

Maria Günther at Flintridge

The Annual FEI Dressage Symposium, Part 2.

by Kit Davis Stebbins

Lateral Work Reveals Rhythm Strengths

Half pass demonstrations showed clearly the theme of rhythm running through all riding. The FEI states that all lateral movements "should remain free and regular, maintained by a constant impulsion, yet... must be supple, cadenced, and balanced. The impulsion is often lost, because of the rider's preoccupation mainly in bending the horse and pushing him sideways." To ride the half pass as a "variation of the travers...on the diagonal," the rider needs to start in shoulder-in. Most riders put the outside leg back too early and don't use enough inside leg, so the horse starts in travers on the long side—if a rider corrects this quickly enough, he should still get a good score, everything else being good. However, the zig-zags don't offer much time for correction, so good habits become very important. Unevenness in the half pass is not a mark that belongs to gaits, Maria noted, but to responsiveness to the aids or to the riding: the use of the outside half-halt and release, and correct response to this, fixes most unevenness.

The afternoon rides provided many opportunities for schooling tips in half pass. Demonstration rider Jill Duxbury on *Godin* showed the effects of riding a volte before and during the half pass to encourage engagement, acceptance of the aids, and refreshing of the rhythm. Variations such as riding shoulder-in to volte to half pass to medium trot forward to shoulder-in and a repeat revealed the corrections and infinite possibilities available to a thinking rider, fixing momentary resistance without argument. Maria kept up the spirits of the demonstration riders in much the



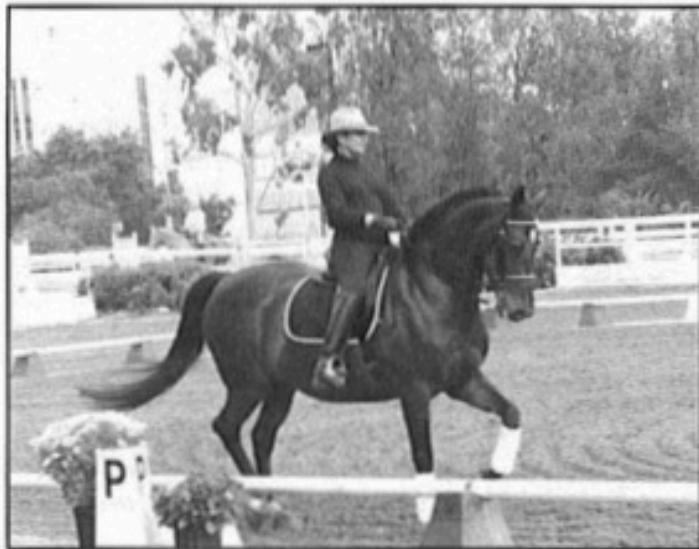
same way as she must keep her own horses happy in their work: a tiny resistance becomes an opportunity, not only to fix an immediate problem but to improve everything in the horse's bearing and the rider's feel. As demonstration riders, we wanted to be perfect. Maria always made us feel we had done something nice for the audience and our horses by doing something "fixable" in our rides, and she proved on these two afternoons that every problem we came across was fixable.

Maria made an important comment about canter zig-zags that our judges might want to note: one shouldn't count the first three (or four) strides of a zig-zag (within reason) because it is hard for a judge to tell exactly where a rider is beginning. Once the first change is made, and the actual counting begins, it will be made clear by the horse's relationship to the centerline whether the rider has counted the first steps correctly. In other words, try not to declare a

miscount on the basis of the start of the movement. A tip to riders of the sweeping half passes of the GP Special test: think of them as a light, forward exercise in saving space. The horse needs enough space to have at least one straight step for his flying change. Plan as well as Monica Theodorescu on the tape we were watching, and you can get two.

Maria suggested additional points about lateral work that she has found useful: once a horse has progressed beyond leg-yield as a youngster, she prefers to do all lateral work other than shoulder-in bent in the direction of movement so as not to confuse the horse with bend conflicts. Also, she'd rather not do travers along the long side, since most horses prefer to move haunches-in along the rail, the haunches being wider than the shoulders, anyway. She uses travers on a circle often but prefers both shoulder-in and renvers (in trot and counter-canter) along the wall. These lateral exercises encourage

D&CT would like to apologize to Ms. Stebbins for misspelling her name in the first part of this article.



P:

...until lightness and self-carriage appear as if by themselves. The author on Lady Kastanette.

straightness by moving the shoulder off the wall and in front of the haunches.

Out of the lateral movements and collection, the canter pirouettes are developed. Important points to keep in mind are that the horse must keep his canter outline in the pirouette, must carry himself, and may make a dinner plate sized circle behind. Six, seven, and eight strides around are all correct; none is better than the other. The tempo of the canter can slow a bit in the pirouette, which is still correct if it moves toward four-beat.

A horse has to really "take" collection before it can do a pirouette. Half-halts down to almost canter in place are good preparation. In riding pirouettes, help the horse balance by collecting, establishing bend from slight shoulder-in position, then apply outside (mostly) aids to start. Remember to help the horse to "come out" soon enough: halfway through a half-pirouette and three-quarters of the way through a full one, start increasing inside aids to maintain balance, bend, and rhythm.

Speaking about judging the extended canter, Maria said, with a straight face, "I have never seen an extended canter in a dressage test." This was in the morning session at JPL. After audience laughter had died down, Maria advised riders to really "go for it" schooling at home, alternating coming back for the change with proceeding at counter-canter. Once the horse is accustomed to this, one can perform extensions with all prudent daring at the show, given the need to finish

the rest of the test.

She says getting the good downward transition is just a matter of education, of doing the exercise in a manner the horse comes to understand. She suggests not using a lot of "old" inside rein so the horse doesn't collect in travers but to feel you are giving with the "old" inside rein. If you can give this rein early while collecting from the body, you can avoid having the horse change early and keep freedom of the shoulder for the change. Later, Hilda Gurney on Peggy Thomas' *Willie the Great* did a roaringly beautiful extended canter in her demonstration ride. Maria said that six excellently-sitting straight strides to a beautiful change are not too many in a downward transition for a big horse going "all-out" and awarded the movement a nine.

Before discussing our last closely-examined points of training, and work in hand, I want to thank the demonstration riders who helped make the morning academic sessions come alive. Hilda Gurney, just returned from Florida and qualifying for the Olympic squad going to Europe, generously brought three horses—Mary Contakos' *Lavinia*, *Domingo*, a Grand Prix stallion now owned by Melissa Meeker, and *Willie* himself. Her participation was most appreciated by all of us who understand how wearing travel and returning home to many needy clients and animals can be. It is typical of Hilda to put the good of the sport—or art—first and give even more of herself than most of us could ever have in reserve.

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Using a light touch keeps work from the ground "like playing." Rachel Saavedra on Comus.

Mary Grace Davidson, a judge and rider, was also most generous. Trailering in from the San Francisco area just for the symposium, she always contributes greatly to everyone's knowledge. It would be awfully easy as a judge to stay in the purely theoretical plane, but Mary Grace is always willing to put her own riding on the line.

Another most valuable rider was professional Jill Duxbury. Her demonstration of work in hand is a testimony to her Spanish Riding School-based training, and her willingness to let us be part of introducing *Godin* to one-tempo changes was a risk that worked.

Rachel Saavedra, panel moderator and presentation organizer, rode Bob Attiyeh's stallion *Comus*, Alix Fargo's *Fable*, and Dee Thiesmeyer's *Dante*. Rachel's endurance is possibly only exceeded by Maria's, as Maria conducted the afternoon sessions on foot and without a break after giving so much each morning, to try to teach us everything in two short days. I was also allowed to contribute on my mare *Lady Kastanette*, who learned tempi changes and came out at Intermediate II a few months after the symposium, then moved on to GP shortly thereafter, giving me my USDF gold medal.

Dressage is Done Sitting: Lightness is Allowed

Work on flying changes was something that became a highlight of the riders. At least two of us understood, in theory, that a rider should sit for the changes but felt, in practice, that coming out of the saddle with our seats enabled the horse to round his back more and change more easily. Everything in our earlier jumper training made our bodies believe it and swing up as the horse rounded its back for the change. Maria knew exactly what we were feeling, having had that feeling herself once.

First, she explained carefully that dressage is *done* sitting. Sitting is a requirement. (We knew that.) Next she talked about rider suppleness, flexibility, and the need to be able to follow the back wherever it goes, only increasing the pressure on any point of the back when consciously using the increased pressure as part of an aid package, and then only as part of the swing of a rhythmic application of the aid. (We knew that, too.) Then she painted a picture, with gestures and words, of a regally erect back, elastic lower spine and pelvis, with even distribution of weight

from calves through Kreutz. For a change left, the right "bun" lightly follows the back, steadyng the horse for straightness. The left "bun" (and only the "bun") does a little up-and-forward soft sweep to ease the inside hind leg forward and through. All the other correct aids for changes apply while this is going on, of course.

Two years (and with many reminders from almost as many eyes on the ground as Dr. Neckermann used for his entry) later, I can confidently say my mare does her one-tempis comfortably from "bun" to "bun." This says a lot, because changes had been her area of difficulty. Her changes to four and three strides were never very good until she suddenly understood ones, a concept developed for her by Eicke Von Veltheim (who was on the German team when Maria started riding with Bubi) and reinforced by Maria.

The wonderfully liberating feeling this lesson produced exemplifies what training from Maria gives: a sense of the lightness and ease that is our goal in dressage. It increased my anticipation and eagerness for the next symposium in April, when more is sure to be revealed.

Important points in judging changes are to remember that "counting" mistakes is not as important as expressiveness, throughness, straightness, and rhythmic swing. If a judge has in mind an eight as a score, and there is an error, it will drop you to a six; however, if the changes are rushing or stiff or a little short throughout, with no mistakes, the best possible score is four.

Important in schooling changes in series is that the horse must maintain a pleasant roundness and a giving attitude. A volte before beginning and one or two in the middle of the series as needed left or right, and a volte at the end can correct most problems of rushing, stiffness in the jaw that goes through the back, and a lack of coming through far enough with a hind leg. Voltes accomplish just what they do in other exercises: freshen responses to a half-halt, soften the feel, and re-establish rhythm in a calming way, particularly when the rider aims for a release of the inside rein. Straightness and attitude and lightness appear as if by magic when a rider eases up on driving for nine times two and listens to the horse's needs. A return to canter-walk (shoulder-in) work and praise can refresh everyone's attitude.

Initiating one-tempo changes needs to come slowly, "like playing." Riding reins down the long side to a soft straightening and change can prepare the horse for the first one-one. This accustoms the horse to an easy change to true canter and prepares him to go back to counter-canter with his inside shoulder already placed for a comfortable change. Much reward, quiet repetition, removal of stress, and re-establishment of balance with walk transitions all allow the horse to accept later increases of demand with aplomb. Drilling on the exercise, of course, has no place: if the rider has listened to the horse and felt for the balanced moment when success is likely, success and quick reward follow.

Piaffe/Passage: "If the Horse is Leaning on the Hands, It's a Rider Problem"

The exercises that need to be the most "like playing" are piaffe and passage. Maria's logical answer to which should be taught first comes naturally from the horse: "whatever he offers first." Maria's answer to the question of when to use alternate legs and when to use both together as aids also comes from the horse: "whatever he needs." She says that both leg aids for piaffe or passage have very strong adherents among very successful trainers. She did point out that the aids should be used only a little behind the girth—they are essentially driving aids.

Here the softest hands are needed. For increased roundness, raise hands slightly to activate the curb. Pulling should never be a part of this work. Here, as in all riding, "*if the horse is leaning on the hands, it's not the horse; it's the rider!*" Here, as in all riding, the important part of the half-halt is the release, so the horse can come into self-carriage and develop his own suspension and elevation. The piaffe should work toward a long phase in the air, and a slow tempo, therefore, collecting from passage to piaffe is an important exercise.

When in the horse's training to begin piaffe/passage work depends on the horse's responses to the training scale. Certainly the horse must move with rhythm and be receptive to the aids of the rider. He must accept contact and show increasing suspension at extended, working, and collected paces, combining power with straight-

ness and lightness. The effects of the rein aids, supported by forward driving aids, must flow through the body and into the quarters. The horse should be working somewhere around Third Level with confidence. The horse may have offered some passage-like steps or half-steps when responding to strong half-halts from a medium trot. Or the horse may have produced some trot in place when frustrated in a desire to move forward away from an alarming object on the trail. The horse may passage in hand or under saddle on the way home to dinner. Letting the horse lead the training in the beginning keeps the necessary joy in the movement.

However the exercises are started, actual training sessions should be short and filled with reward and praise. Some horses respond best when working alone under a rider. Most others need a person on the ground, with a gentle whip hand, to educate them to produce the desired activity consistently when the aids are applied. Almost all horses benefit from work in hand, though this requires a gentle expert who has first learned the right touch on experienced horses.

After watching the morning tapes and evaluating some of the best piaffes and passages in the world, we moved both days to the demonstration horses, each of whom required a different approach to bring about its best in engagement, elevation, and joy of movement in and out of transitions. Six horses show a wide range of individual differences.

Preparing to work piaffe/passage begins with the warm-up and a check of the training scale. The first horse, *Kastanette*, a hot mare, was quite rhythmic but needed many soft, repeated walk-trot transitions and half-halts, riding for the release of the hands, to give herself up to the aids of the rider. She wanted to drive her tremendous power forward into a deep and heavy neck. While contact, impulsion, swing, and straightness were there, the necessary responses to the aids with the whole body were not. She was ridden repeatedly softly forward, given little quarter-halts with the seat, and the release of each of these helped the mare to grow "bigger" and lighter in front. Once the horse has gone through the training scale steps, the rest of the day's work program keeps her there until the piaffe-passage work starts or is interspersed into other work. Since piaffe and passage are very strong points of this

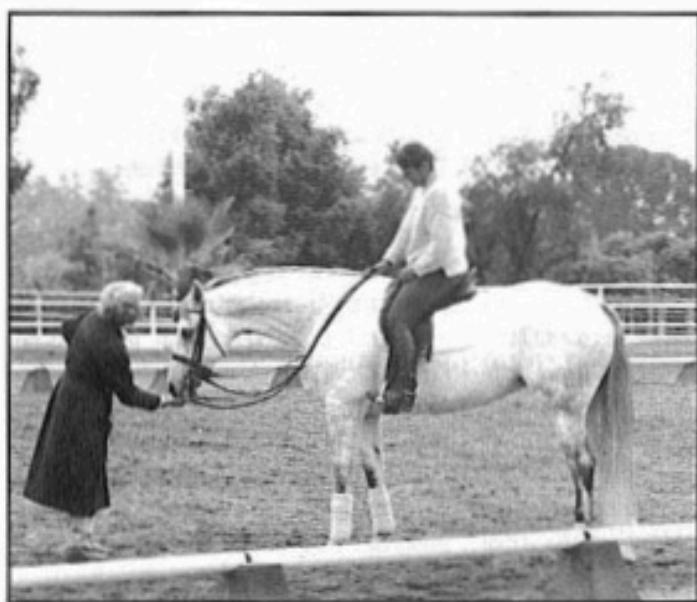
mare, soft transitions in self-carriage were the goals.

A little passage out of the walk was asked first: push horse in front of the leg, sit heavy, and give, and give, with the hand. Maria checked whip response from the ground, but the mare was engaged and hot enough that she was allowed to work on her own under the rider. The first piaffe was asked out of a walk volte to loosen the back. As the horse's nose approaches the track, half-steps are asked to activate the hind legs as the wall or rail approaches. This can be repeated a number of times using the wall as a visual barrier, encouraging the horse to collect itself. Then, passage forward out of a piaffe gained in this manner simply involves giving rein; piaffe out of this passage simply involves sitting heavy to collect and giving rein, dropping to walk to finish or passing forward again. Passage to centerline piaffe-on-the-spot was just as smooth, straight, and elevated as on the wall. End of lesson.

Comus' warm-up proceeded through the training steps in a different manner. This impressive, big, at the time Fourth Level stallion wanted canter work to establish balance and forward swing, producing half passes to changes, and stretching down on the circle afterwards to confirm roundness, power, and engagement. Later, he was asked a little passage first, alternating with medium trot to get him in front of the rider, swinging powerfully, taking suspension from the medium trot, and slowing it down. The volte to piaffe half-steps as nose approached rail proceeded rhythmically after this preparation. *Comus* wanted Maria's light whip hand to help him understand what was required, but the whole lesson was still "like playing."

Keeping the horse in a good mood was the order of the day with all the horses, but watching the interplay between Maria's delicate hand, Rachel's light and sympathetic seat, and this powerful stallion's eager desire to please was especially rewarding to the audience. Reminders from Maria to "just have patience," and if a horse takes a couple of nice steps to stop and pat him or lightly move forward, kept the work like play. *Comus* is now showing Intermediate I successfully and will be showing his piaffe and passage developed this way next year.

Memory's warm-up included use of the volte



*The reward.
Hilda Gurney on
Lavinia, who is
receiving some
goodies from
Maria Guenther.*

in corners and in the middle of movements, giving and giving with the inside rein to produce and re-establish roundness, rhythm, and softness in the back. Renvers in the long-side canter again enabled releasing with the inside rein (with visual quarters control), schooling medium canter transitions in this way because all horses seem to want to do the downward transition in a travers fashion. Again the value of shoulder-in on long side coupled with renvers was shown to produce straight downward transitions. Properly prepared, asking a bit of shoulder-in downwards is all that is necessary. Truly memorable was watching Maria develop more expressiveness in piaffe and passage with this carefully prepared, experienced horse. Here, the "secret" of being a good groundperson was demonstrated, though not discussed.

Here, the phrase "dancing with one's horse" took on a new meaning: Maria used her hands like a philharmonic conductor; her whip was her baton. She produced elegant piaffe and passage steps like a dancer herself, guiding not just this horse but several of them to peak performances. How many miles Maria covered, lightly "dancing" her charges into expressiveness, is anybody's guess, but the horses noticed and imitated, responding with the light, supple transitions that are an all-too-seldom-seen goal. The audience was struck not only by Maria's grace and talent at bounding alongside the horses but

by her extraordinary fitness at being able to instruct into the microphone, positively and charmingly, throughout the performance without getting breathless. A good groundperson produces a happy feeling "like playing" in the horse: that was evident. It also involves a grace and fitness we would do well to strive for. Mary Grace has produced outstanding freestyle performances with *Memory* by bringing out his best.

Lavinia's preparation concentrated on soft acceptance of the bit. For her, when the good contact is established, the other steps on the training scale are there. *Lavinia* was most successfully showing St. Georges and Intermediate I at the time. She is now showing successfully at Grand Prix. Her warm-up proceeded into a stretched long rein, with impulsion built from a forward/working rising trot into soft-handed collected trot transitions and rein-back on serpentine with lots of bend, then through many canter transitions and circles and voltes with release of the inside hand. Tension on the outside rein was eased with short, easy flexions and releases outside, and once acceptance of the bit was established, it was maintained through voltes in the canter work, and use of the corners and the short side of the ring, to regain softness.

Her piaffe and passage have always been done with no help from a groundperson—the mare sees no need for one—yet simply with acceptance of the bit came a soft, pulsing, ex-

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pressive piaffe out of a walk volte, then passage and reward. Transitions from passage to, first, a light medium trot and then to a soft, stretched frame like one would give at the end of a lesson and back increased relaxation and swing of the passage. Many horses would totally lose the impulse for the passage after being asked to stretch to the ground: considering the individuality of each horse was strongly underlined when *Lavinia* came back from the stretched position softly into her best passage.

Two horses worked in hand with Jill Duxbury, whose training shone in excellent demonstrations. Her body language and timing as she worked her *Godin* were exquisite, and she took the same light touch to Dee Thiesmeyer's *Dante*, with whom she had never worked, producing lovely expressive gaits from both. The question was raised how can we who have not used this technique learn enough of it to make it a beneficial thing to our horses? I think we need to see it done, certainly, and then move perhaps to line driving or work on the "double lunge" first, a technique Bubi Günther used with incredible success during his career.

For work in a single leading rein, tack can include side reins with a lunge caveson or side reins with the lead rein attached to the outside bit ring as help in straightening the horse. Use saddle or surcingle to hold everything in place. Certainly we have to practice on horses who already have the idea of piaffe aided from the ground before we ever try the process of teaching it this way to a new horse. The countless things that can go wrong have to be thoroughly anticipated by an experienced hand; all texts on the

subject need to be thoroughly digested, especially Podhajsky's *The Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, and as in anything else, an experienced eye watching the process makes it safer, even with a very experienced horse.

Help is available here: our excellent clinicians just need to be asked. I have had the incredible good fortune of being at Flintridge where Gerhard Politz trains, providing an ever-alert and helpful eye on the ground for all exercises. Especially rewarding has been my mare teaching me the double-lunge techniques with Gerhard's sharp eye watching. (He starts piaffe with almost all his young horses from the ground, either with one rein or line-driving.) The advantage of two reins, according to Maria, is that with two reins and the reinsman behind the horse, you can turn the horse and work piaffe on the centerline easily. It's a gradual process but a refreshing alternative for the experienced horse and a good way of explaining things to a new one. With a new horse, an assistant at the head is useful.

The question of when during the day to use the work from the ground to best advantage was raised. Again, "Let the horse tell you what he wants" was the logical response. (After the symposium, I used it with my mare on her lunging days, finishing work she liked with new work she liked, since the work was largely for my educational benefit.) Bubi Günther used it with some horses before riding to activate the hindquarters, with others at the end to help a relaxed horse into increased collection. Certainly, when teaching it, bringing the horse out a second time in the afternoon, after having worked in the morning,

for sugars and "play" and praise in hand for a few minutes, makes sense and is not too much to ask for a horse that has progressed far enough in the training steps to begin this type of work. This is especially helpful with horses who don't know that piaffe is something they want to do.

Maria likes to begin piaffing the same way she does under saddle, walking in volte and beginning to ask trot half-steps as the horse approaches the rail. Lightness in hand, produced with "giving" half-halts, is mandatory. If the horse kicks out a bit at the whip, this is quite an OK response, since the idea is to activate the hindquarters. This is why learning the safest places (vis-à-vis the hindquarters) to work from is so important. Jill demonstrated with *Dante* an excellent under-the-belly to the outside hand coronet band touch with the whip. The horse responded as to a fly, with a quick, active, lofty engagement of the outside hind. About whip technique throughout, "The horse can feel a fly land on him." Whacking the legs with the whip takes away the "playing" aspect and has no place in any work from the ground, unless the ground-person has stupidly put himself into a dangerous position of getting dragged or kicked—in which case saving oneself from certain disaster becomes paramount. (There was no need to demonstrate disaster-escaping at the symposium.)

The biggest gift Maria brought to us at the symposium was an infectious attitude—that passes easily from rider to horse—of joy: of light, forward corrections to problems of stiffness and heaviness and resistance that dissipated all problems through strong rider drive and generous giving. Horses gave back because they were pleased to feel the rewards of softness and praise.

Using the individuality of each horse to advantage was the key to each one's improvement: Alix Fargo's *Fable*, for example, started his warm-up with a thrilling forward gallop in half seat under Rachel, while Hilda's *Domingo* enjoyed quiet roundness and gentle, easy paces at the beginning. Both days ended with a ride demonstrating Grand Prix and Special movements, with Hilda riding *Domingo* the first day and a finely-tuned, most expressive *Willie the Great* on the second. Maria's commentary tied-in their rides with points covered in the morning sessions, creating a feeling of wholeness and completeness at the end of each day. ¶



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