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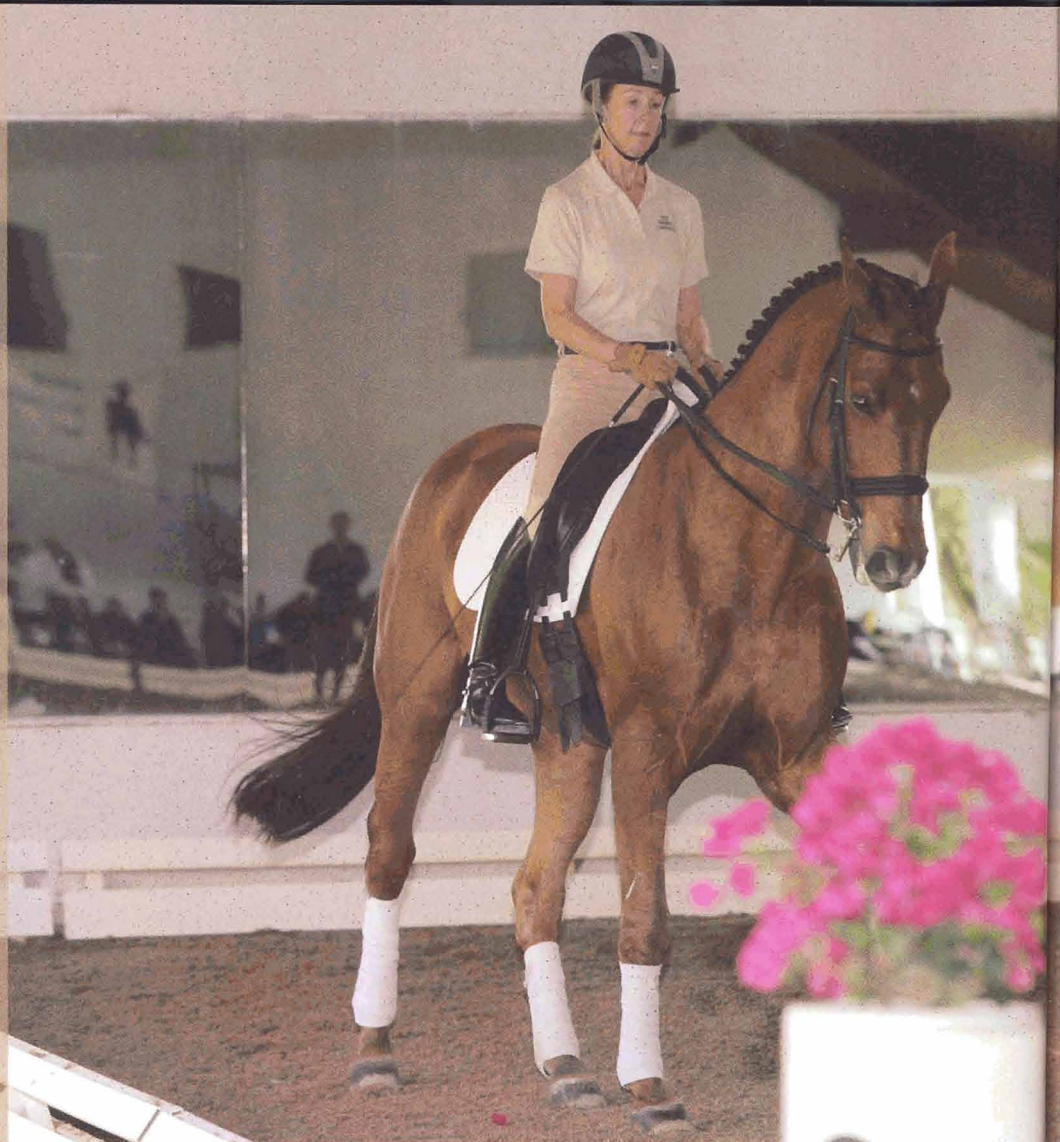
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TEACHING THE TRAINERS



Henk van Bergen
speaks trainer-to-trainer
at the 2009 Succeed®
USDF FEI-Level
Trainers' Conference.

By Beth Baumert
Photos by PhelpsPhotos.com

At this January gathering at Mary Ann McPhail's High Meadow Farm in Loxahatchee, Florida, Henk van Bergen captures the hearts of his audience immediately. He respects them as trainers and treats them as colleagues. He begins by saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, do you know that feeling in your stomach when one of your students goes down the centerline? It's not really nerves and it's not fear, because it's not you in the saddle. It's the feeling of hope—hope that your pupil will do well after he has worked so hard. That's the feeling I have for myself right now," he says. "It's not nerves or fear. It's hope and a feeling of responsibility. I hope you will understand what I try to explain. I don't ask you to agree with me. I'm only here to explain how I've worked over the past 40 years. My method gave me a successful business, and it didn't



Mary Ann Grant on Westenwind

give me enemies."

It's true. It would be hard to ever disagree with van Bergen. He's just too logical, which is why he's so successful with horses and riders. At one point, he says, "We don't want to change 'wrong' into 'good.' We want to make it a little bit better every day. Many little bits are a lot after awhile." This is van Bergen's strength as we will see, but today his first concern is the trainer's responsibility to his horse.

The Trainer's Responsibilities

Van Bergen wants us to know that we are watched in the way we work with animals. Those who look out for the humane treatment of animals aren't necessarily horsemen. So, while they may love animals, they might not know horses. They might not know how

much horses love their work or how horses love to learn. Also, they might not understand that learning happens on the edge. "That's the problem. 'Very good' and 'wrong' are very close," he says. "Progress happens on the edge, and you have to find the edge. I promise you, the horse will not give you a Grand Prix from sugar and pats. You have to bring him to the point where he might become tense before he learns. Improvement happens on the edge."

Van Bergen tells us that he has had two great trainers: From one, he learned the ideal. This trainer tried to avoid mistakes. The second one helped him to solve problems. "That second trainer has been more helpful to me," he says. "It is only when the horse makes a mistake, that we find the edge. And when we recognize the mistake, it is no longer a mistake."

The horses in this clinic are never punished for mistakes, but they are not rewarded for them either. "They must not get the feeling they were successful after a mistake," van Bergen says. "The best correction in schooling is disappointment. That mistake is information for the rider.

"The future of the sport belongs to us [trainers]," he says. "The point is not *whether* you reach your goal, but *how* you reach your goal. Don't walk away from your responsibility. Finding that fine line is a difficult job. If your student is unfair to his horse in the warm-up area at a show, it's your fault. The warm-up area used to be a secret place but, now, the spectators can buy tickets, and the organizers put the restaurant next to the warm-up."

"Take care that riding is fun," he reminds us. The trainer is the psychologist and the organizer of the farrier, the correct fit of the saddlery, the nutrition and putting all the pieces together. "All that complaining, blaming the judges and looking for excuses everywhere except

inside yourself doesn't help," he says. "There is no judge that says the judging system is perfect, but the work at the show should be happy and easy. That's what the judge wants to see. The trainer working at home doesn't want the horse to be happy every moment, because then he would never learn anything. But, at the show, the judge should see that the work is happy, and the trainer is the mirror for the rider. He sits in the corner, not making himself obvious, because the teaching must be complete by the time we are at the show."

The Good Instructor

Van Bergen's definition of a good teacher is a simple one: A good teacher is the one whose pupils return. "After the first lesson, the student is usually just confused, not better. He must come back to get better." But it's not that easy.

Van Bergen talks about the qualities of a great teacher. The teacher should make the subject simple. "The student mustn't feel he has to be a genius to do dressage," he says. "The teacher encourages, motivates and translates the horse's body language."

The dressage teacher must understand the horse. "If you want to catch a fish, you have to think like fish," he says. "The dressage teacher has to translate the horse's behavior, and teach the pupil the language that is the aids."

How does such a complicated matter become simple? That is van Bergen's forte. He finds the main problem, and does one thing at a time. "If the horse is not thinking forward, and he's not on the bit, and the rider can't sit, then we forget about the horse's need to go forward and on the bit, and we go to the longe line for a sitting lesson." Then, the horse can be asked to go forward and come on the bit—one thing at a time. He warns teachers not to give students so much information that it is impossible for them to react. This principle

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Courtney King-Dye rode Bogner B at the Trainer's Conference in Florida.

applies to the training of the horse, too. "Don't expect too much," he says. "If the horse is doing the best he can, you have to respect that. Otherwise, he will become tired or frustrated. 'Better' is sometimes the enemy of 'good.' Ask often, expect little and reward a lot."

With the riders in this symposium, van Bergen wants to see balance. He compares dressage work to that of jumpers. "When you make an effective preparation, then the horse has a chance at the fence. You need the balance from which you can begin." For van Bergen, finding the balance is all about transitions and half halts.

Balance and Self-carriage

Transitions are van Bergen's favorite exercises, and they are done to get the balance and to keep it. The same is true of half halts. He likens the rider in a half halt to a tightrope walker. With arms left and right, the tightrope walker finds the balance in the middle. To keep the

balance, experienced tightrope walkers need little arm movement left-to-right, but when they are just learning, they need more movement. For the rider, his half halts (and transitions) are back-to-front and front-to-back balancing acts, but the principle is the same. When the rider and horse are attuned to one another, the half halts become subtle or even invisible.

One of the demonstration horses is quick to go forward from his rider's leg, but he doesn't pay attention to the rider's half halts and downward transitions. The horse's first reaction to the half halt is to pull, and van Bergen thinks like a horse. "They are all interested in speed," he says. "That's their defense—running." The horse's excess activity creates tension in his neck and back. "If he complains in the contact, it's OK until he gets round, and then you can soften the contact." Then, he advises the rider to be careful. "Go as much forward as you can manage with softness," he says.

"Never build up more activity in the hind leg than you can manage in front. He must learn to be round but be on his own legs. Then you can slowly build up more and more activity once the horse is balanced."

Van Bergen uses the transitions to help the horse with the balance and make him finer in the contact. "That wonderful feeling in the hand comes from the balance and self-carriage of the horse, not just because the rider's hands are fantastic," he says.

The horses are not allowed to take over in movements and lose the balance. One of the demonstration horses starts to take over in the half pass. Van Bergen says, "If he takes over and makes the movement by himself, he will, for sure, do it without taking the weight on the inside hind leg. Then, the profit from the exercise is gone." He asks the rider to go back to the shoulder-in.

"Why a shoulder-fore or shoulder-in? Because it puts the hind leg in a position to carry the weight." He demonstrates on his own two legs how the horse in half pass needs to push and then step forward-sideways enough to carry: push—carry, push—carry. The horse must cross the hind legs and carry enough so the rider's inside rein can be soft. Then the finishing touch after a good transition, half halt or movement is when the horse is nice in the hands. "When the rider can give the hands, the job is done," he says.

Seat and Contact

Van Bergen sometimes wants the horses rounder because he wants more relaxation. "You want the feeling that the horse could stretch at any time," he says. "Stiffness in the neck quickly becomes stiffness in the back and then stiffness of the hind leg." The reverse is true, as well: A relaxed neck enables

a relaxed back and a comfortable place for the rider to sit. Then, the rider has access to the horse's hind legs. He wants each horse to exercise on his own four legs without needing the rider's hands. "I don't want to hold the horse in a position," he says. "We always go in the direction that they carry themselves."

When this balance is achieved, the rider can work on creating more activity. He activates the hind legs while keeping the neck relaxed. The horse learns that he doesn't necessarily surge forward from the leg aid, but with the rein aid he lifts in collection. Then, the more he collects, the more actively he can go forward again—"staying between my legs and hands and under my seat, even when the hands go away." Later, piaffe and passage are the result of working on perfect transitions forward and back.

When Shawna Harding rides, van Bergen comments that the basics are done when the rider has absolute control over the rhythm and the position, because the rhythm, in combination with the position, makes the balance. "She didn't learn this from me," he says. "This is the product of ambition and perfect schooling. This balance must be there before I can teach the horse anything. It's a waste of time to do exercises out of balance."

He watches Luis Denizard riding and comments that he "plays" with his horse, shortening the stride while keeping activity and then transitioning forward again. "This playing builds up the relationship," he says. In the medium trot, he warns, "Not too much. Keep him on your seat" to keep the collection in the extension.

Van Bergen comments that Courtney King-Dye is a product of the best training. "From a teacher's point of view, you can only be as good as your students," he says. "When you explain a concept

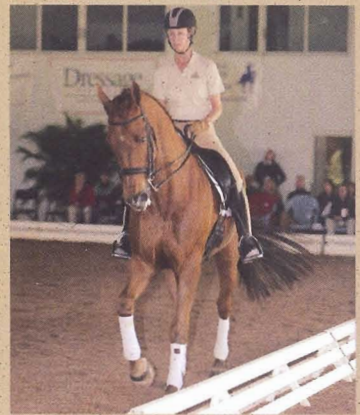
to your student, she must be able to understand, process and translate it to the horse. Pupils improve teachers as well as the reverse." He notes that she uses exercises not as an end result but as a tool to make the horse more supple and through. "Although she has one of the best positions I've seen," he says, "her position supports the function. It doesn't 'die in beauty.'"

When Jessica Jo "JJ" Tate rides, van Bergen comments that the riding is as technically perfect as it can be. She demonstrates the walk and canter pirouettes, and he reminds us that the walk is the heart of the walk pirouette, and the canter is the heart of the canter pirouette.

From the beginning, Tate worried about the trot becoming too "passagey." Van Bergen introduces quick, short steps to teach the horse to activate behind without thrusting the whole body forward. As the horse learns, he makes natural mistakes. For example, the neck becomes too high, and van Bergen explains how that blocks the hind legs, so Tate lowers the neck as if she wants him to stretch. Van Bergen notices that Tate uses the whip when the horse is relaxed, so the horse improves. He comments that if she were to use the whip during a tense moment, it would have gotten worse. He talks about use of the whip with such sensitivity. He says, "Touch the skin." Tate's horse stays very connected and through. He is smart, and we notice how quickly he understands. He—and all the horses—are happy in the work. They demonstrate the goal of our sport: "Good dressage training always improves the horse's movement." 🐾

Henk van Bergen trained riders for the Olympic Games in 1972, 1984, 1988 and 1992, where his Dutch team won a silver medal. He has trained Juniors, Young Riders and adults in Great Britain for eight years. Based in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, he and his wife, Wilma, own and operate Dressuurstal Brakkenstein.

Riders & Sponsors



Mary Ann Grant

Jessica Jo "JJ" Tate rode Sacramento, a Dutch gelding owned by Stonegate Equestrian. Courtney King-Dye rode Bogner B, an Oldenburg gelding owned by Jeff Fugua. Shawna Harding rode Richmond, a Dutch stallion owned by Kathleen Broug. Jennifer Baumert rode Lancelot, a Danish gelding owned by Katherine Pfaff. Luis Denizard rode Nalando, a Dutch gelding owned by Donna Dunbar. Mary Ann Grant rode Westenwind, a Hanoverian gelding owned by Lauren Walfish. Lynda Alicki rode Donates, an Oldenburg stallion owned by Melanie Pai.

Sponsors included Horse of Course, Succeed, Schleese Saddlery, SmarkPak, Dressage Training Online and *Dressage Today*. Katherine Robertson, Senior Coordinator for USDF Education Programs, and her staff ran the conference.