

Cindy Sydnor Dressage Symposium  
at Uphill Dressage  
New Alexandria, PA  
Sept 10th, 2011

Riding to develop a Circle of Energy  
between Horse & Rider Over the Back... by Kristin Hermann

This symposium was just what the local dressage community needed. Uphill Dressage, Tammy Heckman and Lisa Hall, did a fine job organizing this event and providing wonderful demonstration riders. We might as well have been at a USDF Dressage Symposium, but luckily we did not have to fly across the country for such talent and classical instruction!

This symposium was divided into sections of Retraining Issues, and Training through Fourth Level. The day started out, however, with Cindy talking about The Circle of Aids and energy, and how the interaction of the rider influences the horse and vice versa. She had a 23 page handout for the auditors with photos to illustrate a good use of the Circle of Aids. Cindy continually talked about the horse's top line, back, and haunches, and how important it is to train the horse over its back and not just the head and neck. All riders were wonderful at their level and the instruction from Cindy was excellent for pointing out exactly what each rider/horse combination needed to improve at the level.

Retraining Issues were two horses, a OTTT (Off the Track Thoroughbred) and a Morgan cross. Immediately the use of the half halt was addressed. "I wish there was a mark in the dressage tests for balance" Cindy commented, "Is balance not very important for training?" The half halt creates balance for the horse, and there should be a release of the rein aids at the end of each half halt with the leg slightly on. To further show how the half halt is used, Cindy had the riders feel for the movement of the inside hind leg and then use the whip and leg aids to ask the horse to engage and activate the inside hind leg to improve the transitions from walk to halt. She said in a good halt the hind leg should come under the horse's hip.

Riders need to be more proactive on the horse's stiff side, she said. And she asked each rider if they knew the difference between the stiff side and the hollow side? "You can bend your horses so their nose lines up with your knee, bending beyond this point is usually too much. Bending helps the horse to "release its neck," Cindy said.

Using the new tools of half halting, bending and engaging the horse's inside hind leg, Cindy then had the demo riders moving the haunches out on a circle, leg yielding,



Elgin Panichelle and *Trillium* learning how to square up a halt.

and riding serpentines. She said to school serpentines, they should be ridden like an S shape or like ribbon candy, not straight across like it is illustrated in the dressage tests. Riding the serpentine improves the bend by engaging the inside hind leg as the outside rein controls the tempo and helps to guide the horse.

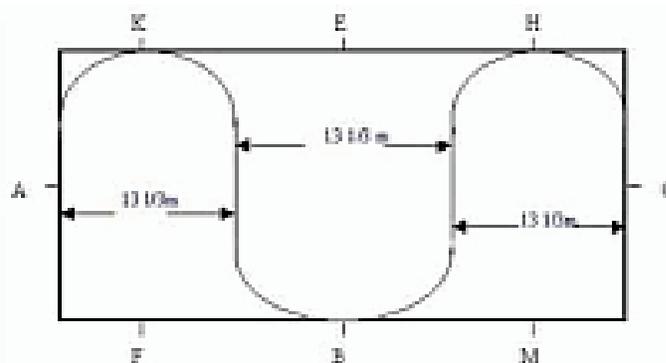
After every exercise Cindy asked to have their horses “chew the reins out of the hands,” or stretching. She wanted to see the horses stretching so they looked like they were grazing at the trot! “When the rider allows the horse to stretch the rhythm should stay the same and the horse should not rush or speed up,” she said. She explained that stretching develops longitudinal suppleness (from back to front) and lateral suppleness - the horse’s ability to bend right or left, or side to side.

Cindy also talked a lot about contact. “If the reins feel too short they are likely the right length,” stated Cindy. “You need to keep shortening your reins until you have a functional length. Riders need to become skillful and have the feel for when to release the contact on the inside rein. Most riders inadvertently tighten or stiffen their horses because they hang on to the inside rein too long and too heavily,” she stated. Continuing, Cindy said, “You need to be more communicative with your horse so your horse does not brace against you. Riders must have a straight line elbow to bit and maintain soft wrists, elbows and shoulders, and not be stiff in order to have an elastic contact with the horse’s mouth. It was said of Grand Prix trainer, Herbert Rehbein (rip), that he had tranquilizers in his hands.”

After forty five minutes of retraining, whether the horses or riders, Cindy had these two riders engaging their horses’ inside hind leg, applying half halts that went through the horse from back to front, leg yielding in and out, and chewing the reins out of the hands. As a result, both riders finished with better balanced horses!

The two Training Level horses worked on similar exercises but did more advance versions. For example, they learned how to engage the inside hind leg at the canter to collect and then extend the canter. They also activated the inside hind leg for canter/trot transitions instead of going into a walk/halt transition. By activating and engaging the horse’s inside hind leg the rider develops pushing and carrying power in the hind quarters. “Preliminary to any engaging of the hind end the horse has to “track up” or reach under,” stated Cindy. This pushing from behind develops the muscles, which will allow the horse later to have carrying power in the hind quarters. “Without being correctly connected from back to front, a horse can neither be light or have self carriage,” stated Cindy.

“Connecting the young horse over his top line from behind and into the hands of the rider is a priority. This is how the circle of aids works,” stated Cindy. “When a horse



Ribbon candy with lots of S shaped turning and a dressage test serpentine.

is relaxed, connected and engaged with balance from the outside rein, the pushing power begins to become carrying power and then the horse starts to collect! And, the shoulder-in is the first exercise to introduce collection,” says Cindy!

When a few riders had difficulty keeping their horses connected or round, Cindy taught them flipping the crest and *uberstreichen*. Flipping the crest is not something she often teaches, she said, but for these riders it seemed appropriate. Riders learned how to offer the inside rein to allow the horse to become lighter and she had them



Anna Hanses riding Hidden Oak's stallion *Broadway* demonstrating flipping the crest to the left on a circle to the right.

flipping the crest to get them more connected to the contact. “Your contact should be solid but not stiff, and flipping the crest helps with this. She explained flipping the crest at the halt, and said if you can’t do it at the halt you can’t do it at the trot or canter.\* She asked the riders to flip their horse’s crests to the outside on a circle which they found challenging. Once the rider mastered this she had them flipping the crest on the serpentine and while leg yielding. “Sometimes flipping the crest to the outside at a canter while on a circle helps to improve the horse’s acceptance of the outside rein which in turn helps the balance,” stated Cindy.

Flipping the crest with an elastic contact also helps the horse to chew the reins down, according to Cindy. But, flipping the crest does not work the horse’s whole body so when stretching the horse be sure it works from behind over the back by tracking up and reaching under and not just lowering the neck. Horses should be “strong behind and soft in front,” Cindy said over and over!

While on the subject of flipping the crest Cindy went into detail about the three basic rein aids: direct, indirect and opening rein. You must have relaxed wrists for all rein aids, and the indirect rein is a highly finessed rein aid and best used to bend the horse. “All these aids and crest flipping take a lot of coordination from the rider,” states Cindy, “You have to talk to the horse every stride with your aids.”

The First Level riders, too, worked on balance. “You cannot sweep the balance of the horse under the rug,” stated Cindy. “It is the



Sue Hershey riding her home bred horse Iron City demonstrate holding the whip correctly with a straight line elbow to bit and a soft wrist and elastic contact. Whip is placed naturally over the thigh ready for action at all times to engage hind end.



First Level demo rider Nina Catazanrite and *Rumba* uses her activating aids to get her horse to step more under.

horse's belly or abdominal muscles that support its back. Even at First Level horses should be learning to lift and swing their backs. This training of the back contributes to the future lowering of the haunches. Have you all heard of this," Cindy asked?

"Activating the hind quarters in timing with the landing of the inside hind combined with the outside rein half halt gets the horse to elevate the forehand," says Cindy. The First Level riders got their horses more in front of their legs at the canter by engaging the hind end. While cantering, the horses started going uphill as the haunches were lowering. Cindy warned that you do not want to pressure the horse too much and you do not want to be ungrateful. She asked riders to praise their horses and always stretch. "Stretching to a horse is like us getting into a hot tub, it feels so good." says Cindy. Even the Third Level riders stretched their horses while keeping

them active behind and soft in front.

This all day symposium ended with two Fourth level riders who worked on even more expression with their horses. And expression they did have as Cindy ended the session with work on piaffe with each rider. "You tap the horse on the hind legs to stimulate his brain to communicate with his hind legs. It is like a brain wave across the top line that is not let out of the front. The horse should not be compressed by the contact, if it is it will not work over its back. After you have familiarized the horse with the ground person and whip you tap the hind leg when it lands on the ground to increase the activity! Teaching half steps helps to increase the loading capacity of the hind end but the horse must not go faster. You need to stimulate the horse without frightening him," Cindy emphasized. "This activating of the hind at this level starts with the rider training the horse to step under for the halt. Such as we trained our lower level riders at the beginning of the symposium. Each horse is different and the degree of aids vary," Cindy said.



Cindy activating hind end from the ground with junior young rider Meredith Monsour riding her horse *Agat Amadeus*

Engaging the audience with her skill for training piaffe at the end of this symposium left all fifty auditors encouraged and enthusiastic about actively returning to their own barn and horses to continue with the tradition of classical dressage.

### **More tips from Cindy Sydnor**

Watch Heather Blitz riding her horse Paragon for a lovely pair.

Manage the front and ride the hind end.

You have to be proactive as a rider to keep the horse in balance ....

The outside rein, not the inside, flexes the poll

If the horse is stiff in the neck there will be a blockage from the hind end to the poll.

A half halt is a small weight shift from the front to the back.

Bending a horse can take two to three strides it is not like starting a lawn mower.

You have to release the inside rein to get the horse on the outside rein.

If your stirrups are too long you will ride on your pubic bone and not your seat.

At the canter you half halt when the seat is at its deepest point.

You can shorten your reins and then move the elbow forward if needed.

Your shoulders should follow the horse's shoulders.

You cannot make the horse straight unless it is supple.

A horse should step under and reach into contact over its back.

When the stride is not long enough the top line will sag.

What you see in front is a result of what you get from the hind end.

Putting a horse together does not mean pulling together. There is a fine balancing act of activating the hind end and softening in the front.

You do not want to ride with the hands, but you need to have contact in the front.

When your reins are too long you do not ride well.

If your horse is not soft in the bridle you cannot collect.

If you cannot get your horse straight you will not be able to elevate the fore hand.

Shoulder-in is the foundation for all straighten

Shoulder fore is a baby shoulder in.

Flipping the crest is like asking a question to the horse, are you soft?

Every corner provides a bending exercise.

When training turn on the haunches, Cindy would rather it be big and active than small and stuck.

You need to use preparatory aids for transitions.

When stretching the horse try to maintain contact and not let any air or slack into the reins.

Keeping your horse on the vertical is like threading a needle!

The dressage arena letters were originally half halt points, before and after the corners, in the middle.... Later they added international letters as markers.

\* Flipping the Crest. Here is an article I found on the internet that goes into more detail about neck flipping

[http://www.equisearch.com/horses\\_riding\\_training/english/dressage/bendcontrol\\_06140](http://www.equisearch.com/horses_riding_training/english/dressage/bendcontrol_06140)