

What I Wish I'd Known Then

Feeling True Collection

By Donna Richardson

I wish I had really understood earlier that the essence of dressage is collection. Like most teenagers, all I wanted to do was jump. Fortunately, I my instructor, Emmy Grant, made us spend 40 minutes a day “inflicting dressage” on our patient school horses. I learned ~ the difference between a shoulder-in and a leg yield, a clean versus ~ a late flying change and how much bend to put in a half pass. I actually got pretty good at “doing the tricks,” although I had little idea why I was doing them other than to please Emmy. Later, when it became clear that I was much better at this dressage stuff than I ever would be at jumping, I somehow got my converted jumper, an enormous Appendix Quarter Horse, to Grand Prix. We never scored higher than 58 percent but, in those days, low 60s would get you on the Olympic team. My first “serious” dressage horse was a talented 3-year-old warmblood named Astaire. As we progressed through the levels, I realized there was a huge hole in my dressage education. Although I rode Astaire to the California Dressage Society’s Open Third Level Horse of the Year reserve, I was tired of the “needs more engagement” and “needs uphill balance” comments I was always receiving. And I had no idea how to fix the problem. My instructors here, I’m sure, tried to explain it to me, but I just wasn’t understanding. So Astaire and I went to Germany to train with Jo Hinnemann. For six weeks I did not hear the word ‘gut’ (good). Nothing was good, not the energy, not the balance or straightness Jo didn’t care that my half passes were flowing or that my flying changes were clean. My horse simply wasn’t collected, and so nothing could be sufficient. Astaire and I strove mightily, usually leaving the ring drenched with sweat but still not making that so-anticipated breakthrough.

Then one day, after perhaps the thousandth instruction to “push him forward into your hand, half halt and give,” it happened. After a medium trot diagonal, I gathered Astaire’s energy into my hand, then softened.

He rocked back onto his hind legs and carried me through the corner with a forehand lightness I had never felt before. For a few magical strides, he just waited attentively, in perfect balance, for my next request. For a few moments, anything—passage, piaffe, extension, half pass—felt possible. ‘Ja, richtig,’ Jo finally said, softly. “That’s it.” “It,” my friends, was collection, the top of the mountain, the peak of the Training Scale. There’s an old saying that “when the student is ready, the teacher will come.” Jo didn’t say anything I hadn’t heard before. I just kept trying to follow the same instructions, again and again and again. Then one day, when I was ready. when the horse was ready, when the stars were in alignment, collection just happened. And it really was like Paul seeing the blinding light on the road to Damascus—sudden, immediate change. The feel was entirely different. Learning the “tricks” is important, but it’s really only the beginning. Too much emphasis on tricks alone tends to produce a horse held into a politically correct frame who marches like a robot through the tests. Collection is not easy to learn. You need to find a horse that knows how to do it and a human who can show you how to ask. Neither is easy to find. The number of instructors who truly insist on riding from “seat to leg” is still small but growing. But trust me. Once you’ve felt true collection, even for a few strides, you’ll never want to ride any other way.

Donna Richardson is a USEF “5” judge. In 1999, she and her horse Jazzman were named to the U.S. Equestrian Team. At the 1999 Pan American Games in Canada, she won a team gold medal and finished sixth individually. In 2002, at the Australia CD, she was on the bronze medal winning team. She teaches and trains at Fox Run Farm in San Marcos, California.