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Dressage

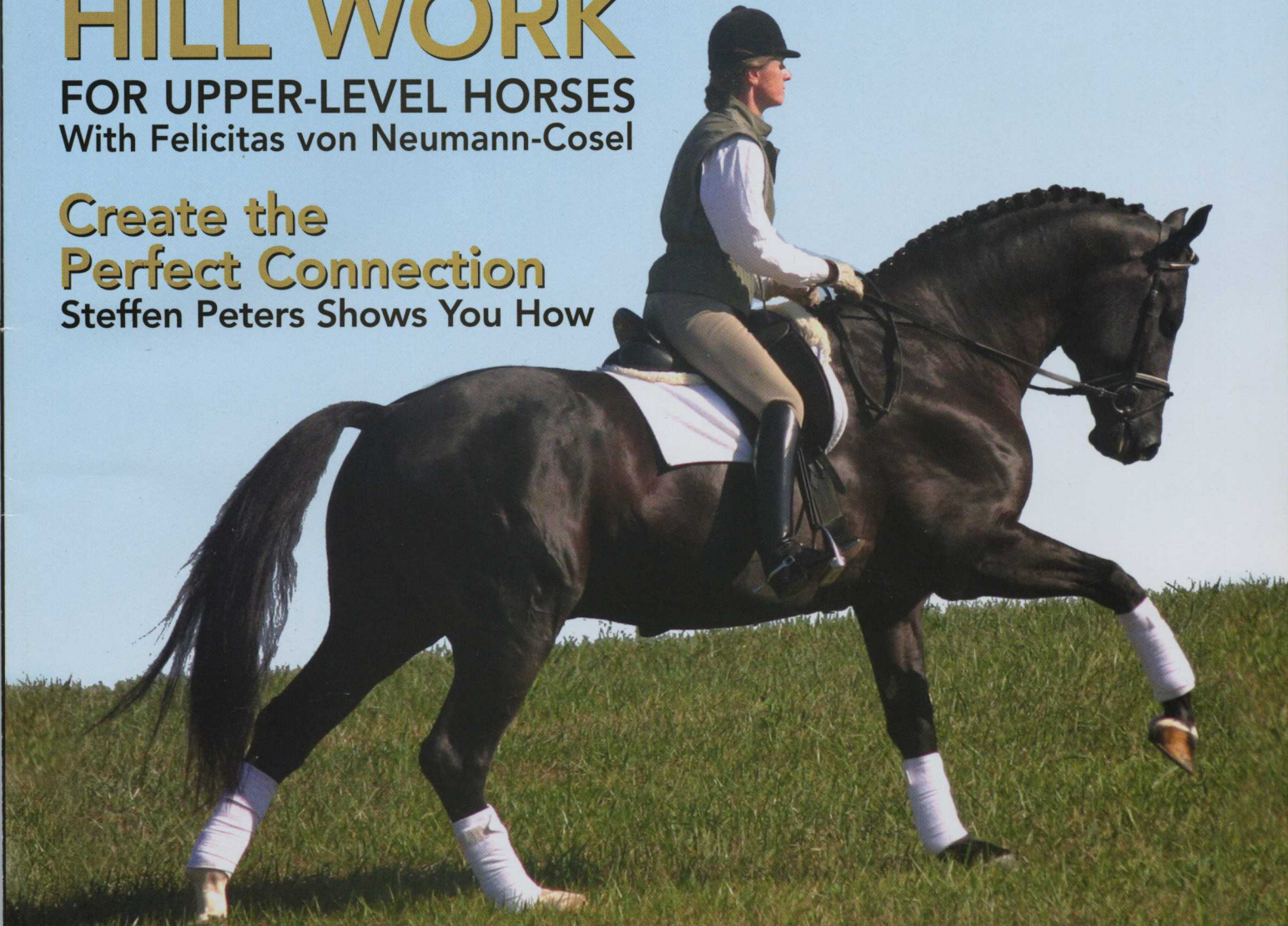
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February 2008

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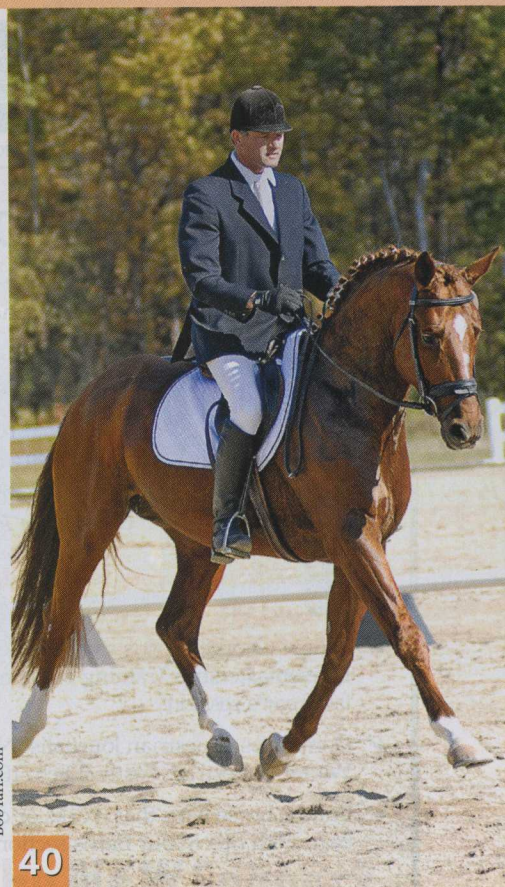
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ABOUT THE COVER: Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel rides Where's Waldo, a 7-year-old approved Hanoverian stallion owned by Bonnie Watrous
Photo by Mary McKenna

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5 Steps to Better Rider Awareness

Learn how to build a closer partnership with your horse to improve your dressage.

By *Andrea McManus*
and *Elizabeth Hanson*

The best dressage riders have a simple but important gift or skill: They have learned how to use their attention to notice the subtleties of movements between horse and rider. Proper use of this type of awareness makes every transition a little easier, a little more consistent and a little more fluid. Focusing attention well is one of the most important skills that a rider can develop.

Riding instructor Alex Chterba, two-time Olympic coach of the former Soviet Union, says that asking for engagement of the dressage horse is like driving a finely tuned Ferrari. You would not move your Ferrari from fifth gear into first gear without taking the necessary steps for the transition. The driver must have his attention on many things at one time. He can then notice how much clutch, break or gas is needed to make any transition. Much like the Ferrari, your horse will perform at peak level only when you are attentive and noticing exactly which riding aid is appropriate at which moment.

Riding manuals detail the most effective position for sitting in the saddle, but sitting correctly won't be effective until the rider is attentive to the position of her body in relation to the horse. To achieve this, try these five steps before and during your next ride:

1. Clear Your Head

As soon as you arrive at the barn, prepare yourself for riding by focusing your



Mary Cornelius

Great riders can feel the subtleties of movement between horse and rider.

attention on the task at hand and leaving any scattered thoughts at home. Distractions include everything other than your ride, and the smallest one takes away part of your attention. Concentrate on living in the present. Horses are very “present” animals and will sense if you are not.

If your mood is off or you are angry, the horse will pick up on that and won't understand that it is not directed toward him. The same holds true for any other emotion. At the end of a ride, we often blame the horse if it hasn't gone well. So clear your head and get into the present. You may be amazed at how your horse responds. Here are a few ways to clear your head:

First, take a look at the thoughts that are weighing on your mind. Look at the importance of each. If an item needs to be addressed, do so. If it does not need immediate attention, write it down. Then, you will not have to think about it until you get back to your car or home.

Next, take a break in a peaceful outdoor or natural surrounding—maybe your favorite place in the barn. Close your eyes and take some deep breaths. Focus on any tension in your body. As you continue to breathe deeply, imagine you are breathing into each area and releasing the tension. Slowly open your eyes and begin to notice your surroundings. You are now better prepared to focus your attention on your horse.

2. Become Aware of the Horse

While the nature of the horse is to give, his natural spirit is in the herd mentality. As herd animals, horses are sensitive to aggression of any kind. They are alert to body posture, smell and, most important, to movement. Every step you take or movement you make sends a message, and they are constantly trying to understand what you want.

So greater awareness allows you to get feedback that is immediate and strong.

When you keep your attention outward and communicate clearly with the horse, you build trust and commitment in the team. This allows you to tap into the horse's fiercely loyal nature.

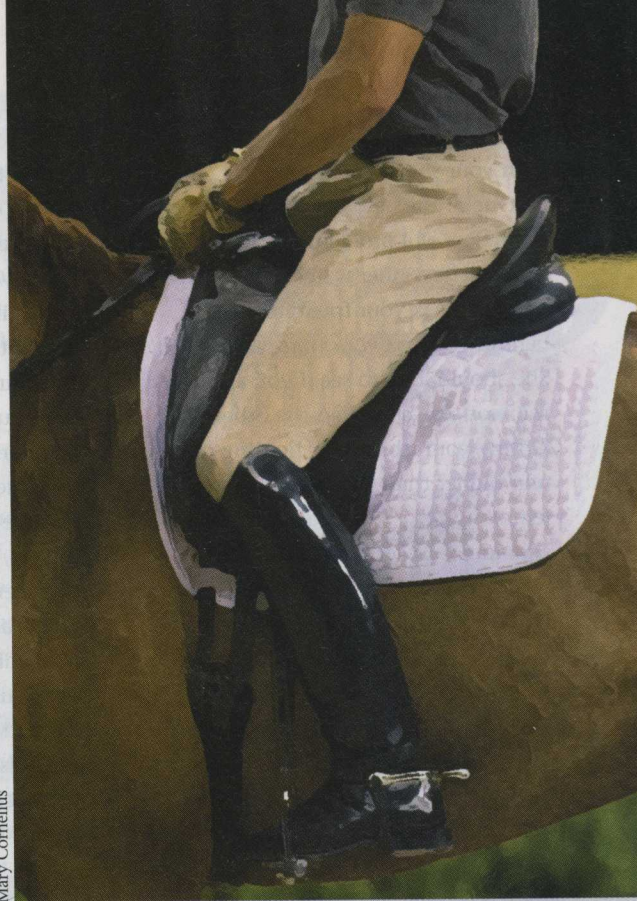
To improve your awareness, begin by balancing your need to direct the horse with an idea of what the horse is sensing. You must be clear about your intention and your goal. When you think of the horse as the main unpredictable factor, you may quickly conclude that he was spooky or he was in “quite a mood.” If you step back from the situation and remember how loyal and sensitive the horse is, you may see that it is you who is the unpredictable one. You can determine where the difficulty lies when you really look. For example, when your horse decides to be spooky one day, stop your ride and ask yourself what is working and what is not working right at that time.

3. Become Aware of Your Position in the Saddle

Now it's time to observe your position. While every riding manual tells you to sit tall in the saddle with your shoulders, hips and heels in one line, arms bent at the elbow, etc., this doesn't mean that you stay in exactly this position at all costs. Riders can get so focused on retaining this position that they stiffen their bodies and become too mechanical in their movements.

Like top dressage riders, you want to make minute changes in your position based on the subtle movements of the horse.

Just as your emotions affect the horse, so does your position. If your trainer is consistently correcting the same position



Mary Cornelius

Body awareness in the saddle is fundamental.

fault, you may want to look at what is really going on in your body. It may be corrected with better body awareness. Begin by noticing when you are in the correct position and when you are not. This is one of the most difficult yet most fundamental dressage riding skills to learn.

Most problems with rider positioning start with the seat. When the seat is even, the body is in balance, and it is easier to correctly use the aids. The challenge for all riders is that everyone is a bit crooked, and we all tend to favor one side of our body over the other. For example, one common problem is that one of the rider's shoulders is lower than the other. Most often, the actual issue is loading more weight into one sitz bone (ischial tuberosity) than the other. This causes the rib cage to collapse, making it appear as though the shoulder is lower.

Rather than focusing on your shoulder, first make sure your seat is even and see if this naturally corrects the problem

with your shoulder.

One of the best ways to build your awareness of a problem like this is to have a fellow rider watch and give you feedback. Ask your friend to stand behind you and your horse at the halt. She should look to see if you are sitting more on one side than the other, collapsing your rib cage or holding one rein higher than the other. These problems will make it look as though one shoulder is lower than the other.

Once your friend confirms what is happening, ask her to notice the placement of your right sitz bone versus your left. You will probably find that you have more contact on one side than the other. To even out your seat, sit down a little more into the higher sitz bone. This shift is usually very subtle.

Have your friend confirm when your body is straight and even. Pause, and become aware of what "straight" feels like in your body. Most likely, it will feel crooked to you. In most cases, correcting the position of the seat will automatically correct the position of the shoulders.

If this doesn't solve the problem, rather than trying to raise your left shoulder, lift up through your torso and elongate your spine. You will probably need to lift your rib cage on the lower side. To maintain this position, sit a bit more on that side and reach the opposite leg down to counterbalance.

Once your friend has confirmed that you are straight, stop and take a mental note of what the correct position feels like. The goal is for you to get better at noticing what you are doing so you can correct your position immediately.

Another related rider-positioning error is having one foot turned out more than the other. The first correction is to check that your seat position is level. If that doesn't solve the problem, try turning your leg in from your hip joint, pressing firmly with your big toe. Usually, when the rider's foot is turned out too much, there is too much pres-

sure on the outside of the foot and not enough on the inside. The goal is to have even pressure across the stirrup.

Ask your friend to look at your position while seated at the halt, making sure that your seat and stirrups are even and your feet are correctly positioned in the stirrups. While your friend holds your horse, pause in the straight position and close your eyes. Take a mental note of where your body is located in space.

Next, move on to the walk. Have your friend watch you closely from behind and from both sides and give you feedback on your position. Each time you move to the correct position, stop and take a mental note on how that feels in your body.

The challenge with all of these corrections is to recognize when they are

a balanced position.

Once you develop this skill, you can use it to address any issue you have with your riding position. For example, while fighting to sit tall in the saddle, do you inadvertently stiffen your spine? Do you lock your elbows when your horse transitions from collected trot to extended trot? Do you drop your inside shoulder when practicing shoulder-in?

4. Notice the Horse's Movement

A horse mirrors his rider. So, focus your attention on your horse's movement, which gives you feedback about your own position. Feeling how the horse's body moves underneath you often gives you an idea of your position or use of the aids. A little bit of this kind of noticing can drastically improve your ride in



Ask a friend to watch you ride and help you make corrections.

needed. You do not have the same compensation patterns every time you ride, and there is not always one simple solution. For example, if you are tired, you easily revert to old muscle-memory patterns. The solution is to find a program, such as Pilates, to work out the imbalances off the horse in order to create new muscle-memory patterns. This cross-training causes your body to want to be in the correct position rather than in a constant battle to try to find

a short period of time.

Play around with your seat to perfect your skill of noticing. At the halt, intentionally sit too much on one sitz bone. Stop, and then notice how your horse moved his body. Then, while he is moving forward, play with the amount of pressure you have in your seat and try to notice how the change in pressure moves your horse one way or the other.

Here is an example: A rider is on the

right rein on the long side of the arena trying to keep her horse straight. She notices that his haunches and nose are tracking to the outside. What does this undesirable movement of her horse tell the rider about her body? It is a clue that her body is out of alignment. The haunches are pushed to the left because she is sitting too much into her right sitz bone. This unbalanced seat then causes her to hang too much onto the left rein, which in turn causes her horse's nose to turn too much to the left. By starting to notice her horse's movement, the rider has gained a valuable tool to improve her ride. A friend on the ground can also watch you ride and give feedback on your horse's movement.


5. Put it All Together

The final and most difficult task is to be aware of all four aspects of awareness at one time. It requires the rider to be a master of noticing. The more you practice each one of these areas, the more naturally these steps will come together.

As you challenge yourself more, be careful, because you may tend to put pressure on yourself and your horse. With this comes the risk of not remaining present at the most crucial time. One of the easiest ways to prevent this difficulty is to simply stop yourself and notice what's going on around you. Ask yourself, "What am I feeling from the horse? What does my world look like at this very moment? What do I need to do right now, this second, to make this the best ride I have ever had?" Then do it.

Appreciate your mistakes and accomplishments. If you can appreciate your mistakes, they will become fewer all the time. So notice them, move on and don't give them any power. By doing this, your attention will not be grabbed by problems, and you will remain present.

That moment when you feel like you are floating on horseback, matching

each stride with ease and the ride is effortless and beautiful, you and your horse are one. This is truly magical. It is the greatest part of riding and one that brings you back to the barn every day for the opportunity to experience it again. 

Bob Gopher



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