

## GERHARD POLITZ EXPLAINS EXTENSIONS WITH A LIGHT TOUCH

Julie Bergman

Gerhard Politz likes to use the French verb *toucher* to describe the rider's use of the whip in encouraging greater engagement from the horse in lengthening the stride.

"The word means to give a light touch," said Politz. "It's not smacking the horse, it's just a light touch to get that extra activity from the horse instantaneously, and supplementing, augmenting, strengthening the leg aid."

It's no surprise that Politz chose a foreign word to describe the use of an aid, considering the broad international base of his education. Politz is a native of West Germany whose initial credentials were gained in England as a British Horse Society Instructor in jumping, eventing and dressage.

After returning to Germany, he achieved his German *Reitlehrer FN* degree studying with Egon Von Neindorff, Willi Schultheis, Gen. Albert Stecken, and Gen. Kurt Albrecht, former director of the Spanish Riding School. His own competitive career included receiving the German *Goldenes Reitabzeichen* award for his winnings at FEI level.

Since immigrating to the United States in 1967, he has been sharing the amalgam of his technical knowledge as the resident dressage trainer at the Flintridge Riding Club in Southern California.

Politz spends much time on lengthenings and extensions.

According to Politz, the quality of the horse's response to a request for lengthening or extension, transitions in fact, carries over into many other aspects of his training.

"What lengthening teaches the horse to do is to open up and to contract its frame. Of course at the lower levels, the changes that you observe in the lengthening and the contraction aren't as noticeable compared to when you're speaking about a Grand Prix horse. There we have the finished product where you can go from that ultimate collection, which is the piaffe on the spot, to the extension," he said.

Teaching lengthenings begins early. With 3-year-olds, Politz generally does only walk, trot, canter and basic obedience work. Once a horse is around 4 years old, Politz asks for more, keeping in mind that the horse may not have much strength in his hindquarters until he is closer to 5.

Once the horse is capable of responding, Politz wants what he asks for. "When the horse knows that putting the leg on means go forward, you should ask—even from a young horse—for the working trot to be more lively, then bring him back, then ask again for the trot to be more lively. Transitions: trot to walk, walk to trot. Teach the horse to be there even when you're just thinking. Now I want to trot." Snap—get the horse to trot," said Politz. At this stage response is more important than great lengthening.

In carefully monitoring his demands on the young horses, Politz will not even ask for an animated trot for the whole length of a 60-meter arena. He explained: "Maybe for only half the distance of the long side, you are asking for the working trot to be more lively. Then you ride a transition back to your basic tempo, and you might ask again for the same kind of exuberant trot after you have ridden your half-halt."

### Intensifying Work

Politz then begins work on the circle. "I like to get away from the straight line and teach the same principle on the circle, because on the circle the horse has to use the inside hind leg in a more distinctive manner. I'm not at all worried if I don't get much to begin with. I'm just looking for whether the horse is engaged behind and "bending," said Politz.

"If he starts rushing instead of giving me that feeling of engagement in the hind end, I bring him back to a working trot," he continued.

On the circle, Politz concentrates on control of the outside shoulder and the haunches, and lightness with the inside aids to encourage freedom of the horse's shoulders. He gradually builds engagement, using a light touch with the whip

when needed, and then carries that result down the rail for a few steps.

"When the horse gives you a nice response on the circle, you go on a straight line because it's easier for the horse to travel straight, and you will get more power from behind if the engagement on the circle has been correct," Politz explained. "You'll feel in due course that from merely giving a more engaged trot, the horse will all of a sudden start becoming more brilliant. You won't have to force him, it will be natural for him."

If the horse is correctly prepared, he is ready to give what is asked. Reward the horse when he responds.

Rather than a faster tempo with a lengthening, Politz looks for a slower tempo. Politz said: "A common thing one sees is the horse quickening a little in the lengthenings or in the medium trot. But if you see that the horse tends to give you the impression that the beat is just a little slower, then you know for sure that the horse is really also carrying behind, and not simply pushing.

"By carrying, I mean that the horse is also sitting on the haunches, engaging the haunches and not merely pushing off the ground. That again increases the freedom in the shoulder, makes the forehand lighter, increases the cadence and gives the impression that the horse is trotting uphill rather than coming down on the forehand. The frame is opening in a forward, upward manner."

If the rider allows rushing, often the horse leans on the rider's hands more, and the rider tends to hold too strongly.



(Mitchko Photo)

Faustus, a 12-year-old gelding ridden by Gerhard Politz in an FEI class, has a powerful thrust from behind, with the diagonal well elevated off the ground, good freedom in the shoulder and all the joints in the right hind well bent. He goes in relative self-carriage, is swinging through the back and allows his rider to sit deep in the saddle.

Politz noted: "There has to be a certain amount of support with the reins, there's not doubt about that, but in the rushing trot, the rider tends to hold too strongly with the hands. There's a very clear tendency for the neck to become too short, which encourages the horse to go wide behind. Opening up of the frame is a very clear criteria of an extended trot, or an extended canter for that matter. The top line should open up corresponding to the length of stride."

#### Extend Later

Actual extension should not be pursued until the horse is working close to fourth level. At first level, Politz is satisfied seeing a basic lengthening without rushing or forced strides.

"What we definitely want to see is that the hind end is in harmony with what the horse shows in front. That is a clear indication whether the horse is being brought along the classical lines. Even a moderate lengthening in the stride is correct and should be given good marks, as opposed to a lengthening that looks impressive in front, but you can already see that this horse doesn't know how to use his hind end. You know at that point that there is going to be trouble further on in this horse's training."

At second and third level, the tendency becomes more polished with more power in the hind end. Politz describes the desired hindquarters action as "stepping under and stepping forward, and picking up the hind legs in a very clear, marked fashion, comparable to the action in front."

Lengthenings are not something Politz feels can be passed over at the lower levels if the horse is not ponding.

"You'll run into trouble later, especially in the case of teaching the horse to lengthen his stride. You should make sure that the results you are getting are correct. Now it may be incorrect because you are asking too much, or because the horse is not respecting your driving aids. If the horse is dead to the leg and does not give a good response to the whip, these are things which must be worked out."

Politz said keeping a young horse in a happy frame of mind is more important than brilliance in the early stages. "I want to make sure that for several shows the horse just feels comfortable in a show ring situation. When he is relaxed about showing and doesn't mind all the new things that are going on at a show, I gradually begin to ask for better results. I think big mistakes are made when you take a horse to a show, and you want to show them off so you overdo it. The horse gets tense, and then the lengthenings will again have a tendency to be rushed."

Even at third and fourth levels, Politz doesn't ask for the maximum lengthening the horse is capable of, since that skill will continue to develop as his training progresses. "I would say from about fourth level on, that the trot should get to the point where you can say, 'Well this is a really brilliant extension.' But even then, one will find that when the horse can do piaffe and passage, extensions will improve dramatically. The horse is learning better how to use not only the pushing power in the hind end, but also the carrying power, which is a very, very important part of a really good extension," said Politz.

If a horse and rider are schooling piaffe and passage and yet not getting the



(Mitsuke Photo)

Wallenstein, a 5½-year-old gelding ridden by Otrud Lorenz in a test comparable to second level, displays a good medium trot with the thrust in the left hind corresponding to the reach of the right front. He is in nice self-carriage, through at the poll and his nose line slightly in front of the vertical.

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extensions, the horse may be tensing and stiffening his back. "Maybe the rider is not sitting correctly and is holding onto the reins too much. It comes back to the basics." Untangling problems with lengthenings and extensions always means back to basics."

#### Rider Problems

When a student comes to Politz and says that his horse has never given him a good lengthening, he can often show him impressive results with just two basic factors: "You have to know how to be light with the hands but still give the horse enough connection in front, and you have to motivate the motor in such a way that the power will be produced," he said.

Politz approaches rider problems with exercises on the longe line to promote an independent seat. A rider whose seat is educated should find good lengthenings comfortable to sit. "The more engagement in the hind end, the back should swing more. The horse will give the rider the feeling that he is actually being drawn down into the saddle. The horse takes the rider with him," he said.

Politz sometimes sees too much use of the spur in attempts to produce lengthenings. "Generally, when the aids are used too strongly, you produce tension, which results in rushing steps. A lot of the time you see that there is an unsteady leg caused by a sort of hammering the horse in the side in order to make him go, and that's very detrimental to a good lengthening. It makes the horse contract in the ribs," he said.

Politz believes backing down and retuning the horse to respond to light aids from the seat, leg and whip are the solution. "When I'm in a lesson situation and I see somebody preparing to trot or canter and they shorten the rein, prod with the spur, and the horse swishes its tail and goes a little crooked before finally going forward, I know that the horse is screwed up in his responses," he said.

With a rider that sits well and a horse that gives good responses, you don't need much preparation. You close your legs, use your seat, give a little half-halt, and the horse goes off. It's the same with lengthening and extensions.

"If the horse doesn't understand the aids from the legs and the seat, where are your responses? Then you get to piaffe and passage, and you have to bloody his sides to get a response. So it's fine tuning that is necessary, and the finer the tuning, the more elegant the overall picture, and the more instantaneous the response. That applies all the way up the levels, and in fact it applies more, the more difficult the levels get," said Politz.

Not all horses, even at Grand Prix, have the same physical capabilities for good extensions, but effective training will always produce results. "Some horses are more spectacular than others, however, good training should produce a good extension even if the horse doesn't have a spectacular trot to begin with. Very often, through the strengthening of the hind end with piaffe and passage, you can get a horse who looks very ordinary in his basic trot, to give you a very good extension," he said.