



Between Rounds With JEREMY STEINBERG

THE NO BS TRAINER

If amateurs are really the lifeblood of the sport, our columnist believes we need to do a better job of respecting them and their aspirations.

Months ago I had a conversation with an amateur client and friend. She'd just come back from watching one of those big production clinics, where the horses and riders are chosen ahead of time, are students or friends of the instructor, and the whole thing ends up being more of a showcase of the instructor and students than an educational event. She was discouraged that she didn't get any answers to the training questions that she faces on a daily basis.

Over the years, my friend has heard my stories of clinics and symposiums and my frustration with the lack of teaching at them. At one in particular, the other clinicians wanted to see the horses the day before so they could figure out what to work on and what to avoid.

"We don't want to do anything with an audience that the horse will misbehave over or be difficult," they said. "We only want to work on the good stuff."

She'd heard my story of being told not to talk about a horse's lateral walk because of the fear that the rider hadn't fully disclosed the issue with the owner, and if we ended up being to blame for that rider losing the ride on the horse it would be a big deal. Instead of recognizing the elephant in the room, we stood there like morons all to save face for the rider.

At one clinic I was told by a judge she would give the horse 9s on his pirouettes and would encourage anyone

to find fault in them, but she regularly gave that horse no more than 7s in competition for years.

So my friend had this idea to put on a "no BS" clinic that would be completely amateur based. There would be real, hard-to-ride horses, difficult situations, and all the normal, day-to-day challenges we have when training.

She wanted real talk about how to sit more comfortably when your hips hurt, what to do when the horse is heavy and your hands can't take it, and how to find motivation outside the show arena since showing seems to be less of a priority for the average rider.

Her vision was to have a symposium where the teachers didn't edit their words based on what would make the audience happy. They would teach the amateur how to train a horse, not how to improve scores, and they wouldn't humor or humiliate anyone. The horses and riders would be normal, average or difficult, and the instructor wouldn't get to work with the horses the day before.

My friend's frustration isn't unusual. I hear the same from many people, that masterclass instructional weekends with medal-winning equestriennes leave them feeling broke because of the cost and not any better informed. I can't really tell who those clinics are geared toward. The normal person can't afford to watch; the normal rider will never get selected. The normal horse will never be present,

and if they are, they aren't usually treated well. If only the top ride, top watch and top horses show up, how much education is that providing the general public?

Up-and-coming riders always want to ride in these clinics because they want to be seen on their horses and promote themselves to the theoretical horde of amateurs coming to watch. So again I ask: Who are these clinics, symposiums and masterclasses designed for? If the person running the experience is banking on enough income from the average rider, wouldn't it be better and in their own interests to service the needs of the average amateur's education? Why couldn't they run a class where someone like Charlotte Dujardin teaches people how to get their horse on the bit, and they aren't allowed to say one snarky comment? No insults or frustration allowed. It may seem funny because they have an accent and a medal, but in the end an insult is an insult and is not part of the educational process for rider or auditor.

I understand why you won't get Isabell Werth to fly halfway across the world to teach people how to post, but wouldn't it be interesting to see people of that caliber work with the average horse and rider and improve them? Could they even be empathetic to the plight of the average rider?

WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR ME?

The truth is, the riding community doesn't care about the adult amateur. Not unless that particular amateur can do something to better that person's career, or they're the parent of a talented young rider.

With the ongoing emphasis on creating teams and team riders, the instruction is more and more horse show based with "how to improve your test score" clinics, taught by riders who are trying to secure a team berth or cool new horse and look at teaching as a means to an end.

I've often heard the comment, "Kick your horse instead of using the whip, since you can't use a whip in your test." This seems silly when you want to train the horse, not just improve the test scores or learn ringcraft tricks. How many of your hours in the saddle will be spent in the show arena and how many at home? How many of us are realistically trying to get an 80% at a show, and how many of us are riding to improve ourselves and horses? And are these things as compatible as we're led to believe they are?

Some clinicians can only berate their students because



Columnist Jeremy Steinberg questions: If I can borrow or buy a horse and get my medals, can the medal actually vouch for me as a trainer?
LISA SLADE PHOTO

they lack empathy, and some can't be bothered to teach diagonals or canter leads because they're far too good for that. There are trainers who claim they can help you achieve your medals and show goals by finding you horses to buy that are far too difficult or young to be appropriate but turn out to be a perfect fit for themselves.

I see judges at clinics telling riders how to get 9s, but at shows the riders can't seem to manage more than 6s from the same judges who told them weeks earlier their scores would be higher if they only did it this particular way. I hear people telling students just what they want to hear so they come back for more lessons, but strangely they never seem to get better. Or they give them just enough information to need to come back instead of enough information to make them independent.

I hear time and time again, "Your horse isn't good enough; buy something better," or I see more expensive horses with lesser riders who are beating the riders with the lesser horses, which happens on the amateur and professional level.

I see wealthy riders who ride multiple horses a day with unlimited time to train and compete, and they show under the "amateur flag," which seems unfair to the true amateur with a full-time job. I could go on and on, but I think every one of you reading this has a similar story. In the end, the true amateur is being phased out, and no one really seems to care. Or do they?

I've seen countless amateur owners who want to support their trainer and be part of something "bigger" get turned off the sport when that trainer can't produce the horse as promised. Or they're discouraged by the lack of opportunities beyond a new award or ribbon they can get. There are amateurs with talented children who get humored with lessons and attention so the trainer can keep working with the kid in hopes the kid turns out to be great. I have many European friends who use the term "housewife rider," not understanding how offensive that is, basically invalidating either the fact that the rider runs a household as a full-time job and/or how hard it is to start riding later in life when your body doesn't want to cooperate at the same level as a younger rider's will.

MEDAL MANIA

I look around at young trainers, accomplished trainers, team riders, judges, and I see a trend. Everyone wants more than they currently have, and I don't blame them. I too want more. Average riders want to be better; trainers want to improve and have better horses; judges want to

judge higher levels at bigger shows and so on. No normal rider thinks the last show they did was the crown of their career; they want more. No judge judges their local horse show and says, "Wow, I've made it. I can now retire."

I don't think anyone gets up in the morning and thinks, "I am perfectly content never being any better than this. I am happy to ride, judge or train training level the rest of my life." That said however, the horse industry insidiously breeds the mentality that you have to produce certain results, or no one takes you seriously. Look at the U.S. Dressage Federation medal program and the number of people who make that their goal. "Buy a horse, train a horse, borrow a horse, steal a horse, by whatever means necessary I need to get my medals so people take me seriously as a professional." But to what end? If I can borrow or buy a horse and get my medals, can the medal actually vouch for me as a trainer? Why do amateurs insist that they just get one more score for their medals regardless of the condition of their test or horse?

I had one student tell me they didn't care that they couldn't piaffe or do one-tempi changes, but they were going to start showing Grand Prix so they could get their gold medal. As Marcellus says in "Hamlet," "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Are the amateurs really pushing to get a medal because "they" want the medal, or have they been encouraged by their trainers because of a system that gives credence to a trainer with many medal-winning students?

I don't have any of my USDF medals. When I was a teenager I realized my friends were getting gold medals on borrowed horses they didn't train so they could say they had it. I have far too much respect and love for training to think getting a medal is any reflection on anyone's ability or talent. In the end it seems to only benefit the trainer, who can say, "I have students with these medals." That said, I totally understand and respect the rider who has brought their horse up the levels and achieved these goals, and kudos to them. I love it.

I only wish the system gave more recognition to training than showing. There's a trend to do what it takes to either equine or human to climb the ladder of stardom in the horse business. Some consider these people as go-getters, while others think they're selfish. Ask yourself why one Olympics isn't good enough for some of our top riders. Maybe they want to be professional Olympians versus professional trainers, as I believe there is a huge difference between the two, but that is another column.

TEACHING VS. HUMORING

Why aren't we more focused on helping the amateur enjoy riding, learning and improvement? The system is pushing so hard for the amateur accolade that it's actually driving amateurs away from the sport because your average amateur can't keep up with the professional amateur.

A few years ago I had a cello teacher with whom I stopped working because of his continual push to get me to memorize my music, which took all the enjoyment out of playing. He wanted me to perform with his other group of students who did a monthly evening recital. As an "adult amateur" cello player, I just wanted to play for myself, and he couldn't relate to my goals. He wanted to show off his students, which was great for his younger students who might become professional musicians, but not for me. I wanted to be taken seriously as a student, but I'll never be a top musician.

Many amateur riders don't want to show. They don't like the stress; they don't like the pressure, and they don't like the expense. They just want to love their horses and

How many trainers out there want to teach and work with a rider who doesn't do anything to promote the trainer?"

learn to ride better. They want to be taken seriously as riders, but they know they won't be going to an Olympic Games. The problem then becomes how many trainers out there want to teach and work with a rider who doesn't do anything to promote the trainer?

If we believe that the goal of amateur riding is a medal or a score, we are going to lose them. When working with

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the USDF and U.S. Equestrian Federation, I heard over and over again that the amateur is the base of the industry, the foundation of the sport and the people we need to keep happy and involved. I do see USDF and local organizations offering clinics to amateurs; I also see trainers who revel in teaching people their diagonals, but these experiences and people are few and far between. If amateur U.S. dressage riders really are the foundation and base of our culture and support, why don't more of us help them improve, instead of using them as a means to an end?

Amateur riders make up the largest demographic in the industry, not just in dressage, but in all equestrian disciplines. We often say if there were no amateurs, there would be no professionals. So why do we tell amateurs they can be a part of something bigger, live vicariously through one of our top riders, if they only donate money to their cause, when in fact, that money would do more for the sport if it was spent on a lesson from someone who actually cares about them? When it goes to the federation it supports a group that, in turn, doesn't always give that same support back to the community that funds them. Amateurs are asked to donate money to support top riders, but then the top riders say they don't like teaching amateurs or clinics. Or they do teach amateurs but berate them for not being better or just humor them, take their money and run.

Our top riders often say they're too busy to teach a clinic at an amateur-friendly barn, yet they are happy to take those grants and donations that come, in part, from the amateur community.

Years ago I had a student who I was trying to hold back from Prix St. Georges because she couldn't do canter pirouettes well enough because she lacked control of her horse's bend and body, and the horse was too behind her leg. She took a weekend clinic from one of our Olympians, and the Olympic rider told her she was silly not to show PSG and that the pirouettes were only one score. She should come train with them, and they'd have her in the show arena in no time.

I asked the Olympian about it a few weeks later, and they told me

the rider would never be good enough to ride at that level proficiently, so why not just let them show and make them happy? I can't relate to that attitude. Why not take the amateur seriously enough to help them get better and set attainable goals instead? Just because you have to work harder to educate the less-than-top rider or less-than-top horse doesn't mean you shouldn't try.

One of the first questions an amateur rider should ask when taking a lesson from a new trainer should be: Why do you teach? If the answer is to make a living, that's not the right trainer for you. I make a living from teaching, but I chose to do what I love, and the living comes as a bonus. I teach because I love it, because it is my calling in life, and fortunately enough for me, it puts food on my table.

I'm not a coach, an instructor or eyes on the ground; I am a teacher. My job is to give information, unfiltered yet kind, and see my students improve. I'm not a traffic director. I give homework, ask questions and expect studying in return. I'm more than happy to answer questions and can talk theory with you until one of us drops from exhaustion. I can back up the training, both theoretical and applicable, with facts, physics, math and science as well as art, history and the kitchen sink, but by no means do I think I'm done with my own education. If I don't know the answer, I'm going to lose sleep over it, study and come back with ideas. I'm long winded and opinionated, but all for the love of teaching. I thrive on seeing people learn—young, old, good, bad or ugly. That said, my standards are high when it comes to watching and listening to other people teach, and I believe yours should be too.

A younger trainer told me about an Olympic rider who'd told her not to bother training the pony she was on and that he was a waste of time. The pony was problematic to say the least—hard to catch, jumpy and skittish, with

less than average gaits. The trainer's attitude was, "Why bother?" but the rider's attitude was, "It's what I have." Instead of talking through the horse's shortcomings and creating a plan to improve the pony, the idea of training the horse was scrapped. A better way of handling that scenario would have been to use this trainer's years of expertise to create a game

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plan to make the pony better. Even if there were extreme limitations, there is still room for improvement.

When a rider learns how to deal with a difficult horse, better the average horse, improve the untalented and train the ordinary, the talented horses become easy, and a new, thinking horse trainer is created. When you have the brainpower and skill set to train a less-than-average horse and problem solve, you learn to think, and a thinking rider is a good rider. This rider has in the last year or so gotten this pony doing flying changes and improved his gaits significantly, but not because of support or encouragement from her Olympic trainer. She got there because she couldn't give up because he's all she owns, and she wouldn't give up because she knows the process is important to her education.

What happened to the true teachers whose pride is based on the comprehension of the student, not the show results? If we professionals treated our horses the way we treat most amateurs, we'd have nothing left to ride. If we can't be bothered with the average, can't find joy in the process, and aren't willing to work through the difficult, no horses would ever get trained. That's what seems

to happen to the average adult amateur; they don't get trained.

Is there a greater purpose to dressage beyond showing? One question can start a journey of a lifetime, and we should be encouraging our amateur students to keep asking them. There are very few true teachers out there, which is why they aren't always easy to find, but when they are, they're respected by their lifelong students. 🐾

JEREMY STEINBERG

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