

“Ride Him Forward, Ride Him Round!”

Clinic with Nancy Smith

Add “ride with 100% concentration,” and you’ll have an idea of the intensity of Nancy Smith’s coaching style. “As soon as you pick up the reins, you are ‘on the clock,’ and so is your horse. Remember, you are training your horse with every second you are riding, and if you are not asking for 100%, you are not going to get it.”

The clinic, held at 8th Heaven Farms over Memorial Day weekend, was a mix of breeds and levels, including a beginning 6-year-old Westphalian/Thoroughbred, a 2nd Level Saddlebred, a 17.2 hh Hanoverian, a paint started Western, a green Friesian cross, an Akhal-Teke, a Holsteiner jumper, a Morgan stallion, a Trakehner eventer, and a PSG Level Dutch Warmblood.

Smith started each session by asking where the pair was in their riding, what the goals were, and any particular issues to address. Smith’s style of teaching is very “eyes on,” keeping after the rider to make corrections as she noticed the horse evading or going incorrectly. Seeming to have X-ray eyes, Smith easily spotted when a rider’s outside leg was absent, and quickly pointed out a horse’s failure to come into a transition 100% correctly or maintain a steady tempo. Although insistent for the rider to be completely focused, Smith also offered a “Bravo!” or “Super!” when things went right.

No matter the level of ride, Smith took each pair through a warm-up to check for fundamentals: a long, low neck reaching for the contact, forward from the leg with an active rhythmic stride and regular tempo, and roundness, balancing the horse from the inside leg to the outside rein. All of these elements have to be in place without compromise before further work can commence.

Lessons in Forward and Round

Charlemagne, a 10 yo Hanoverian owned by Lynn Marohn and ridden by Jr/YR Jessica Sheppard, began with what appeared to be a big walk and trot – an illusion he creates by his sheer size of 17.2 hh. Smith urged Jessica to push him forward with more activity, keeping his inside flexion by supporting with the outside leg. At the same time, he was not allowed to lose tempo or back away from the contact. The tempo and activity must remain the same, even when correcting the horse.

After several 20m circles, the trot visibly improved into a big floating stride with the hind legs fully engaged. As they came down the long side, Smith reminded Jessica to keep her outside leg close for support, saying “Don’t let the wall ride the outside of the horse for you. The outside leg is just as important as the inside leg, giving support to the horse.”

The next horse was Cooper, a 13 yo Saddlebred going 2nd Level, owned and ridden by Jr/YR Hannah Lewis. Because of his breed characteristics, Cooper has a tendency to hold his head high and tight. Getting him to reach and stretch forward was most difficult, but necessary for him to supple his back. As Hannah urged him to stretch forward, Cooper

made full use of several evasions: first running away, then letting his haunches drift out, then sucking in his neck and getting tight and tense. Smith sent the pair into spiral in/out, going to the 10m and then out to the 20m circle. “Don’t give the reins away to encourage the horse to stretch – you must keep the contact and push to a feel on the rein. Flex and give, flex and give, over and over and over.”

“You must keep your figures accurate,” says Smith. “Without accuracy, you cannot hold yourself or your horse accountable. Insist on being accurate!”

Being Honest on the Aids

Olaf, a 10 yo Dutch Warmblood, has shown to PSG but has not been asked for much hard work for several months. Now owned by 8th Heaven Farms and ridden by KC Parkins Kyle, the program has been stepped up. Again, Smith asked for the fundamentals first, asking KC to get him stretching lower to soften his topline. “Even riding Grand Prix, the majority of time working with the horse is spent getting him honest on the aids.”

Similar to Cooper, Olaf tended to be short in the neck and slightly behind the vertical, giving the picture but not the reality of an engaged frame. Smith encouraged KC to flex him to the outside sometimes to go lower with his neck, using half-halts on the inside rein for control. “Take and give, don’t take and drop” the reins. As KC continued asking for roundness and the inside flexion, Smith reminded her to keep her outside aids in place – “don’t let his shoulder pop out.”

“Olaf is a beefy, big-muscled guy, but he is not flexible yet. He needs to be honest (forward and round) when the leg comes on. If you need to take him to a hectic trot to get him to come to the party, then that is okay, because you are making a point.” Similarly, Smith said that when asking for forward activity, a few trot steps at the walk or canter strides at the trot is okay – don’t correct the horse for giving you the forward activity, just come back to the gait.

At the canter, Smith pushed for big long strides with hind legs fully engaged, then when asking for the trot transition, push him sideways to keep them engaged. Still at the canter, the pair was asked to go shoulder-in down the long side, then half-pass across the long diagonal. “The shoulder-in gets the engagement, and the half-pass gets the horse on the aids, especially when using the long diagonal CORRECTLY!” As a movement in 3rd level, where the flying change is asked for at the finish of the diagonal half-pass, the horse must absolutely be on the aids. If he is not, the movement should continue into a counter-canter, getting onto the aids.

Second Day Results

All horses and riders who signed on for a two-day lesson were visibly improved from the initial session, allowing Smith to build on the basics from the previous day. Lauren Lustig, a young eventer on Halo, a newly purchased Trakehner, had obviously taken Smith’s advice to heart. Smith had drilled the two on several figures to help Halo come

onto the aids and especially develop his flexion to the right. On this day, Smith had the two doing 10m circles left and right from the centerline, six-loop serpentine across the whole arena (“make it like ribbon candy, doubling back a little with each loop”), and leg-yields at both trot and canter, insisting on accuracy of hitting the letter and making the canter get softer, not faster. Enjoying the moment, Smith called out to Lauren “Red Rover, Red Rover, make Halo come over!”

KC and Olaf were also “at the party” on the second day. More active and honest to the aids today, the pair repeated the shoulder-in/half-pass exercise with much greater success. Noting that Olaf’s shoulders have a tendency to “be-bop” left and right, Smith told KC to “mold him like clay right into the middle,” also reminding her “it takes two hands (and two legs) to handle a whopper!”

Wrap-Up

After watching two full days, and reviewing the DVD’s filmed by Castlewood Productions, the consistency of Smith’s coaching throughout the clinic was apparent. Her advice went right to the core fundamental issues each rider needed to work on. Professional yet personable, Smith struck just the right note for each individual pair. Her experience with all disciplines, including jumping and Western, allowed her to provide solid lessons for those riders or horses new to dressage, while lending her own FEI skills to those riders more advanced.

I know I will NEVER forget to use my outside leg again!

For more information, contact Beverly Swanson at 8th Heaven Farms, 303-688-5727 or info@8thheavenhorses.com. More about Nancy Smith can be found at her website, www.equisentialinc.com

PHOTOS:

File Name: Lauren-Halo BW.jpg

Caption: *Lauren Lustig works her aids on her new Trakehner, Halo.*

File Name: Smith-KC-Olaf BW.jpg

Caption: *Nancy Smith with KC Parkins Kyle and Olaf*

File Name: Smith-Steph-MB BW.jpg

Caption: *Smith coaches flying changes with hunter pair Stephanie Bell on Mille Belle, owned by Angie Joyce.*

PULLOUT:

Our first impression was of course (the) wonderful barn. Coming from the Air Force Academy Stable it was quite a difference. Right away we had somebody help us and "check us in." The stalls were very clean, bright and friendly. The staff was there for us right away to help and ask for their instructions for feeding and care. It was a good feeling to know that our horses were in a barn where people care.

The arena is very nice to practice dressage not only because of good and even footing but also because of mirrors in the right spots where they help to correct seat, horses positioning, hock engagement and so on...

Personally I was very thankful that the clinic was open for anybody who wanted to learn. Not being able to afford one of the more expensive dressage horses as of right now I could not have learned from Nancy Smith and taken so many new ideas and training tips to my students. Usually with young horses or less talented horses good dressage clinics (that could help the rider) are often open only to certain levels.

I can only say I really enjoyed Nancy Smith, a great teacher who is able to pick you up where you and your horse are at, interpret the horse's behavior in minutes and give you homework that is very productive. She makes everybody feel good about themselves, important enough to be taught and it does not matter to her what breed, what age or what background...A wonderful person with a wonderful personality!

From Bianca Rimbach, upper level rider and trainer from Germany

SIDEBAR

Smithisms

1. Go "on the clock" the minute you step into the arena and pick up the reins.
2. Always get the fundamentals in place first: forward from the leg, stretching into the contact, and balancing from the inside leg to the outside rein.
3. Insist on being accurate with your figures.
4. Ride with two hands and two legs (both sides of the horse).
5. Ask for change, work through the resistance, and trust yourself to ask for more.
6. Expect reaction to the aids to be immediate – do not compromise.
7. Even when relaxing, keep the horse active and in the bridle.
8. The stretchy/chewy trot must be forward, with flexion, and still in the bridle.
9. Probably at least 80% of horses have more left rein contact, so it is almost always easier to supple the horse to the left.
10. Go to a circle whenever you lose the flexion, but don't lose the tempo.
11. Riders who win shows have their horse ALWAYS on the aids.
12. The horse only gives what you ask for – Believe In Yourself, and Ride Your Horse 100% - no compromising!