

Conrad Schumacher Clinic

Editor's note: Conrad Schumacher presented a three-day clinic at Arlene Rigdon's Freedom Hill Farm in Olathe, KS, in February 2006. A number of NDA members audited the clinic, which was organized by Rebecca Rigdon. NDA member Jami Kment of Palmyra rode two horses on the first day of the clinic: Contingent Fee, a Holsteiner gelding schooling Grand Prix, and Third-Level Holsteiner gelding, Cadeaux. The following report is based on Jami's lessons.

By Cynthia Johnson

Renowned German dressage instructor Conrad Schumacher has many tools in his teaching arsenal: knowledge of and experience with dressage, of course; but also a well-honed personal philosophy, more than a slight dose of humor, and an unerring ability to teach by putting the hay down where the goats can get it. (Thanks to Garrison Keillor for that analogy).

But of all the things Mr. Schumacher brings to his richly instructive lessons, empathy for the horse is the quality most often in evidence.

"My training philosophy is to get after the rider and not the horse. A horse cannot make a mistake on purpose; it has not the logical brain for that," Schumacher begins. "So the conclusion out of that is that, if a horse makes a mistake, it is either" due to an instinctive reaction such as fear, or "99% is the rider."

"Riders make mistakes on horses all the time," Schumacher continues. "They don't realize that. And then the horses react in a funny way, and then most of the horses get . . . a punishment. But when you want to get better, you have to make the rider better. The riders make the horses . . . and that's why I always correct the rider."

He does not hesitate to describe the folly of riders who avoid having their riding critiqued, saying that "a winner" has two primary traits: First, a winner "accepts criticism," Schumacher says. Second, "when the going gets rough, winners say 'that's what I want.'" People who are not winners in Schumacher's eyes "say 'I'm better than most people.' They want to stay in the comfort zone."

"We learn only when we go into the 'achievement zone,'" Schumacher continues, "and when we go to the limit."

In helping NDA member Jami Kment obtain more engagement from her Grand Prix gelding, Contingent Fee, Schumacher began by saying that "to improve the engagement of a Grand Prix horse, you work him like a Third or Fourth-Level horse," and he asked her ride freely forward at the trot and canter. "When you want to shut the door, you have to open it before," Schumacher explained. "Engagement is like 'shutting' the horse. That means you have to ride forward first."

He then proceeded to a series of exercises that ultimately produced a more engaged (and expressive) horse: transitions between medium and col-

lected canter and between trot and walk on the 20 meter circle.

After 15 or 20 minutes, Schumacher was pleased with the results obtained from the exercises, and he turned to the auditors and said enthusiastically during a particularly expressive trot, "That is international collection; that is a horse that goes."

"Collection is not as slow as most people think," he said. "Impulsion is a prerequisite for collection."

One of Schumacher's oft-repeated admonitions was "ride with the body, not the hands; ride with the body, but don't do anything." Especially with horses that are hot or spooky, the rider needs to follow this course, Schumacher said.

"We must be aware of one fact: human beings have a natural 'grab' reflex," he continued. "Whenever something comes about, we grab. . . . And that is something we have to kill for riders. When the rider grabs the moment something happens, we are already wrong. We never can solve a problem with the hands. Never! The hands have only one function: To give contact, neck position and to make horses happy. Everything else is rubbish."

Elaborating on the "ride-with-the-body-but-don't-do-anything" concept, Schumacher said: "The horses must feel us, in a nice way. We have to cuddle them." It shouldn't be drive, drive, drive, he added. "You have to play with the horse, in a nice way. Of course, we know what we want; that's a different subject: We must have a strong will in what we want to achieve. But it must be done in a way like 'I play with you, I cuddle you.' And it's not, 'I ride you with my legs and don't dare to do anything, otherwise I kill you.' That's the wrong attitude."

Schumacher prescribes warmup exercises on a 20-meter circle—transitions within the trot and canter and reducing and enlarging the size of the circle—to calm a hot or spooky horse. After 10 or 15 minutes of steady work on the circle, he observed, "This work is kind of a tranquilizer, for both horse and rider."

In all of his lessons, Schumacher has the rider use the volte (see sidebar to this story) liberally as a "noninvasive" correction whenever the horse makes a mistake. "When the horse is spooky, when he makes a mistake . . . volte," he said. By riding a volte immediately following a mistake or misbehavior, the rider is able to avoid punishing the horse.

The Volte

In dressage, the volte is a small circle from 6 to 10 meters in diameter; a circle is a figure with a diameter of 10 meters or more. Volte is pronounced *vol-tuh*, and it traces back to the Italian word "volta," which means "turn."