possible to know this particular rider, who the trainer has only seen ride a few times, know their skill set, work ethic, talent and capabilities? Seems a little far fetched to me.

My first question to that rider was to ask what her parents did for a living. Were they positioned to be able to subsidize a riding career for their daughter? The answer was of

course yes. Was it that the trainer saw the dollar signs and wanted to take every chance he could to get his hands on the bankroll of the parents, in commissions or training? Or was it that the trainer genuinely saw talent and wanted to be a part of something greater than himself? Not too hard to imagine, but sad to think.

I'd be far more impressed if this

trainer talked less about creating the next Charlotte Dujardin and more about creating good human beings. Why do so many trainers look at children as bankrolls to their future, and since when did advising someone to drop out of school become the thing to do? What kind of children are we trying to raise? These are not good educators.

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## Respect—And Hold Accountable

Everyone's capacity to learn is different. We clinicians need to tailor fit each and every training session to an individual horse and rider combination and learning style.

Amateurs in particular need a special involvement. The typical amateur has taken up riding later in life and has other things that take time and energy away from the horses. They have years of life that take a toll on the body and years of experience that also make them smart.

Why is it that riding comes so naturally to young people and is so difficult for older ones? Think about trying to learn a musical instrument at 40 versus 12 or deciding at 55 to become a marathon runner when you are slightly overweight or have never been super fit. It's completely possible to do, but it takes a different approach than it would to train a high school kid to run the same marathon.

Can you teach an amateur the same as a high school kid? Absolutely not. But should you be giving them the same dedication and information? Without a doubt.

A lot of the amateurs are extremely smart people away from the equine industry. They help support the dressage community, appreciate the art, bring children into the sport, and overall bring some realism into what is sometimes a very unreal and utopian lifestyle. We need to teach them with the same level of respect they give us as the instructors. It makes absolutely no sense to make fun of, put down, shame or humiliate not just the hand that feeds us, but the people who are the patrons to the art we love.

I've known many amateur riders who are in it just to show, and I understand that is not my job to judge. They buy horse after horse to show, enjoy the process, have fun and have earned the right to do so, without judgment from those around them, but they also need to be held to the same standard as everyone else when they're in the show ring regardless of financial solvency.

I've also known many parents who are willing to bank roll their child with one goal in mind: to see the child on the medal podium at the Olympics. Farms are bought for them, horses acquired

# “Why not call a spade a spade and work with what we have?”

and sold. The teachers and judges of those elite few should be held even more accountable for the results they produce with the horse flesh, time, money and opportunity they are given. Every respective situation requires help from the coach, clinician, trainer or teacher, and it's our responsibility to educate.

I remember one symposium I did with USDF and the other national coaches a few years ago when we were told to screen and select the riders for the symposium that we were comfortable working with, so it would make our pipeline and system look good instead of picking any problem horses that wouldn't show well in front of the audience. Funny that in these symposiums we were supposed to be teaching to the masses and the audience as *educators* far more than the riders, but we weren't supposed to show anything difficult or that “needed” training as it would make us look bad.

It was basically just sound bites of what good training would be but nothing that was real world. During that symposium I remember seeing one young horse with a very bad, extremely lateral walk, and I said to the other presenters that we should make a comment on the walk and what we would do to address it. The microphone was taken away from me (and not given back for the rest of the presentation), and in my ear was whispered, “What if the trainer doesn't know, or hasn't told the owner of the horse how bad the walk is?”

They went on to say that if we said something and the owner then took the horse away from the rider because they either didn't know or the trainer wasn't straightforward with them we'd be in a lot of trouble with the rider if they lost their sponsorship over it.

Strange again, since our job was to

educate and definitely telling in the moment as to where the priorities were placed. What if the owner was an amateur rider lending her horse to the trainer, and the owner had no idea, and the trainer never brought it up? What if the trainer had no idea the horse had a bad walk, and no one has told them? In any of these scenarios, who then is the bad guy? Is it us for not informing our amateur owner, owners in general or rider/trainer, or is it the rider/trainer on the horse? Why not call a spade a spade and work with what we have?

I understand that there are politics in horses, but do politics and ego need to play such a role in education?

We need to hold ourselves as clinicians to a high standard. The work we do is reflected not only in the results our students produce at shows but also in their education and knowledge. Your students are your best and biggest advertisement.

My teacher used to always say, “You can see the work of the trainer in the seat of the student.” ☉



COURTESY FRASER PHOTO

## JEREMY STEINBERG

Jeremy Steinberg was the U.S. Equestrian Federation Youth Coach from 2010-2014. He's a well-known rider, trainer and competitor based out of Del Mar, Calif. He is one of four

clinicians who works with the U.S. Dressage Federation in its Platinum Performance/USDF junior and young rider clinic series. He worked with long-time friend and mentor Dietrich von Hopffgarten extensively until his passing in 2004. Jeremy has trained and shown through the Grand Prix level. He now runs a small “boutique”-type training business and travels the country giving clinics. More information can be found at [steinbergdressage.com](http://steinbergdressage.com).