

DRESSAGE



"DRESSAGE IS A PROCESS"

Lita Eliscu

Gerd Politz's first dressage clinic in Southern California in the fall of 1982 attracted mild interest; several European instructors had arrived in recent months and reviews had been mixed. But before Politz's first clinic was over, riders were asking when he was coming back.

Politz has a thorough understanding of the schooling process as taught at Warendorf, the famous German riding school. Rather than the usual phrases about "lighten the forehand," Politz has the ability to make clear the subtleties of dressage. His riders understand why dressage demands a logical schooling process based on priorities.

Many top riders and trainers find it difficult to explain what they are doing. Politz's emphasis on logic and rationality may lack emotion and inspiration for some, but his clarity and thoroughness make up for it. A recent German National Young Riders Champion, Jurgen Franck, won his title and two reserve championships while

working with Politz. Politz himself was awarded a gold medal in 1982, proof of the necessary five wins at S level (roughly, lower level FEI classes).

Politz was born in Germany in 1942. He attended school in England for several years, resulting in a fluency in both German and English. He is a bit shy, but when discussing horses he speaks with confidence. Politz is six feet, four inches tall, slim and blue-eyed, and only seems complete when on horseback.

"I don't really remember how I started... my grandfather had horses and loved them. There is a whole tradition in Germany, a status associated with having

riding establishment). He first obtained British Horse Society Assistant Instructor and then the full Instructor rating.

After returning to Germany, Politz found a position at a stable in Hamburg, Flotbeker Reithalle, where he was able to watch famed teacher Herbert Rehbein and a star pupil, Karin Schluter. Schluter won the Ladies' division at Aachen and represented Germany at the 1972 Olympics. Politz stayed at the stable for six years, taking time one winter to study with Willi Schultheis. He credits Schultheis as a major influence in his career.

"He allowed me to ride upper-level horses, to learn how to improve a horse as well as train it—and perhaps best of all, I came to realize the absolute importance of teaching horses to use their backs."

After Politz had absorbed all he could watching Rehbein, he applied to Warendorf and was accepted. His experience and degrees obtained in England were considered fulfillment of the normal three-year-apprenticeship, and he was allowed to take exams after a month of study.

Exams cover every aspect of horse-



Gerd Politz and his Hanoverian stallion Watzmann perform the canter pirouette. "The horse is just gathering himself to sit down on his haunches," Politz explained.

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horses. Grandfather used to put me on his horses' backs when I was 2 or 3, I do remember that," Politz said. "My parents did not like the idea of me riding and refused to pay for lessons. So I would save up allowances and pocket money and sneak lessons at a stable near Warendorf, in Westfalia, near home. I explained lumps and bumps as the result of bicycle adventures."

After he finished school, Politz returned to England and worked in an import-export firm where his bilingualism was a big plus. He rode on weekends and in any free time, studying and always trying to improve.

When he was 24, the head of the stable where Politz rode asked him if he would like to be an instructor. He had thought about making a career switch and finally decided to pursue his love of horses, but only after obtaining proper certification. Politz worked with Brian Young, head of Crabbet Park (home of Lady Wentworth's outstanding Arabians and a premier

manship and management. They are written as well as active and are exhaustive. Politz passed, was granted the title of Reitlehrer F.N. and was licensed to teach.

Laughing now, Politz said Herr Specht, then and now head of Warendorf, judged him in a recent Grand Prix class and congratulated Politz afterwards. "He told me that he'd doubted I'd ever get this far so fast, based on his initial impression of me at Warendorf."

Training and Experience

For the past six years, Politz has had his own stable, "Grafenberg," south of Stuttgart. He has 40 horses, most in training, several at Prix St. Georges, a few higher. He rides in 25 to 30 shows a year, especially the larger ones; and is proud of his second place out of 20 horses in Grand Prix Kur at Wiesbaden last year.

Politz emphasizes in his clinics the need for horses to use their backs. "The

prerequisite is for the horse to be relaxed and able to maintain a rhythm," he noted.

Politz added that there is too much emphasis on hand riding and not enough use of suppling and flexions. "A horse can flex latitudinally—sideways, as in lateral work—as well as longitudinally as in extensions and collections," he remarked, explaining that it is important for the rider to use the proper gymnastic exercise for a particular problem.

"People seem over-concerned with frame, with achieving a proper frame when it should be the other way around." There is a proper training process which, as a matter of course, produces the proper frame, Politz said. "The horse learns to bend his hocks and to use his back in a swinging, rhythmic fashion; the more he uses his hocks, the more collection he has—and the rounder and more correct the frame."

Politz went on to stress that it is basically useless to place the horse's head first, just as it is inadvisable to do anything on a tense horse. "It takes training and experience to decide if the horse is resisting mentally or physically and then to know what to do about it. It always goes back to the old maxim: calm, forward, straight."

Politz believes riders can benefit from books. He recommends Seunig, Podhajsky, Watjen, Steinbrecht and Muesler as writers who state ideas effectively. "I think Muesler's idea of "bracing the back" is misunderstood and misapplied. Obviously, you can't "push " a horse—not unless you get off him, get behind him and push. But you can use your seat and legs effectively to keep the horse moving forward, and this is what Muesler is talking about," Politz explained.

Politz smiled and pointed out that many riders lack truly effective seats, that they often ride the various movements without any true idea of a connection. "A rider must have a deep, balanced seat and quiet hands," he said.

Politz first decided to visit the U.S. for a vacation. In the airport, while waiting for his flight, he came across Karin Schluter. Schluter told him she, too, was on her way to the U.S., but to give some clinics. Schluter suggested that Politz might enjoy doing the same and put him in touch with stables in Colorado. Politz ended up giving some clinics there and one of his students, Aloysia Hard, was very pleased with the results of her lesson. Hard, a member of the California Dressage Society, arranged for Politz's first California clinic. Politz now teaches there about three times a year, staying several weeks at a time.

Politz suggests that American riders might benefit by schooling in 20x40-meter arenas as many Europeans do, because "corners come up quicker, and the horse must bend, be accurate and supple or run out of ring space." Politz said the smaller ring helps to make the rider aware of the need for crisp transitions and proper half-halts.

Gerd Politz feels the most important advice he can give a student is: "Always give the horse the benefit of the doubt. The process of learning dressage is a process of maturing."