

Focus on the ESSENTIALS

FEI judge Christoph Hess teaches riders what their horses must know, while having fun along the way.

Text and Photos By Jessica L. McTaggart

Who's going to win your election, Obama or Clinton?" asked FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) "I" judge Christoph Hess. It was the start of the annual symposium of the North American Dressage Trainers Club (NADTC), in Palm City, Florida. His question perplexed the auditors, adorned in full-seats and polo shirts. Finally, when they realized he actually wanted to know, the loudest of them answered, "McCain!" Hess looked confused but intrigued. "McCain? In Germany, we just hear about Obama. How exciting!" Auditors looked at each other, clearly thinking any clinician brave enough to start a dressage clinic with a political poll must have some interesting things to say.

Motivating the Lazy Horse

Ensuring that the horse is in front of the leg was a theme throughout the symposium. Orintha Silva entered the ring with a 6-year-old Lusitano stallion, Mr. Bond Interagro, no

Christoph Hess soothes the 4-year-old Holsteiner Romeo, while he instructs Lisa Smit.





Katherine Poulin-Neff and Brilliant Too eased through difficult movements.

doubt a namesake derived from his 007 tattoo. "He's a bit of a lazy boy," Hess observed. "He seems to do just enough to get by. If he were in school, he would only work when the teacher was looking. When the teacher looked away, he would goof off." Hess turned to the auditors. "I know none of you were such students."

With Mr. Bond needing to be more sensitive to the leg, Hess had Silva begin with upward and downward transitions: walk-trot, trot-canter, canter-trot. Then they moved on to transitions within the gaits: collected trot-medium trot, collected canter-medium canter. With these, Mr. Bond came more in front of the leg and began stretching nicely to the contact. But, because he was still not 100 percent in front of the leg, Hess had Silva ride medium canter. Those who say dressage clinics are boring would have eaten their words as this compact pair powered around the arena. Even Hess said to the auditors, "Brave rider, no?"

Now 60-meters is too small for him." With all of this forward-and-back work, Mr. Bond was listening to his rider's every request—mission accomplished.

Mary Anne Milleman and her 6-year-old Hanoverian gelding, Fidelity, came into the arena ready to work, or at least Milleman did. Immediately, Hess could see Fidelity's reluctance to move off the rider's leg. "This horse has good suppleness, but he is just a little lazy," Hess commented. "A lazy horse has to want to work, so he simply requires more motivation." This newfound motivation came from transitions.

Hess had Milleman ride several walk-trot transitions on the long wall and on circles, with the goal of bringing the horse up into better self-carriage. "Until the horse is properly uphill, don't ask for special movements," he stated. Fidelity improved but continued to lack internal motivation. Hess explained to Milleman that she must insist by using her legs. "Ride from your position and

kick with your inside leg. You may need your spurs, but only use the whip directly behind your leg or on your horse's shoulder to emphasize that he must go forward." Milleman began using her inside leg more effectively, and the horse reacted honestly with a much more forward trot.

Hess compared lazy and hot horses. "Lazy horses must be made athletic and powerful, while hot horses must be made quiet and supple." He told auditors the quality of each gait must be addressed before tackling any movements.

Both horse and rider had worked hard and were feeling the intensity of the Florida heat. Hess had them finish by stretching long and low, emphasizing that it is important to finish each session with something the horse loves to do. This way, he goes back into the stable with a positive feeling.

Back into the ring with her second mount, was Silva on Tirza, a 7-year-old Dutch Warmblood mare. Silva and Tirza spent most of their session cantering. Hess noted that Tirza needed to be more powerful in her canter. The pair worked on transitions within the gait—medium canter to collected canter. Then they worked on downward transitions from canter to trot. The pair worked tirelessly as Hess advised that Silva not use her hands in the downward transitions, otherwise the horse would become stronger and stronger. When Tirza didn't quite understand the aid solely from the seat, Hess had Silva ride leg yield on the circle, which slowly helped to clarify the situation. After a few repetitions, Silva was able to ask just with her seat.

Next was Priscilla Baldwin on Amara, a rather wide bay mare. The excess girth soon made sense as Baldwin explained that the mare was currently seven and a half months pregnant with her second foal. Baldwin said she was an adult amateur still figuring out the finer points of dressage. She soaked up the learning

as Hess covered a few basic elements. "The horse must be in front of the aids, and the contact must be correct," he began. "The horse should be working 10 percent more than she would if she did not have a rider on her back." With this, Baldwin gave Amara a swift kick and off they went. Hess had the pair ride shoulder-in, leg yield and half pass, which also helped to get Amara off the rider's inside leg.

To develop confidence and trust in horse and rider, Hess had Baldwin place the reins in her outside hand and pat the horse with her inside hand every few strides. The horse opened up in her jaw and stretched to the bit. "The rider needs to have confidence that the horse isn't running away," Hess explained. "Don't fight the horse. Pet the horse."

Stay Focused and Supple

Michael Poulin is NADTC founder and president (he won a U.S. team bronze medal at the 1992 Olympic Games). He guided the first of many Poulin family riders into the arena. Daughter Gwen rode Watson, a 5-year-old Dutch Warmblood. From this pair, many auditors hoped to absorb through osmosis what Hess called "a top-class position." With a strong core, fluid hips and willing partner, Hess noted that Poulin and Watson were examples of classical harmony.

As Watson cantered past the auditors, he pushed his haunches to the inside. Hess told Poulin to ride shoulder-in at canter. "The horse is coming inside with his hind legs, so we take the front legs into the arena. Even when the horse is nervous, he must learn to accept the rider's leg," he noted. "Use the inside leg on the horse when he is pressing against it. If you are using the inside rein, you must use the inside leg. If the horse is still coming against the inside leg, use an opening sideways rein and kick with the inside leg to get your point across. The horse must be off (move away from) the



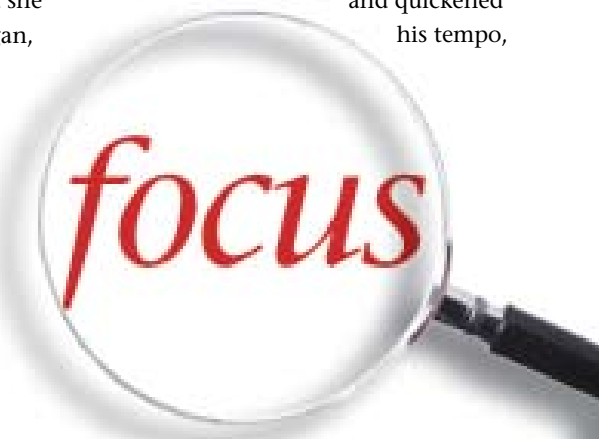
To improve the piaffe, Hess had Nancy Smith ride Donatella forward and back.

inside leg to be properly balanced. The better the balance, the better the use of the body and the better the gaits."

NADTC secretary Jennifer Dillon not only organized the symposium, but she also participated. As the session began, her horse, Uliet, a 7-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding, was inattentive. Hess pointed out what to do when a horse's attention is an issue. "When horses are distracted," he explained, "you should focus on two main ideas: going forward and staying on the correct line of travel."

Hess had Dillon ride a 20-meter circle in the middle of the ring until Uliet was listening to her aids. "You need to incorporate this boring work sometimes in order to school the horse properly," he said. "This is how you develop steady confidence." Even when spooky elements came their way (such as another horse entering the ring to warm up), Hess had Dillon focus

on keeping Uliet moving forward and asking him to stretch downward into the bridle. At first, this wasn't always successful, as the horse braced his neck and quickened his tempo,



but their work eventually resulted in a calm, focused partnership. Hess reminded her that we must have patience when schooling horses. "It's good for us to do things that require a lot of patience because we live in such a technical, fast-paced world."



Hess told riders to end their workouts with something their horses love to do.

Following Dillon, was Romeo ridden by Lisa Smit. Only under saddle for three months, this 4-year-old Holsteiner gelding was surprisingly well-behaved. While riding in a light seat at rising trot, Hess asked if Smit was ready to canter. He added that, when working a young horse, a rider should feel as though the horse is saying, *I'm ready to start canter*. Romeo fussed with his head when Smit turned him onto a circle. Hess reminded her not to fight with the horse's mouth, because he would win every time. Instead, he advised her to use a sideways, opening rein to guide the horse around the turn, therefore showing the horse, in no uncertain terms, where he was going. As the horse acted up ever so slightly, Hess remarked, "Young horses are like kids. Ninety-nine percent of the time they are good, but when they are bad, they are really bad." Romeo soon relaxed and started stretching into the contact.

Larry Poulin (Michael's brother) came into the ring with his 9-year-old Hanoverian gelding, Wiley. Poulin is a

world-class carriage driver and dressage trainer. When Hess found out that Wiley was also a driving horse, he couldn't help but take a shot in the dark. "Could we go for a carriage ride?" he asked. "Traveling around Florida in a carriage, how fun!" Poulin laughed as Hess got back to business. To work on suppleness, he had Poulin go into rising trot, ride shoulder-in on the long wall and then half pass to the centerline. "We want the horse to be happy and soft," he remarked. At that moment, Wiley sneezed. "See, he's saying thank you!" The pair began to ride 10-meter circles between the shoulder-in and half pass to further Wiley's suppleness. At one point, Wiley kicked out on the circle, coming rather close to Hess. "Do you talk badly about judges to your horse?" he asked Poulin.

Poulin warmed up Wiley with shoulder-in and half pass and then moved on to flying changes. When he asked for a single change across the diagonal, the horse jumped up and kicked against his leg. Hess remarked, "He is fresh in his

tempo today." Poulin then commented that Wiley was just happy and loving the audience, to which Hess responded, "He's loving everybody and everything but your leg." Poulin had to smile as he continued with the changes. Hess explained that the horse must accept the driving aids and the inside leg in the changes. He asked Poulin to ride medium canter on the long walls, asking only with the leg, not the whip. "You always need to have a medium canter tendency with this horse, because he is against your leg. He must accept the leg in a 100-percent supple way," Hess stated. "Kicking against the rider's leg is when the horse is doing exactly the opposite of what the leg is asking." Poulin kicked with the inside leg to bring the horse off his inside aids. After a few medium canter rounds in the arena, Wiley responded quickly and expressively to the leg.

Upper-Level Work

Pan American Games gold medalist Katherine Poulin-Neff rode her partner, Brilliant Too, a 12-year-old Dutch/Thoroughbred cross gelding. The pair breezed through the warm-up and tackled flying changes and pirouettes with ease. As she rode a line of one-tempi changes, Hess said, "Katherine, I think Brilliant likes demonstrating these movements."

Her father, Michael, remarked, "I think the feeling is mutual between horse and rider." Katherine smiled as she finished her clean and expressive changes. After riding these challenging movements, Hess directed her to let Brilliant stretch long and low. "It is important that a horse knows that after he does such difficult movements he will be allowed to stretch like a 3- or 4-year-old."

Olympic hopeful Nancy Smith and her 11-year-old Danish Warmblood gelding, Donneur, entered the ring ready to tackle the hard stuff. A quick clap,

clap from Hess and off they went into trot lateral work—from shoulder-in to half pass and back to shoulder-in. Hess broke up the work by having Smith ride a lengthening down the long wall between each exercise. The forward work served to keep the horse in front of the leg and on the aids.

The advanced pair moved onto flying change work. The focus for the session was on one-tempi changes. To ensure that the canter was in front of Smith's leg, Hess directed her to ride five to 10 strides in collected canter, then five to 10 strides in medium canter, a medium canter on the open side of a 20-meter circle and then onto a diagonal to ask for a set of ones. Hess explained that including forward work between the changes helped to keep the canter 100 percent in front of the leg. To ask for the "go," Smith asked Donneur with pressure but not tension. Hess told her not to use the whip, because this was the source of the tension. "The horse must accept the rider's body language and leg," Hess reminded everyone. As the horse came across the diagonal several times with forward, jumping sets of two to four ones, Hess exclaimed, "Super!"

Pirouettes were next. Hess quickly pointed out that Donneur had the habit of sitting too much behind. "Come out of the pirouette in medium canter on the circle," he directed. "Give the reins and go out. Work him with a long, stretched neck so he can balance his own body. This way, the horse can stretch under his body without using his neck." Soon this eager beaver was jumping expressively in each step, and the previous labored appearance dissolved.

Kim Aikens, also an amateur rider, and her 10-year-old Danish Warmblood, Cajo, entered the ring next. This big bay and his long-legged rider caught the attention of the audience. Cajo appeared tight in the neck, so Hess got right to work. "This horse needs to stretch out

and be long. Let's ride a few transitions: medium trot—collected trot," Hess instructed. "Give the rein during the transitions to ensure that you are riding them properly from your seat." Flying changes made up the meat of the work. After demonstrating a few three and four tempis, Hess asked Aikens to ride an exercise to help the horse stay forward and jumping in his changes: "Ride medium canter on the diagonal line, collect before X, and then ride the flying change. The horse must be absolutely out in front of you."

Then, to help the straightness and the acceptance of the inside leg, Hess pulled out another exercise from his back pocket. "Ride shoulder-in on the long wall, half pass to the centerline, flying change and shoulder-in on the centerline." As the changes came more fluid and expressive Hess announced, "Bravo!" He then challenged Aikens to ride five one-tempi changes on the diagonal. Here, he discovered their weakness. With total disregard for Aikens' aids, Cajo continued on the diagonal with another two to three one-tempi changes. Her first attempt ended with almost double the amount of desired changes. "You have to stop. I can't count so many American changes," Hess announced. He told Aikens that this was an issue that needed further addressing at home. With too many ones and an uphill passage and piaffe that needed to stretch more, Hess remarked, "I think many dressage riders wish they had your problems."

Nancy Smith came back with her second horse, Donatella, a 12-year-old

Westfalen mare. The pair warmed up with lateral work and lengthenings and then quickly got down to work on the main subject of the session—passage. To make sure Donatella was in front of the leg and on the aids, Hess asked Smith to ride medium trot across the diagonal, collect the trot for three or four strides at

X and then ride

medium
trot



again to the
end of the diago-

nal. To begin the passage, Hess asked Smith to come onto a circle. The mare had a tendency to get tight and slow in the movement, so Hess asked Smith to rise to the passage with a long rein, always thinking forward. She rode a 20-meter circle in passage, and Hess directed her to ride medium trot—collected trot—medium trot on the long wall to reinforce the necessary forward tendency. After doing a few of these sequences, the mare loosened up in her back and came bigger in the neck.

Riders and auditors are hoping Hess will return to share his knowledge once again. Maybe they will convince Larry Poulin to arrange that Florida carriage ride for Hess after all. 📧



Christoph Hess is an Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) "I" judge and is an accredited Professional Riding Instructor from the German Equestrian Federation (FN), where he is Head of Instruction and of the Personal Members Department. He has written many books, including *Better Riding—Where is the Problem?* Visit the Web site hofbettenrode.de.