

► BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

JEREMY STEINBERG

Making My Mentor Proud

Our new columnist reflects on learning from mistakes and the impact a trainer can have on a career, a life and a sport.

As I travel around the country giving clinics, I run into people from different areas, different levels and all different backgrounds. When I think about the number of people my words affect from day to day, it's humbling and astounding.

I go to cold climates, hot ones, dry ones, wet ones, urban ones and rural ones. It doesn't seem to matter where I go; as the countryside changes, the people—and their passion and drive, their riding, the talks and dinners and friendships—remain the same.

These days, I always seem to run into someone who says "I knew you when...." Most of the stories go back to when I was a young rider. Some go back further, to stories of my mom and me riding together, and some are pointed at something I did wrong as a new and young trainer.

There are more of the latter than I like to recall. I've done some stupid things in my career, and I hope as I get older, the smarter decisions and the better judgment start to slowly outweigh the mistakes. All the good and the bad have shaped me into who I am today. I look back and wonder if I could possibly be the rider, trainer or human being I am without having made all those mistakes. That question is frequently on my mind, as is the one where I wonder if a different decision would have led to a different life. A life I love more than the one I have now? I don't think that would be possible.

Eva Salomon, who worked for the U.S. Equestrian Federation when I was hired on as the youth coach, asked the staff at dinner one night where we all saw ourselves in five years. I told her I saw myself doing the exact same thing I'm doing now:

teaching clinics, working, riding, always looking for that special bond with that next special horse, wanting to make one of the U.S. high performance teams.

I love my life. I love what I do. I never get up in the morning and think, "What a terrible job" or, "I wish I had it better." Sometimes there are days when working outside in the cold, teaching more lessons than my brain can compute, the heartache of horses and the overwhelming feeling of struggle do add up and slow me down, but it's never something that makes me think I'd be happier doing something else. I'd love to have an Olympic medal around my neck, but it's something that helps keep me going every day. It's something I strive for and hope that within the grand scheme of things, it gets worked into the life I'm already living.

Keeping His Lessons Alive

I received an email a few weeks ago from an old friend, Joan Yankis, who rode as an amateur at the same barn I did as a teenager, training with Dietrich von Hopffgarten.

I always looked up to Joan as she worked to fit riding into her life around a normal job, a husband, a very difficult horse and a very difficult trainer. She never had easy lessons. Dietrich was hard on her and her horse, but away from the barn and off the horse, there was an obvious mutual respect.

Although it had been years since I'd seen her or heard from her, Joan contacted me out of the blue to congratulate me on doing so well with the young riders this year. (I got quite a few of those this year as the success of the youth programs is starting to show some signs of development, which is fantastic, but not just my doing. There are many people involved, many of them long before I came around, who also need credit for their hard work and dedication. Their ripple effect on the pool of youth riders is a wave I am now able to surf.)

I love getting those emails, but Joan's really stood out, as it was short, heartfelt and extremely personal. She knows how much I miss Dietrich. She knows he's always on my mind, and his death is always heavy in my heart as I think it is for many of us who were close with



Trainer Dietrich von Hopffgarten (pictured) had a profound influence on the author. "All my actions are somehow positively tainted or affected by words he has spoken to me, or conduct I've seen him convey to riders and horses alike," said Jeremy Steinberg. "When you take a lesson from me, you are in some way or another taking a lesson from Dietrich." MARY CORNELIUS PHOTO

him. At the end of the letter, she said she knew how proud he would have been of me and how “it means a lot that I’ve continued his teachings and love of the horses.”

I’ve probably done more things that would have angered Dietrich or upset him than made him proud. He was my moral compass, scolding schoolteacher and overbearing, strong father figure all rolled into one. He was the first to call me when I’d lose my temper, and he had eyes and ears everywhere. He was the first to tell me I wasn’t dressed appropriately, and he always told me if I said something stupid, both of which he would never let me live down. He was never proud when I had my picture in a magazine because he could only ever see the broken left wrist he’d been yelling at me about.

I wondered, “Did I do that many dumb things, or was he just that mean and tough?” It might have been a mixture of both, but the facts lean way more toward the former than the latter. He had the respect and long-standing relationships with peers, friends and students. I was no exception. My respect for him always withstood his frustration with me, as I knew he was trying to guide me to become a better rider and an even better person.

Dietrich knew me and knew me well. He knew what to expect in the best of times and the worst. When I think deeper about whether or not he would be proud, I think he knew me well enough to know that the mistakes, dumb decisions and bad riding will continue to be both my downfall and best teacher. I rest assured that he would still be angry at the mistakes and bad decisions, and it would not surprise him to know that at close to 40, I am still making them. I know he would be expecting me to be making fewer of them, but he would still be there to guide or scold as needed. And so I realize that none of those mistakes would be letting him down, as each one I learn from I have him in my head helping pick up the pieces.

So when Joan said he would be proud, she wasn’t talking about the actions of my own riding life and career, she was talking about taking his words, his guidance, his knowledge

and his passion and passing it on to the people I interact with throughout the country.

Every time I take someone’s stirrups away in a lesson, or spend the 45 minutes on a 20-meter circle teaching a rider to get the horse on the bit, I remember Dietrich. Every time I tell someone to put his or her snaffle bridle on instead of the double, I remember Dietrich. When I work for weeks at a time on someone’s seat, I definitely remember Dietrich. Every time I see someone come in for a lesson wanting to work on higher-level movements, exercises or concepts than either that person or his or her horse is ready for, and we have to have a discussion on basics, theory and the art of dressage, I remember Dietrich. When I find myself lecturing one of my young riders on the art of dressage, or proper etiquette of horsemanship, I remember Dietrich. Every time I get frustrated or lose patience with a rider under my guidance because of their conduct on or off a horse, I remember Dietrich.

I know he would be proud of those things, and of that, I am also very proud. I carry him with me every step of every day. He has left an imprint on me that will last for a lifetime. All my actions are somehow positively affected by words he has spoken to me, or conduct I’ve seen him convey to riders and horses alike. When you take a lesson from me, you are in some way or another taking a lesson from Dietrich. When I tell you to tuck in your shirt, polish your boots, get your heels down, take a walk break, work harder, shut up about yourself and let your seat be your advertisement, you are getting a kick in the butt from Dietrich. Of this, I also know he would be proud.

Keep Learning

It’s an interesting concept, the one that says, “Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish, and he eats for a lifetime.” This was Dietrich’s prime directive. He insisted on “teaching” instead of coaching. In fact, coaching was a word he hated. He was a teacher through and through, from his university degree to his day-to-day life.

We should never lose sight of the

idea of teaching someone to “fish,” so to speak. Whether it’s in relation to young riders or amateurs and professionals, it’s imperative that we continue to educate those around us and also to continually self-educate. Make mistakes, but learn from them. Teach others and learn from them in return.

As in the movie *Pay It Forward*, the concept of one good deed leading to another and another years later also rings true with horses. Anything and everything we do now has an echo effect for years to come. As I travel around the country I see that effect happening both for good and bad. It’s not about doing good deeds for others and watching it come back, it’s about the way our words or actions move through generations. One comment now from a high-powered dressage professional could become “dressage law” five years from now.

It’s up to us to keep true to the art of dressage, to have standards of good horsemanship, to teach instead of coach, to continually learn as we go, so that in the end the echo the future generations hear is one we can all be proud of. 🍎

► Jeremy Steinberg



Jeremy Steinberg is the U.S. Equestrian Federation Youth Coach and a well-known rider, trainer and competitor based out of Del Mar, Calif. He’s

also a selector for the Developing Horse Program and one of five 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 many horses up through the Grand Prix level. He now runs a small “boutique”-type training business and travels the country giving clinics privately as well as for USEF and USDF. More information can be found at steinbergdressage.com.