

January 2008 Beyond the Basics

“So You’ll Never Take a Dressage Test?” Part I

I hope this article finds each of you having experienced a wonderful holiday season, and now ready to look towards 2008 as a year of new and deepening understandings with your horse. I recently read a quote by Johann Friedrich Von Schiller which seemed to sum up my personal visions for the upcoming year. “Only those who have the patience to do simple things perfectly will acquire the skill to do difficult things easily.” I reflect back on how many times we have said in our clinics, that horsemanship is really quite ‘simple’, it just is not ‘easy’! Now that doesn’t take anything away from the blessings we receive from working *with* horses, not the least of which is pure joy and fun! So as I look forward to the activities of 2008, I am going to keep in mind that pursuing my passion for understanding horsemanship will take a four-letter word...WORK, combined with the PATIENCE to practice the basics, in order to gain a measure of the WISDOM that horses have to share. I am also drawn to two words that were emphasized to me during this past holiday season...Humility and Service. With these semantic ingredients, perhaps I have found the recipe for the over-arching theme for my 2008 clinics...Working with patience to discover though the horse, what is the best of our humanity, while giving and receiving unconditional service. I am so excited!

This upcoming year, we have a great line-up of article topics in this ‘Beyond the Basics’ series exclusively in *Northwest Horse Source* magazine. In keeping with the original premise of providing readers with very practical exercises to apply to their personal horsemanship development, we have created a year-long series that looks at three BIG topics. Over the winter months we will look at the benefits of pursuing the classical dressage Training Scale, and how these age-old principles can prepare both horse and human for great riding experiences. This month we will examine how these principles can help people make decisions about getting into riding at a later stage of life, or returning to horses after a sabbatical generated by time or created by fear.



Over the spring months we will tackle one of my favorite subjects...Riding Outside the Box! These articles will give you great ideas for riding games beyond the walls of the arena. From helping those of you pursuing Trail Classes with all sorts of obstacles, to seeing how cows can help the dressage horse to enjoy his training tests, this series will keep your horse happy.

The final series breaks-down a huge subject that really is the essence of horsemanship...Training. Often times it is only people who want to start their own horse that take on the deep responsibility of learning to use tools that will help to establish a willing attitude with balanced movement. However, these same tools, and the exercises you can accomplish with them, are the critical foundation for all our horses, no matter where they are in their training. We will examine the use of some traditional cowboy tools such as the lariat, flag, and round pen, as well as looking at the more classical tools of the whip, the surcingle, and square pen liberty work. Us ‘western-types’ have so much to learn from the ‘dressage’ folks...and visa-versa. Open minds and open hearts make for a better partnership with horses (and humans!).

So let’s get started with talking about this month’s topic – Making An Investment in Studying Dressage. At first glance, I may have killed about one-half of the readership’s interest to read on, as you are saying to yourself, “I will never ride a dressage test, so WHY would I want to study dressage?”. The answer is quite simply in the semantics. The word ‘Dressage’ means ‘Training’. Classical Dressage, or intense studying / training of the movements of the horse, was first developed primarily for military warfare purposes to allow the rider to escape from incredibly dangerous situations. Not only did the horse need to be schooled in the basic movements with rhythm and balance, he also needed to know how to defend the rider from the ground attractor, and therefore learned to use his weapons – primarily his feet and legs – in amazing movements called ‘airs above the ground’. By rearing-up in the *levade* or jumping straight up and kicking out with the hind legs (the *capriole*), he could protect himself and his rider. The essence of these movements is still being preserved today as an art form in the Classical riding schools of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, the Cadre Noir in Saumur, the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Jerez de la Frontera and the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art in Lisbon.

Why then, should we mere mortals, and who are probably not interested in military pursuits with our horses, why should we want to study the principles of dressage? Again, quite simply it gives us a clear system of principles to train the human and the horse, which is based on thousands of years of studying. It truly reveals that mantra... "It so old, that it is new again"! From the human's perspective dressage gives us not only the training tools to help develop the horse athletically and mentally, it also calls us to a higher standard to be mentally, emotionally and physically prepared to become a good leader. From the perspective of the horse, dressage principles provide him clear, step-by-step exercises to achieve, that when combined under the watchful eye of a good rider, blend into a symphony of movement. This dance is not limited by the costume worn, the country in which it is being performed, or the breed of horse. The concert that is achieved by applying mindful dressage – thoughtful training – is universal in my book. From the court in Vienna to the cow pastures of eastern Oregon it is a 'joyful noise'!

In the past several years I have had the pleasure of working with many people who are getting into playing and 'training' horses in later life, or are returning after years without riding. Many of these folks happen to be women who find they now have the time and means to pursue their life-long dream. Born out of an initiate love of horses, these gals can now own a horse. Equally so, I have encountered many people who rode when they were younger, and are now returning to horses for joy, companionship, and maybe even to participate in little equine competitions. In both these scenarios there is often a wee bit of trepidation and fear involved with not only riding a horse, but safe ground handling. It is here that this series of articles...Investing in the Study of Dressage...can give you a template for fun and safety.

Thousands of years of studying the 'training' of horses have yielded some practical steps to help humans to develop a willing and safe partnership with their horse. The 'Dressage Training Scale' is a great place to start for preparing the horse and rider, in the saddle and on the ground, to have a positive experience. In following up with next months article, we will examine how this training triangle can provide a picture for all of us

to pursue no matter what discipline we enjoy, or where we are within our horsemanship journey. For now, begin to think about your personal definitions of the elements of the training scale, and examine how they apply to you and your horse both on the ground and in the saddle. As example: How does 'rhythm' apply to your everyday life? Do you walk with rhythm as you are doing your shopping? How does 'balance' play a role with rhythm and perhaps influence the 'timing' of your movements? Does rhythm affect your attitude?

Get the picture? Over the next few months we are going to dissect the training scale and look at each element for its depth of possible implications. In the end I can guarantee you will be walking with better posture, completing a safe dance with your horse, and most importantly, having fun with 'dressage' – the 'training' of you and your horse!

"It takes years learning how to sit on a horse without getting in his way. It takes additional years to learn how to influence the horse and then a few more years learning how to influence him without getting in his way."
"Dressage is a commitment of TIME to train yourself and the horse. There is no specific costume associated with this achievement"



Collection

Impulsion & Schwung

Straightness & Balance

Contact & Feel

Suppleness & Rhythm