

**CENTRAL DRESSAGE TRAINING FORUM WITH STEPHEN CLARKE
AT HURSTBOURNE EC ON 28 AUGUST 2023
REPORT BY HELEN TRIGGS**

Stephen's visit to Hurstbourne has become a must-attend event for many riders, judges and trainers who admire his clarity of explanation and training techniques with the horse's welfare in mind.

Stephen started the day by saying he felt dressage in Britain was in a very good place with everyone trying to get better and showing the rest of the world how dressage horses should be produced.

Davina B ridden by Sonnar Murray-Brown



4-year-old Mare by (De Beau x Validation) owned by Sorrel Warwick

“When I look at a 4-year-old in my mind I’m thinking will it be a GP horse – even with a good percentage of capability it will only make it if the training is clear and thorough from the beginning.”

For Stephen the basics mean a ‘reaction’ – is the horse in front of the aids and accepting an elastic contact. “Transitions are the name of the game – in GP the whole test is about transitions within the pace and from one pace to another.”

Collection is the engagement of the hindlegs so the horse can come up through the shoulder with freedom and mobility. It takes a lot of training to gain the muscular strength to do this.

There is no such thing as a straight horse, every horse has a stiff side. Through training, although never 100% equal, it can appear to be straight.

“Horses are complicated creatures – we can make them more complicated.”

Stephen was happy with Devina’s walk which showed good rhythm and absolutely pure gait. Sonnar was praised for sitting so well. “It’s only possible to train a horse correctly if the rider sits well and has core strength to be able to influence the way of going. Core strength should be used momentarily to engage the hind leg. Rider should be able to absorb the movement and not sit against it. Sit independently in the saddle and relax when you have got what you asked for.

“The relaxation of the rider when the horse is going in the right way is a way of rewarding the horse.”

In trot, Stephen looks for crystal clear steps, regular rhythm, suppleness and stepping in front of the aids into a soft elastic contact.

Horses hindlegs need to follow front legs on curves, if hind legs stepping out on circle is sign of lack of suppleness to the bend.

Walk/trot transitions are an opportunity for horses to take the weight behind and for rider to ask for a reaction.

Stephen commended Devina’s natural reaction to go forward. The canter has clear rhythm and natural airtime.

When cantering, rider looks after the engine and the balance. When stops riding the canter rhythm horse learns trot is being requested. At this stage Stephen asked for some changes within the pace – just small amounts of lengthening and horse must maintain its balance. Important horse returns to normal trot in balance. Looking for bigger steps and more ground cover, not faster.

Sonnar said that Devina can get quite goey in the canter. Stephen asked for some forward steps then use half halts to teach her to come back to working pace in a relaxed way.

Stephen asked Sonnar to let Devina relax and take the neck down and forwards so back lifts under his seat. Important that reins are not left ‘empty’, and that horse steps through to contact.

Important to train the different walks – medium walk should be exactly same rhythm and tempo as collected walk.

Exercise:

Leg yield 5 metres in from track back to side.

Take time, keep horse straight and then go forwards and sideways. Keep the frame straight. Horse learns to be submissive to inside leg. No bending. Slight flexion away from direction of movement. Keep same trot.

Elementary/medium: Wytiske ridden by Gracie Catling



8-year-old Friesian mare owned by Fraithwen Friesians, been with Gracie for three weeks.

Stephen's warm-up checklist:

- Does she accept the rein contact?
- Does she react the way you want her to?
- Can you sit how you want to without shoving or restricting the front?

Stephen commented on Wytiske's natural cadence and ability to bend her joints. Asked Gracie to make her take more rein and keep her head up a little more, push hands forward to encourage her to keep a more open frame.

Canter is active so no need to push. Give both reins at times to show the balance, when retake the reins don't shorten them too much.

Walk-canter-walk transitions: when committed to canter, horse has to go even if not pretty. It's the rider's job to activate the horse and then leave it alone.

In the leg yield it's important to control the forward movement, don't allow the trot to change. Need reaction from inside leg.

Exercise: trot leg yield to track then medium trot

Make sure you finish the leg yield on the track before going medium then come back extra collected before going forward round the corner. Important to think about return transition - you can get a few more marks if done well,

When introducing counter-canter, keep horse balanced, straight and carrying herself. Make shallow loops on the long side. Be careful not to compensate by having horse tight in neck.

Stephen asked Gracie to ride with one hand and a better frame was established. He recommended lateral work to make the hind legs do more when horse naturally does more with front legs.

Advanced medium: Oliver Gould and Rockwood Virtue



11-year-old Westphalian by Vitalis, owned by Amanda Towle

Virtue has a nice clear four-beat walk. In transitions to trot Stephen looking for a fluency and relaxation and weight on hind leg.

Exercise: trot-halt-trot

Keep straight, engage the hindleg into halt then immobility. Keep it simple. Stop. Stand. Then rider does nothing

Exercise: Trot-canter-trot

Every transition needs to be the same and needs to be instant

Exercise: shoulder-in/travers/shoulder-in

Shoulder-in angle needs to be about 30 degrees, horse on three tracks, uniform bend from nose to tail. Rider should feel if they release the inside rein nothing would happen

Travers has little more angle than shoulder-in. Trot itself doesn't change – no faster or slower.

Exercise: trot onto centre line, shoulder-in to half pass

Hind legs stay on centre line in shoulder-in. Shows rider's control over the hindquarters.

Exercise: canter-walk-canter

Stephen commented on how Virtue lowered quarters in transition – 'first class'

Exercise: four loop serpentine in canter with flying changes

Make sure horse is forward enough and doesn't drop off the leg in the changes. Achieve collection between the changes. It's important to have enough energy

Exercise: Pirouette preparation

To prepare for pirouettes do big circle, normal canter then ask for few steps pirouette canter. Pirouettes are all about the degree to which the horse can take weight on its hind legs. Establish piri canter for a few steps and then ask to go forward.

Exercise: four loop serpentine with half pirouettes after centre line

Horse has to stay forward so all rider has to think about is maintaining the frame, taking care of the bend and turning. Ride thinking forwards not backwards.

Problem if rider comes into pirouette and canter not collected enough.

PSG: Paul Friday and Darwin



11-year-old Dancier x His Highness gelding owned by Sarah Brener

Paul said that Darwin can get anxious and uses passage against you. His anxiety shows in walk when it sometimes doesn't cover enough ground.

“How nice to have a horse that offers you more than you want! The horse has about 25 different trots and it’s about choosing which one you want. The rider has to maintain the tempo being careful he doesn’t offer too much cadence.

Exercise: shoulder-in then some forward steps down long side

This is way to get him out of ‘over-cadence’. Then deliberately find passage then forward out of it

Exercise: shoulder-in then bit more collected then ride forward

Ride transitions within the lateral work so horse doesn’t get stuck in passage gear

Exercise: travers to shoulder-in then bit quicker, then relax

“When horse offers passage don’t shy away from it. Ride forwards out of it.

In canter Stephen asked Paul to ride some forward steps and then back to freshen up the canter

Exercise: Half pass, flying change over x

In half pass ride forward, collect before change and then ride half pass forward and collect before the change

On the track, go more collected then forward into change, then extra collected then forward into change. This is good preparation for sequence changes.

“Never let him get stuck in one place as he tries too hard and then blows a fuse. The key to this horse is adjustability. There’s always a key to unlocking little problems. It’s the rider’s job not to let him get himself into trouble.

PSG/Inter 1: Andrew Gould and Active Solaris



9-year-old gelding by Szechuan owned by Jo and Terry Barnett
Bought from Holland, Solaris has been with Andrew since he was 4 and is in his first season at Small Tour.

Andrew said his issue is that he tries to drop behind the contact when he asks him to close up. Stephen said he needs to insist he stays more up and half halts through the body rather than shorten his neck. Needs to close up from behind not the front. Reward him by letting him carry himself.

Exercise: shoulder in to travers

Make sure he's always forward to the contact – reward with release of inside rein.

It's important to show the horse off a bit on the short side where judges can get the best impression of carriage and way of going.

Stephen commented on Solaris' lovely easy lateral work and told Andrew to trust the self-carriage. In the extensions exaggerate the return to collection

Exercise: flying changes from half pass

Forward in half pass, collect, change, forward in half pass.

Solaris did lovely two time changes – he was engaged enough to find them easy. When a horse is well engaged, the changes are child's play

Pirouettes

Play around with them. Do double ones, make them larger, then smaller. See how small you can make it for a couple of strides then make bigger again. It's all about transitions and the rider having control.

Extended canter on diagonal

Don't see this done well in test very often. Collect and make change on very last stride.

Grand Prix: Sonnar Murray Brown and Erlentanz



16-year-old by Latimer out of a E H Benz mare, owned by Sonnar

The pair have not competed for two years – Sonnar broke his leg in 2019 and he was competed for six months by Charlotte Dujardin. He is Sonny's first grand prix horse and they learned together.

It was a pleasure to see this talented horse out again and looking so fit. He demonstrated all the grand prix movements very well, in a plain snaffle bridle.

The bending and submission around his rider's inside leg looked easy and clear, and in the collected trot he sat well and moved smoothly forward. His flying changes were very straight 'Like on railway tracks'.

In the pirouettes on the centre line, Erlentanz stayed perfectly in place

Sonny said 'the more he learned to collect, the better he became. I did endless canter walk transitions to strengthen him.

Erlentanz showed some exemplary transitions from walk to piaffe and trot into passage and his transitions in and out were in rhythm.

Exercise: passage-piaffe-passage

Come across to centre line in piaffe then gradually develop a 'travelling' piaffe, then see if can do some steps on the spot on centre line then travel a bit and into passage.

Questions

What do you look for in a 4-5 year old?

I look for correct paces, in front of the aids, accepting the contact and the poll the highest point. Can be difficult with horses with big cresty necks. Can generally see if horse is up and into the bridle.

How do you train piaffe if horse is offering passage?

Conventionally you train the piaffe first. Passage has a longer moment of suspension and piaffe hardly any at all. They are totally different biomechanically.

Once a horse has learnt to push up in passage it can be difficult for the horse to lose that suspension.

All horses are different – we as trainers have to be adjustable enough ourselves to keep an open mind. I always start training them from the ground.

What is the value of riding with the reins in one hand?

It's mostly of value to the rider. Often subconsciously pulling backwards on one rein more than the other, with the reins in one hand have to automatically offer equal contact on both reins and contact has a more forward tendency.

What is the guideline for number of steps in a canter pirouette?

6-8 which demonstrates that the rider is in control of the turning.

We see horses with very poor muscle development in front of the wither. Is this automatically a red flag?

Yes to a point – horses vary. It's fascinating to watch a correctly trained horse coming up the levels and watch the growth in muscle development which gives strength for the higher movements.

Thanks to all the owners and riders for providing such wonderful 'guinea pigs' and of course to Stephen for coming such a long way to give the forum.