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FIT FOR LIFE JIM KOFORD ON CONDITIONING THE DRESSAGE HORSE

The Road to USDF
Instructor Certification

Report: USDF Adult
Clinic with Charlotte
Bredahl-Baker



Jim Koford and Rhett

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BUILDING BLOCKS: As rider Ange Bean on the Friesian/Arabian mare BR Danny's Secret+ learned, Bredahl-Baker has an uncanny ability to "deconstruct" a horse's issues to identify (and then address) the source of the problem:

showing a forward rhythm? Is he relaxed and accepting the bridle? Is there bend?

"The horse will tell you," she would say.

Charlotte was very tactful in working with each horse and rider's issues. The Region 1 clinic featured a wide array of horses at different levels of training. This was very helpful for the auditors, as various training issues were addressed. Many were basic problems that apply to most horses to some extent, such as developing a more consistent connection from the inside leg to the outside rein, and maintaining relaxation and a steady rhythm along with impulsion, suppleness, and lengthening of the neck.

Because of the "electric atmosphere" of the arena and the spectators, some horses were a little tense. Charlotte didn't worry or hurry. "Give him time," she would say. The basics, she insisted, had to be correct before a horse could go on to more advanced work.

Lesson, Day 1

My own session, with my ten-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding, Tango Royale, began with Charlotte asking us to ride on a 20-meter circle to check Tango's rhythm, relaxation, and impulsion. Everything looked good, she said, other than some varying of the hindquarters inside and outside the circle line. The basics were good in all gaits, she said.

We then picked up the contact and asked for more engagement. We did pretty well with the leg-yield and shoulder-in. When we began the half-pass, Charlotte questioned Tango's rhythm and bend—our problem for the day. There was not enough bend, she said, and the haunches would lead at times.

To help correct the problem, Charlotte gave us an exercise: half-pass to shoulder-in, or leg-yield and back to half-pass. We practiced until I got it right, first at the trot and then in the canter. We finished with a correctly ridden exercise that I will always remember. I couldn't wait to watch the rest of the lessons to gather more tools for training.

Lesson, Day 2

The second day was more relaxed, as I knew what to expect. Tango's bend issues were improved, as I was quicker to fix them. In this second session, I graduated to working on pirouettes in the canter. We started in the walk: two steps of pirouette, then two steps straight ahead, over and over. This "stairstep" approach, Charlotte explained, discourages the horse from spinning or stepping out and also encourages him to maintain the balance.

When we tried the actual canter pirouette, things went pretty well. Charlotte used a variation of the previous exercise, this time asking us to come around for three steps and then to proceed straight ahead in canter for three steps, making sure we kept the bend. It was a difficult exercise, but we did get better. I finished with some great work.

Most of the upper-level horses worked on the same exercises that day, so I could really see how they improved. Some also were beginning work on piaffe and passage. Charlotte had some really good training tips for these advanced movements. Be happy with a few steps and then reward the horse by riding forward, she advised. Faberge, a seven-year-old gelding ridden by J.J. Tate, did some beautiful piaffe and passage with Charlotte aiding from the ground. She praised the horse, saying that he is exceptional and that the work is easy for him. Because of Faberge's kind nature and talent, he should go far, she said.

Several people at the clinic said that it was one of the best learning experiences they had had. I went home with more understanding of the importance of basics (bend!), new exercises, and excitement in looking to the future with my horse. The facility was wonderful, and the Hasslers, the staff at Hassler Dressage, and the clinic organizers could not have been more accommodating. ▲

Lucy Helstowski is a native of Massachusetts who now resides in Kennett Square, PA. She began her dressage education with Janet Black while at the University of Vermont. Along with her first warmblood, the sixteen-year-old Mister Chadwick, she owns the Dutch Warmblood gelding Tango Royale, her Adult Clinic partner. Purchased as a three-year-old in 2003, Tango is currently competing at Fourth Level, and his owner hopes to train him up to Grand Prix.