

CENTRAL DRESSAGE

STEPHEN CLARKE TRAINING FORUM REPORT 12 JULY 2017 by Helen Triggs

Stephen Clarke, FEI international 5* judge, is known throughout the dressage world for the honesty and integrity of his judging. As a former Grand Prix rider and an elite trainer for many years, he shares his wealth of experience in a friendly and easy to understand way.

The assorted audience of riders (both professional and amateur), judges and trainers could all find something to take away in his critique and coaching of nine talented combinations ranging from a five-year-old young horse to two potential stars working at Grand Prix. This demo, superbly hosted by Matt Hicks and his team at Hurstbourne EC, had something for everyone.

STEPHEN'S SAYINGS:

Dressage has changed because of Carl and Charlotte. Things have changed in all the countries I visit because of them. Makes me proud to be British.

Anyone can copy Carl and Charlotte's way of riding. Even if they don't do it well, they won't do any harm.

Once you've produced the activity you can produce what (movement) you want.

Your job is to create a reaction and then give a reward (eg relax or stop asking).

[Pirouette] is the most difficult exercise there is, but the horse doesn't need to know that.

The golden rule with every exercise is that the horse accepts the collection first and then rides forward into the movement.

Start the collection **before** the exercise, then ride forward and uphill during it.

The horse needs to understand the deal. They yield to the leg, you give the rein.

More impulsion in the trot; more relaxation in the walk.

Give the horse little surprises; don't over prepare.

Watusi, ridden by Michael Eilberg (also Stephen's god son – who knew?!)

5yo mare by Woodlander Wavavoom.

Stephen commented on Watusi's completely natural way of going and her perfect regularity. He noticed that she was not ridden with a great deal of impulsion but that would develop later.

The elegant mare went forwards for herself and accepted Michael's elastic contact. She has a clear four beat walk which Stephen thought would eventually be a high earning extended walk but she still had the ability to collect. She was going in a natural frame, reacting to the aids and was not held into an outline.

Michael was able to demonstrate both in upwards and downwards transitions that the reward for the horse is the relaxation of the pressure when they have done as they are asked.

At this stage Stephen wants to see physical suppleness, with the horse able to lower his head and neck, still working from behind, and bend supply to each side. When the rider closes the hand, the horse must learn to take the weight back and come down a gear.

The horse was asked to make transitions between the paces, using the forwardness to create impulsion and then asking her to come back onto the hind leg and come down a gear. When the horse comes back and has accepted she has to sit on the hind leg, it can be rewarded with a give and retake of the reins.

When stretching, the horse needs to keep its balance and keep the same tempo. The back is encouraged to swing by the stretching so the whole body is being supplied.

Michael commented: "We've a long way to go. Her personality is quite strong so my training is trying to improve her without upsetting her. I have to make her willing and enjoy what she's doing."

Berlin, ridden by Dan Watson

6yo homebred by Breitling, competing at novice

Stephen worked on straightness with Berlin, using the leg yield to get the horse submissive to the bend and listening to the leg. When the horse gives to the inside leg, then give and take with inside rein. Horse must step into an accepting outside rein.

Dan was asked to stretch Berlin down more deeply on a circle to encourage him to move forward and more loosely through his body. When he relaxed Dan was asked to loosen the inside rein.

Trot-halt-trot and canter-walk-canter transitions followed with Stephen being meticulous about the poll remaining the highest point and the nose being in front of the vertical. At this stage Stephen was not so interested in square halts so much as the horse listening to the aids in the downward transition and an instant forward reaction out of the halt.

Berlin improved over the session, staying up in the frame more consistently and offering a deeper rounder stretch.

Ivor An Idea, ridden by Debby Lush

8yo gelding by Keystone Rhondeo competing at elementary

Debby's horse presented a different issue to the first two as he is a more laid back character who needed to improve his impulsion and engagement.

He worked in a long but natural frame and after working deep and round but still on the contact, began to work with more energy from behind. Stephen then used the 'transition game' to produce more electricity. When insisting on a forward reaction from the horse it's very important that the hand doesn't block.

The exercise used was to ride trot shoulder in with changes of gear within the exercise to take him by surprise. The rider should use the forwardness created to draw the hind leg under the body so when he comes back he is more balanced on his hind leg and the shoulder becomes lighter. The next exercise was shoulder in, then straighten and some medium trot, then back to shoulder in.

To further motivate Ivor, Stephen asked Debby to ride collected canter on the short side (balancing him onto his hind leg) and then surprise him by asking for gallop down the long side. Then Debbie was able to ride him up to the contact. "We ride the horse from the back to the front in everything we do."

Michael Eilberg riding Daltry

7yo gelding by Desert Moon competing at advanced medium

Riding the exercise shoulder in to half pass to shoulder in, the rider needs to sit on the inside seat bone in shoulder in and nothing changes going into the half pass. This is one of the most valuable exercises to get suppleness and engagement.

When riding flying changes, it's no different to applying aids from trot or walk. Before applying the aid the rider needs to know horse is submissive to the bend he is asking for. Riding counter canter, Stephen asked Michael to change the bend (which was to the outside) to straight and to the inside. Initially 'Roger' threw in a change as the bend was changed but by repeating he began to wait for the leg aid. "It's all about the future. If the horse can't do this then he'll be in trouble with the sequence changes."

Dylan Deutrom riding Matt Hicks' and Jackie Vaughan's El Zorro.

12 yo gelding by Amsterdam and potential young rider horse for Dylan

Stephen complimented Dylan on his seat, core strength and straightness. He has obviously been well taught by Matt as he rode very accurately throughout.

Zorro showed lovely active uphill trot work and maintained the same length of stride in the shoulder in as in collected trot. In the half pass, Stephen asked to prepare by collecting in the corner, putting into shoulder fore position and then into an uphill

forwards half pass. The golden rule for every exercise is that the horse accepts the collection then rides forward into the movement.

In the canter, Stephen wanted Dylan to exaggerate the collection in the corner and then ride forward – make this a habit.

Before riding a change in the psg canter zig zag, collect in corner, shoulder fore positioning, half pass, forward into change, half pass and collect at track. Another exercise is to half pass from the centre to the track, collect in counter canter, then forward before the change.

When the horses got excited in the sequence changes, Stephen told the rider to forget the numbers and ride a correction exercise. Go large in canter. Ask for collection, when horse accepts it and is light and easy, go forwards. When this is established, ride the sequence changes.

To prepare for canter pirouettes: on 20m circle go from collected canter to pirouette canter – a couple of steps on the spot. Sit the horse down and don't hold at the front. Don't stay in it too long. Ride quarter pirouettes – sit, turn and go. Without preparation, pirouettes are an accident waiting to happen.

Paul Friday riding his own and Christine Trendell's Roman Noir Himself

12yo gelding by Romanov, competing at PSG.

Stephen praised the horse's active, cadenced expressive trot and remarked that the tempo of the trot should be the same in collected and extended trot and lateral work. The horse's trot is a little 'passagey' but as he kept the tempo in medium trot, Stephen said it was a natural pace not manufactured.

It is very important that the rider has influence over the length of steps, speed and rhythm. Paul rode a small circle, asking for some collection, then quicker, then back, then into shoulder-in on the long side again asking for collection and then some quicker steps. Again in the half pass the horse is asked to go quicker then back. Stephen asked for passage on a circle, then across the diagonal at medium or extended keeping uphill and balanced, then into a circle and asking for a topline stretch with the rider rising.

Although the horse had confident sequence changes, they swung from behind. The exercise was to take the counting out of it and go round the school and to go shoulder fore before and during the change and stay in shoulder fore after the change.

Dan Watson riding his own and Barbie Marceau's Butterfly

9yo by Breitling and full sister to Berlin

Stephen asked Dan to ride the mare “uphill with a look of freedom when you dare” and counselled judges that if they ‘poke’ at horses who are short in the neck, then riders will let it out too much,

Stephen said he normally trains piaffe before passage – the legs should lift to the same height in each movement but the passage has a moment of suspension.

Again Stephen asked for shoulder fore before the half pass – “in training you can afford not to go into the half pass until the horse accepts the shoulder fore”. Again he emphasised the importance of collecting before the exercise so that the horse can be ridden forward and uphill during it.

Stephen worked with Dan on producing more engagement and self-carriage from behind so the horse could put his neck out.

In the canter pirouettes, Stephen said it was about balance and fluency and, for high scoring points, collection was essential and a certain degree of risk.

Matt Hicks riding his own and Anny Bachrach’s Excalibur

“The higher the level, the more important the basics are and to look after the mental and physical wellbeing of grand prix horses you must spend time making sure the basic stuff is correct and the horse is relaxed and supple every time you ride.”

He recommended canter-trot-canter transitions as they encourage the horse to work over its back – the transition is worth 10 marks in the grand prix test. The reason is because it demonstrates if the horse is absolutely on the aids. The trick is to have a good collected canter and all you do is to stop the canter rhythm (with seat) and close the hand.

Stephen asked Matt to show some piaffe. To get a good piaffe, the horse has to understand the reaction from the leg. Ride the collected walk and ‘disturb’ the walk by asking for an instant reaction from the hindlegs . Relax and reward as soon as they react. A really classical piaffe shows no effort.

To improve the passage, Stephen asked Matt to do a ‘power’ trot on a big circle and not to try to manufacture the passage, but just to ask for a slower motion. Ride forward in between to look after the impulsion.

“The tricky thing is putting the piaffe and passage together. The main thing is only think about the reaction [to the riders’ aids]. The main fault is the horse falling behind the rider’s leg. The horse needs to be sharp going in and then relaxed when in the piaffe.”

The exercise Stephen asked Matt for was: passage on long side, sharp turn across school and on quarter line ask for half steps, piaffe on the spot for a few steps then half-steps out of it. As Excalibur repeated the exercise, he got better and better. In

the end, Stephen said the half steps phase becomes smaller and practically invisible.

In the grand prix canter zig zag, Stephen used shoulder fore positioning before the half pass as a way to develop the impulsion and sideways movement. "The problem with the zig zag is the riders needs to practise it a lot – the horses don't!"

Matt Frost riding his own, Adam Kemp and Dedi Leech's Don Rosso

12 yo gelding by Dr Doolittle

Matt explained that Rosso broke his pedal bone and spent eight months on box rest. He has now done a few grand prix tests. He is a loose horse so struggling with piaffe – if he lowers his hind quarters he loses activity or he if he is active he goes croup high.

Stephen advised Matt not to stretch that much – only after shorts periods of high impact – as the horse would love to go on its' forehand.

Rosso showed straight ground-covering changes – Stephen said they would need more engagement for a 10.

Rosso likes to make the pirouettes too small so Stephen asked Matt to vary their size so improve the balance and rhythm and to take care there was enough clear bending.

Stephen again emphasised the importance of the horse yielding to the inside leg and that when he does he should be instantly rewarded by giving the inside rein.

He advocated the rider 'changing their mind' when doing exercises. For example when doing shoulder in, if the horse blocks, then change to half pass.

On extended trot "only travel as much forwards as can keep horse on hind leg". Exercise: in trot, shoulder in on track, straighten and then go to medium/extended and come back in shoulder in before the horse loses balance, If he loses balance do fewer extended strides so horse builds his confidence.

If you have a big walk, don't over collect. In collected walk you need to feel you can canter or piaffe immediately.

When learning piaffe the point of doing just a few steps is that he'll offer more in the end rather than staying in it and struggling,

Matt was asked to ride passage, collected trot and then back into passage. To train in forward thinking, only stay in passage for a few steps then sharply forwards. Rosso showed improved transitions after this exercise,

Stephen's advice to Matt was to take his time to allow this talented horse to build up his strength.