

WINNING A LESSON & MOVING CLOSER TO MY GOAL
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At the 2006 Western Pennsylvania Dressage Association (WPDA) Year End Banquet, I won a lesson with Riding Instructor and USDF Silver Medalist Alexandra Mayer-Tarr, from Hartwood Equestrian Center. Alexandra donated a lesson for the End of the Year fundraiser for the Jr/YR Team. I am always interested in visiting new places with my horse Saber, so I jumped at the opportunity.

My horse and I are currently working on improving our collection and suppleness while maintaining a good connection with the bit. It is my goal to ride Second Level well at a recognized show and I have been training a level above. The necessary ingredients for a horse to show and succeed at Second Level includes an increase in the ability to load the hind quarters (collection), the proper thrust for medium paces, and to be reliably on the bit. Of course, the horse should have already demonstrated the necessary thrust and pushing power required in First Level. Also, Second Level requires a greater degree of straightness, bending, suppleness, throughness, and self-carriage than in First level, as stated in the USEF Rule Book. Below are some notes and key points that Alexandra made, which I have found very helpful and I will continue to use during my training.

“Give your horse a balanced place to stand on.”



To improve the connection with the bit it is necessary to understand what contact is and where it comes from. Contact is defined by Podhajsky in [1], is “the connection between the rider’s hands and the horse’s mouth, which governs the guidance and collection of the horse.” This connection is considered correct when maintained consistently. Furthermore, a perfect contact is only possible when the horse is balanced and able to carry himself without the need of any support from the reins; this state is referred to as ‘on the bit’ [1]. In the lesson, Alexandra explained that if you imagine the bit is a place were the horse has to stand on, then it is important for it to be evenly balanced. For example, if you drop the contact on the inside rein, then the horse’s inside shoulder will fall to the inside and analogously for the outside rein. In addition, too much contact on the outside rein causes the outside fore leg to shorten. If the rider does not have a consistent contact on the bit, a good connection cannot be achieved and, as a result, the horse does not have a balanced place to stand on. Alexandra assigned my horse and I several exercises to improve suppleness, while addressing the issue of a more effective contact with my horse.

One of the exercises that Alexandra assigned us included a series of what I call gymnastic lateral work (Diagram to the right: Exercise A, steps 1, 2 and 3). Riding down the long side, start with a shoulder-fore, then at letter E come off the railing for 2 or 3 steps, then leg yield back to the wall. The first time I attempted the lateral work I was too slow guiding the horse with my aids and ran out of room before finishing with the leg yielding. Alexandra said that you want your horse to be like a slinky. The movement should be fluid, smooth, and easy. This type of work will help my horse to become more straight, supple, and balanced in his work. In addition, this type of work will help me become more accurate on the timing of my aids (i.e. hands, seat, and legs). During this series of movements, Alexandra had me work on using my seat to turn my horse and lessen the use of my hands. In addition, she included up and down transitions, while staying in shoulder-fore. After a few laps, Saber and I were more connected and his quality of trot was amazing, however Alexandra noticed that our corners needed some improvement. As a rider, it is easy to blast around the corner without thinking about bending. To improve the quality of my corners, Alexandra had me ride a small circle in each corner of the ring.

The next series of exercises included another set of gymnastics of up and down transitions (Diagram to the right: Exercise B, step 1). I started riding a 20-meter circle in the middle of the ring, between letters

E and B at a walk, then picking up a trot continuing on the 20-meter circle. At the notches indicated on the diagram below, a down transition was made to a walk for two to three steps and then transition back up to a trot. Once my horse was listening to my aids and maintaining a good contact on the bit, I asked for the canter. At each notch on the circle, I asked for a simple change. The simple change of lead is a transition where the horse goes from canter to a few clear walk steps and immediately back to a canter with the opposite lead. The transition is performed without any trot steps between the two leads [3]. The simple change requires a great deal of balance and suppleness from the horse in order to perform the movement accurately. Counter canter is a very useful training tool, if done properly. For example, if your horse is tracking to the right in a counter canter, and bending left, this requires the horse to bend and load the hind legs more. This helps the horse to learn how to load (collect) more [2]. This exercise helped Saber become more balanced and improved the quality of canter to walk transitions due to the benefits from counter canter.

Finally, more walk to canter transitions and 10-meter circles were incorporated to the pattern (Diagram below: Exercise B, step 2). This was challenging and an excellent exercise to work on for improving collection because the horse is required to bend the hocks more, which increases the amount of time the hind legs, have to carry weight while balancing on a circle. Once Saber and I were fluent, another 10-meter circle was added after each progression (Diagram below: Exercise B, step 3-4). Eventually, a fourth 10-meter circle was added to the pattern to complete the gymnastic exercise for the horse (Diagram below: Exercise B, step 5). To work the other lead, she had us change direction through the circle with a simple change in the middle (Diagram below: Exercise B, step 6).

After our lesson, I felt that I learned a lot and I was impressed at the capabilities of my horse. As a rider, it is important to be just as willing to move up the levels, as it is to move down them, if needed. Alexandra mentioned that if the horse and rider have a weak foundation then it is never possible to move up the levels. The patterns and exercises that Saber and I learned during this lesson represent valuable tools to improve our collection, straightness, bending, suppleness, throughness, and the self-carriage that is required at Second Level. The lesson Alexandra gave Saber and I will definitely help us move forward in our training and achieve my goals as a rider who is working on moving up the levels. The donated lesson was not only a fundraiser for the WPDA Jr/YR Team, but also a greatly appreciated gift for Saber and I.

References:

1. Alois Podhajsky. *The Complete Training of Horse and Rider, In the Principles of Classical Horsemanship*. Wilshire Book Company, 1967. Page 41-43.
2. Charles de Kunffy. *The Athletic Development of the Dressage Horse, Manege Patterns*. Macmillan General Reference, A Simon & Schuster Macmillan Co. 1992. Pg.167-175.
3. 2006 USEF Rule Book (2006), DR105, section 7.

