

CENTRAL DRESSAGE - STEPHEN CLARKE FORUM 2018

This was the third Central Dressage forum presented by Stephen Clarke, former grand prix rider and one of the most senior dressage judges in the world. He was President of the Ground Jury at the London Olympics and is FEI Dressage Judge General.

He gives clinics and demonstrations all around the world so it was a privilege to be treated to his words of wisdom and comments on 10 very talented horse/rider combinations.

The quality of the horsepower on display was quite exceptional. We were grateful to these riders (and owners) for putting themselves under scrutiny and all showed significant improvement after their session.

Thanks to Hicks Equestrian for the use of their lovely facilities.

STEPHEN'S WORDS OF WISDOM

Look for the moment when you can do nothing. It's one of the most difficult things to do, to do nothing.

The walk must be relaxed with activity. The walk is always a giveaway as to what's going on the horse's mind. There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

The horse should be active enough so that you don't need to use your leg and connected enough you don't need to use the rein.

I think you can train a horse to the limit of its conformation and temperament.

When you start a young horse you should have it in mind it's going to be a grand prix horse.

Take care of the basic reactions at the beginning. If the horse is behind the leg, leaning on the contact, stiff to one side, there's a limit to what you can achieve.

Aim to produce reactions you can reward the horse for.

When Totilas was warming up he dribbled around in trot like a pony. As the impulsion developed, the magic happened,

Straightening is one of the few things you do from the front to the back. Straightening the canter is not possible without the leg yield and shoulder-in.

Refuse to look after the horse – make him look after himself (in transitions)

Young horse /novice

Nathan Aston riding Matt Hicks, Matthew Metcalfe and Sarah Warry's ID, 5yo, by First Heinrich.

Stephen commented that he was the type to do the job and he is naturally athletic. The walk was clear, regular four-beat rhythm.

In the trot, he was absolutely regular, the correct tempo and natural elasticity. At the moment he doesn't know how to carry himself and his hind legs are out behind.

The first thing is to have control – can develop more self-carriage later on.

The canter was not perfectly in balance but quite straight and with a lot of 'air time'.

Stephen asked Nathan to work on transitions – he wanted a sharper reaction and for Nathan to relax once it had happened. The goal is not having to push. Submission to bend is all about how the horse reacts to the rider's inside leg.

Stephen asked Nathan to stretch the horse's neck down but only when the horse was in front of the leg. He must follow the rein down and forward. This is a gradual process of working to remove any limit to the horse's relaxation in the back

Question: How worried are you about the restlessness in the mouth?

Stephen's answer: I could see it especially on the right rein. The horse was still a little tense and supporting itself on the rein and opening the mouth. This is a symptom and the rider must not fiddle with the rein. The thing to do is work on the basics of getting a good enough reaction in the transition then the tongue will be fine.

Question: What do you do about spooking?

Keep forwards. Shoulder-in is the best tool we have, useful for creating submission to the bend so the horse gives itself up to the rider. Fatal mistake is to turn away.

Novice/elementary

Elder Klatzko on 6yo Dior, a rescue horse of unknown breeding (but very talented).

Stephen commented he could be better in the contact but that will come with thoroughness and collection. He is built uphill and has the ability to increase and lengthen without increasing tempo.

When stretching over top line horse should not go long and flat – stretch inch by inch – and watch for muscles rippling over the back. Keep the contact.

In the leg yield, Stephen asked Elder to keep him more up to the bridle. Neck stays in place with poll highest point. Tiny bit of flexion and more influence on the hind leg

Canter to walk transitions on a circle – the neck must stay in one place and the horse needed to react quicker to upward transition aid. Moving him forward and

back, when he sits on the hind legs he gets a reward with the give and retake of the reins. Show him what you want and then say 'you do it for yourself'.

Stephen asked Elder to go counter canter and even though Dior has started flying changes he didn't want her to ask for them but to gradually change the bend to the inside and make his rib cage submissive. It's worth spending the time demonstrating you can change the positioning of the horse's body without him anticipating a flying change.

Medium/advanced medium

Abi Hutton riding her own and Charlie Hutton's Suspension Giraldo, a seven-year-old Rousseau x Flemmingh gelding.

Stephen asked Abi to 'play the transitions game'. Trot – canter – trot. Very valuable – all about instant reaction without any alteration of balance and rhythm, Canter to trot one of most difficult transitions to ride – when horse wants to trot, stop riding the movement and wait. Stephen commented there were no tight places in 'Arty's' body.

It is a good thing to do lateral work rising as horse has to be genuinely off the leg. "You could set your watch by this horse's trot – the length of the steps does not change".

The shoulder-in should be good enough so you can release the inside rein and nothing happens. Play with shoulder-in to half pass to shoulder-in.

Medium/advanced medium

Samantha Thurman-Baker riding Carolyn Smith's seven-year-old Storm (Spielberg x Aduala)

Storm was very spooky and curling back in his neck due to tension. Stephen insisted that he should stay up in poll, to a forward contact. Don't compromise. Poll stays forward. Correct from leg.

Storm was put on a 20m circle, straight with no bending. Storm was using the bend to escape.

Sam was asked to ride the whole diagonal in leg yield – horse has to give into the leg.

Be careful not to go too fast. Riders instinctively feel horse is not in front of the leg. Instead slow down to relax horse and it'll find its natural rhythm.

With a shy nervous horse its security comes from positive riding not pandering to his spooking. Stephen advised not to stretch a tense horse until the end of the session.

Sam rode medium to collected canter using the give and retake of the rein to prove the horse was in balance. It's the rider's job to get a good canter up to the bridle, signal for collection is to sit up and wait and then ride forward again.

Medium/advanced medium

Dan Watson riding his own and Craig Messenger's seven-year-old Aster Berlin (Breitling x Dimaggio)

If a half halt doesn't work, the next step is a transition.

Berlin was trotted onto the diagonal before going into the leg yield - helps to encourage forward thinking in the leg yield. Leg yielding is how the horse learns to give into the leg which produces submission to the bend.

In shoulder-in, Stephen asked for gear changes within the movement. This is a gymnastic exercise to encourage the hind leg to step under and to lighten the shoulder.

Dan rode travers – nose should be parallel to wall with rest of horse wrapped round inside leg. Ride straight onto diagonal and then into travers. Stephen pointed out that riders need to sit on inside seat bone.

Stephen got Dan to ride half pass, collect, and then into shoulder fore.

As Berlin was anticipating the change, he was ridden in counter canter, changing to positioning from bent to the inside, to straight, to over following leg. When he could do this in a soft and relaxed manner, he was allowed to change.

Advanced

Charlie Hutton Nicola Hulland's, seven-year-old RDC Google (Zambuka x Dayano)

Google has a natural passage and Stephen said to be careful the trot has activity rather than passage feeling. "No muddy water between trot and passage."

Stephen mixed up the movements – forward and back in shoulder-in, travers, back to shoulder-in, medium on the short diagonal.

In piaffe, Stephen wanted fewer steps and a quicker reaction into it. Needed less weight on the front legs and more bounce in the hind legs. When Charlie got an instant reaction there was no disturbance of the balance.

PSG/Inter I

Paul Friday riding Sarah Overson's nine-year-old Hawtins Horatio (Hotline x Weltmeyer).

Paul explained that Horatio can get tense in unknown surroundings and wanted help with his right to left change.

Stephen helped Paul make him collect more and then ride forward into the change. Like the others, they did the counter canter exercise, changing the bend, and going on and back.

"If he gets a hair's breath away from you, the change isn't going to happen."

When Horatio is tempted to hollow, put him in shoulder-in. Don't sail through corners, collect before the half pass.

Dan Watson riding Ben Delamare and Mark Pollock's 10-year-old Disney Fantasy by Dimaggio.

The mare is one-sided, losing the right side and pushing onto left. Stephen said that her mechanics are very nice but she's used to falling off her hind legs from canter to trot. She needs a secure outside rein and to be ridden in shoulder-fore. Right rein says don't bend.

The mare was very forward and Stephen emphasised the need for her to spring not run. Stop her in her tracks then immediately let go. She is strong because she is weak and once muscled up she will be able to carry herself.

Grand Prix

Joanna Thurman-Baker riding 15-year old Highcliffe Apollo (Der Lenz x Laptop)

In normal canter Apollo looks croup high but he has an amazing ability to sit.

Remember extra collection before the half pass. Collect and then forwards into change.

Energise the passage by riding medium trot in between. Passage/Piaffe transitions need to be really in front of the leg. Travel in the piaffe but keep him active.

In pirouettes, they can only be as small as the degree of collection allows. When horse is in pirouette it's actually four-beat but must look like a proper canter

Grand Prix

Tamsin Vaughan riding Casse-Cou by Carpaccio

Tamsin was the only amateur rider in the forum and is a former GB young rider.

'Cash' has a tendency to get strong and drop his poll and his favourite movement is passage (so Stephen didn't let him do it until the end).

Tamsin was asked to put the poll higher with the snaffle to make sure she can control the poll.

"Ride like he's never done it before – don't take anything for granted. Trust him when he comes up (into the bridle) and give him a forward hand. Collect and let go."