



THE DRESSAGE TOOL BOX

Dressage enthusiasts work with a variety of clinicians to share training techniques.

By Stella Otto • Photos by G. Randall Goss

As instructors, riders and auditors of all levels, we gathered for the Lingh.nl Dressage Tool Box Symposium at Bay Harbor Equestrian Center, in Petoskey, Michigan, to explore avenues for expanding our dressage riding, training, and teaching skills. There were biomechanics experts, physiotherapists, North American Riding for the Handicapped

Association (NARHA) educators and equine extension specialists. Also in attendance were U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) medalists, certified instructors and “L” Education Program graduates. For this diverse group of participants the goal was to share experiences and expertise so we could add to the tools we use to expand our learning and teaching.

We were greeted Friday evening with a symposium program outlining the lessons to come and including short biographies of each participant’s riding experience. At



this inaugural Tool Box, the lectures and lessons focused on five concepts: learning styles, biomechanics of the rider, principles of teaching, biomechanics of the horse and the Pyramid of Training.

Symposium designer and sponsor, Karin Reid Offield, created the program with the hope that it will “reintroduce the idea of regional riders and instructors getting together and taking part in an event that will make riding more fun for everyone. “The winning difference between first, second and third



Auditors, participants and instructors gather for a group photo at the Lingh.nl Dressage Tool Box Symposium, held at the Bay Harbor Equestrian Club (above) in Petosky, Michigan.

place in dressage is in the small details,” Offield said, “and those details come from years of experience teaching, training and riding.”

Part one of this series reviews learning styles and principles of teaching.

Learning Styles

Karen Waite, equine extension specialist at Michigan State University, started the program with a self-test to determine our learning styles (visit DressageToday.com to take the test). Three styles are most prevalent among riders: visual, auditory and kinesthetic.

• **Visual learners** comprise roughly 60

to 65 percent of the population. They often think in pictures, have vivid imaginations and do well in school.

• **Auditory learners** make up about 30 percent of the population. They learn well from lectures, like to listen to instructions and provide feedback through talking.

• **Kinesthetic learners** make up about 10 percent of the population. They prefer learning by touch or feel and express feelings physically. Not surprisingly, many top riders fall into this group. They learn best by doing.

Waite noted that many of the most effective teachers incorporate all three

learning styles into a lesson. It is also important that the rider be aware of their style and take responsibility for communicating with the instructor when they need clarification.

Bonnie DePue, NARHA-certified president of Children and Horses United in Movement (CHUM) Therapeutic Riding taught the lesson “How to Hear What is Being Said by Your Instructor.” She stressed that it is the instructor’s responsibility to figure out how to teach so the student understands. Junior riders Suzannah Simon and Miles Hayes, riding Hanoverians Sam I Am and GT Experience, indicated a need to improve

THE TOOL BOX VISION



Karin Offield, Symposium designer, sponsor and lecturer

My vision is that a series of Tool Box Symposiums can build synergy within regions across the United States. Ultimately, the goal is to see this lead to a designated two-year pilot program of national training centers for young horse, young rider and amateur education.

The symposium is for and about instructors. I am looking for instructors in each region that are willing to share what they are confident in teaching. The goal is to create a program where all professional equestrians have a venue where they can teach.

I am convinced that the manner in which we instruct can be improved. There are many ways to be taught, many roads to Rome to reach an understanding of a subject, and many ways for a student to learn a lesson. I hope that the Dressage Tool Box Symposium becomes a vehicle for and a place where equestrians improve their teaching, their learning and technical grasp of communication.

Additionally, the symposium is just as much for riders. Riders sharing the lessons that they need to learn, either

better or differently, often by listening to a different instructor entirely. Many riders are hesitant to learn from nearby instructors or take part in events like this. To be afraid to take a lesson from a different instructor in your region or to be reluctant because your instructor might get mad, is not smart. Education and grasping experience from others is what is so amazing about life—it’s never ending. The Tool Box gives local riders the opportunity to learn from many teachers.

The symposium is also about the auditors: how they can learn to observe more carefully and see the tools in action more clearly. One of the ways to facilitate this is by asking auditors to move to a different seated vantage point for each lesson, thereby gaining multiple perspectives. Many of the auditors are riders and instructors that for various reasons are not riding at this time. We are all in this together. Every single participant should leave the symposium having made a contribution and gained new tools.

I hope that these reports about the Tool Box Symposiums will encourage you to contact me to schedule a Tool Box Symposium in your region in 2010 and 2011. First choose an amazing facility in your region that can stable up to 10 horses. Next collect 10 to 12 instructors including several university professors who specialize in learning and teaching techniques. Then find one sponsor who loves the idea of being involved in a Tool Box Symposium. Contact me at info@offieldfarms.com and I will help you build your tool box, an affordable, fun, two-day event that brings you closer to your sport and your equestrian goals.—Karin Offield

BETH BAUMERT'S PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING

Principles of Learning can be applied to any teaching or learning situation, whether it be first grade or First Level, post graduate work or Grand Prix. Educational psychologists have proven scientifically that implementing these principles increases the student's understanding and retention of the lessons. Here is a bit about some of the principles of learning:

- **Imitation** is the most natural form of learning. Never watch bad riding. If you are unable to watch a great rider in person, watch online.
- **Readiness** refers to the sequential nature of learning. Barring extenuating circumstances, no one was ever a star at first grade and just couldn't handle second grade. The same is true of dressage levels. Training horses is quite scientific and sequential.
- **Repetition** refers to the value of meaningful practice that builds muscle memory and understanding between horse and rider. Drill is, in contrast, meaningless repetition.
- **Reward** in dressage is usually a feeling. Lessons that give good feelings and leave the student with a good feeling are more likely remembered.
- **Intensity** refers to aspects of your lessons that make them memorable: moments of humor, enthusiasm, demonstrations, analogies and personal experiences.
- **Social learning** refers to the team spirit. Be sure the culture of your barn is supportive. There is tremendous power in well-wishing.



their sitting trot and lengthening and shortening their horses' strides.

To get them sitting tall with engaged seats, Bonnie gave these two kinesthetic learners an exercise for expanding the rib cage. Raising a hand straight up and circling it backward activated the rhomboid muscles located between and beneath the shoulder blade. This opened the shoulders and got the riders sitting taller and more engaged. The horses, too, began to engage, becoming lighter in front and taking longer strides.

For auditory learners, DePue ex-

plained, "The rider needs to be what they want the horse to be—engaged. When you pull your seat bones off the horse, you disengage him. The rider is also disengaged when they slouch. Pure physics points the force vectors down onto the forehead."

DePue stressed, "When teaching visual learners, use easy-to-identify landmarks, such as shoulder, barrel, etc." Many visual learners ask, "Will you show me?" She continued. "Assume that all students are ready to ask. Go ahead and correct them physically, but always first ask permission to

touch them.”

For all students, DePue noted that instructors should be encouraging and engaging so students don't worry about being perfect.

Tonya Grant-Barber taught Nancy Williams on her Thoroughbred/Trakehner cross, Dream Catcher, and Zoya Malitsky on her Trakehner, A Wiccan Way. The first part of the lesson would be very deliberate in using the different learning styles. For auditory learners, Grant-Barber described a keyhole pattern to improve balance and counter canter (see Figure 1 below).

1. Begin a right lead counter canter with right flexion down the quarterline from P to R.

2. After going 30 meters down the quarterline, use the remaining 15 meters to develop a left flexion.

3. Ride into the corner, between M and C, still in counter canter, with a continued inside flexion.

4. Between C and H, work back to the new quarterline near S developing a right flexion again.

This teaches the horse to follow the outside rein. Turning left onto the quarterline on the right lead establishes connection on the left side. By turning back to the right toward the

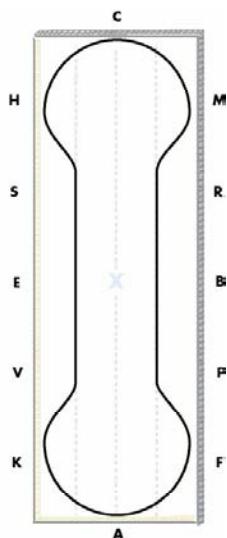


Figure 1, The Keyhole

THE LITTLE DETAILS



Everyone always wonders what is the secret to success? My answer to this is, “It’s in the little details.” One detail that was a novel feature of the symposium was the arena layout. Sections of rail were placed within the arena to allow multiple riders to get off the wall and practice movements simultaneously. I am suggesting placing sections of two-sided rail about in the arena in a way that still allows room for diagonals and circles. This set-up gives riders more opportunities to practice their lines and control of their horses’ shoulders and the movements in all directions.—*Karin Offield*

wall, connection is established on the right side. Even if their horses broke gait, the riders were urged to stay on the pattern. Grant-Barber, a kinesthetic and auditory learner, worked hard to offer verbal direction.

After a bit of confusion, Williams and Malitsky—both kinesthetic and visual riders—and a few auditors indicated that they were having difficulty understanding what the pattern was. To make sure the visuals were confirmed, it was suggested that the instructor walk the whole pattern or put out some cones. Doing so yielded better understanding and finished with some successful counter canter. By separating their two sides, the horses were able to more easily perform a relaxed counter canter. As Grant-Barber noted, “The instructor’s goal is to help the rider improve the horse. If the horse

improved, then mission accomplished, even if the rider was confused or inconsistent about the pattern itself.”

Principles of Teaching

With the foundation of understanding how students learn and how the horse and rider move, Beth Baumert’s Saturday evening lecture, “Principles of Learning” (see p. 44) reinforced and reminded us of the many teaching tools that we had seen in the day’s mounted work.

Some of these principles had been put into practice earlier in the day as Baumert instructed Miles Hayes, who plans to move up to the Junior level.

In the lesson “Corners and the Principles of Readiness,” Baumert clarified that the primary *bending aids* are the inside leg, inside rein and outside leg. The primary *turning aids* are the outside

rein and leg. Baumert suggested that Hayes try to bend and engage his horse before the corner. As Hayes worked to improve his horse, Baumert asked several questions. “Why is the horse covering ground? Is it because the front is pulling or the hind is pushing?” Hayes knew the answer should be the hind pushing and realized that at this moment his horse still needed to push a bit more.

“How do you know if you’ve got your horse in the corner?” Baumert then asked. The answer: When the next movement is balanced and straight. When riding a corner correctly, the hind leg is under the center of gravity and carrying the weight, the joints bend and the horse can be thought of as coiling like a spring—ready to release energy.

To test if the horse was balanced, straight and energetic through the

corner, Baumert suggested using one of her favorite techniques, *überstreichen*. “Pat the inside of the neck. Did the horse keep the bending aids?” No. She prompted Hayes to apply the bending aids again, and the horse retained the bend a bit better. With patient repetition, the improvement became visible.

Überstreichen, the release of the rein, can also act as a cue to relax the neck, which is vital since the back can’t release until the neck is relaxed. This is one tool many of us looked forward to trying out at home. 🐾

Next month: The Tool Box Symposium explores the Pyramid of Training and the biomechanics of horse and rider.

