

WORKING WITH A REITLEHRER

By Lynn Warrender

It is early morning in the foothills of Pasadena, California. Low clouds have swallowed the brushy mountains behind Cal Tech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory as crowds of rocket scientists file toward the lab, past the riding club next door. Here and there someone pauses to peer through a chain-link fence at a large black horse prancing down a dressage ring, ridden by a pretty brown-haired girl. A man in boots and breeches follows the horse with a long whip.

The Lab employees watch as Gerhard Politz steps up to *Diamond*, a Warmblood gelding, and taps lightly on the horse's hind legs. "I'll make him piaffe," he tells his mounted assistant. "You just sit as quietly as you can." The horse lowers his haunches and begins to piaffe. "Lighten your hands; let him come up more. Let him go forward," Politz tells the rider, and the piaffe moves slightly forward. The girl's legs stretch down as she relaxes in the saddle. "Hold him straight," Politz says. *Diamond* performs a half-dozen steps of piaffe, then Politz removes the whip and pats the gelding's neck. "Brav!" he exclaims, his voice effusing praise, and the black horse settles into a poised but relaxed square halt.

So begins a morning's work for trainer and assistant. Gerhard Politz is a German Reitlehrer, FN, who has recently established himself in the Los Angeles area. Rachel Saavedra is his working student, a rider with a wide variety of experience who has come to Politz in order to acquire the techniques of a top German professional. This story profiles what an American rider like Rachel is learning in a program similar to that required of apprentices in Germany who wish to become professionals.

Rachel first met Politz in early 1988 when she took a horse to a clinic he was giving in northern California. She had received formal training from an early age and had become involved in dressage in her teens, eventually turning professional. By the time Rachel encountered Politz, she had developed a flourishing business at Grizzly Peak



Gerhard Politz is both a British Horse Society instructor and a German FN Reitlehrer. He was awarded the prestigious "Goldenes Reitabzeichen" for achievements at the FEI level. He formerly ran a forty horse training barn outside Stuttgart, where he had educated and trained twenty-five young professionals in three-year apprenticeships as preparation for their Bereiter or Reitlehrer exams.



Rachel Saavedra on Diamond is getting help from the ground in developing piaffe.

Stables in the Berkeley hills. However, after taking several clinics from Politz, she was so impressed that she felt she must work with him on a regular basis. She applied to Politz as a working student, was accepted, and moved to LA.

Politz had been living in the United States for twelve months. A tall man with striking blue eyes and short-cropped graying hair, Politz speaks in fluent British English, highlighted by American idioms. As a young man, Politz attended school in England before he became a registered instructor with the British Horse Society. Returning to Germany, he passed his Reitlehrer exams and became a well-known participant in the German show scene. Politz was awarded the Goldenes Reitabzeichen, a prestigious gold medal for achievements at the FEI level. He had a forty-horse training barn outside Stuttgart, where he had educated and trained twenty-five young professionals in three-year apprenticeships as preparation for their Bereiter or Reitlehrer exams.

But Politz decided to relocate to Los Angeles at Flintridge Riding Club to escape the cold German weather. He was in great demand as a clinician and trainer, and needed an assistant to help with his crowded schedule. Rachel finds herself putting in ten hour days at the barn, which is familiar from her own professional work. "I must be absolutely on time, always moving," she says. "We

have a horrendous work day, so he doesn't want me to waste a single moment."

Rachel arrives at Flintridge at 7:30 a.m. While Politz makes a schedule of rides and lessons for the day, Rachel takes out the first horse and lunges it or begins its warm-up in

the sloping, wooded cross-country field at Flintridge. Often she is given a lesson on the lunge by Politz, who is a firm believer in lunging even advanced riders to improve the seat. "When I am lunged frequently and on various horses, I can take my position for granted. Only then can I really concentrate on the technique and the feel that Gerd is trying to convey in my regular lessons."

Throughout the day, Rachel will warm up horses for Politz to ride and will school others herself, riding beside Politz and receiving corrections as she does so. A typical ride begins with twenty-meter circles at a very forward working trot and changes of rein out of the circle. "This is done in an overly round frame. The horse's head and neck are dropped down very deep and the lower back is very much lifted. All the horses at every level are warmed up this way to encourage the swinging of the back." Whenever a horse locks his back or resists at the poll during a schooling session, he is again made to go low and deep to massage the resistance away, the rider returning to rising trot.

A ride is likely to continue with four- and six-loop serpentines. "Gerd also uses serpentines a lot in his schooling, because what they can do for the horse's engagement is remarkable. So one of the first things that Gerd tries to do when teaching his students



As a true pro, Gerhard Politz, who is also an active competitor, campaigns Diamond as often as he can.



Gerhard Politz likes to take a stroll in the field with Pandur.

is to show them how to engage the horse into the outside rein." In any change of rein, Politz has a rider first present the horse with a definite contact on the new outside rein, then bend the horse in the ribs and neck

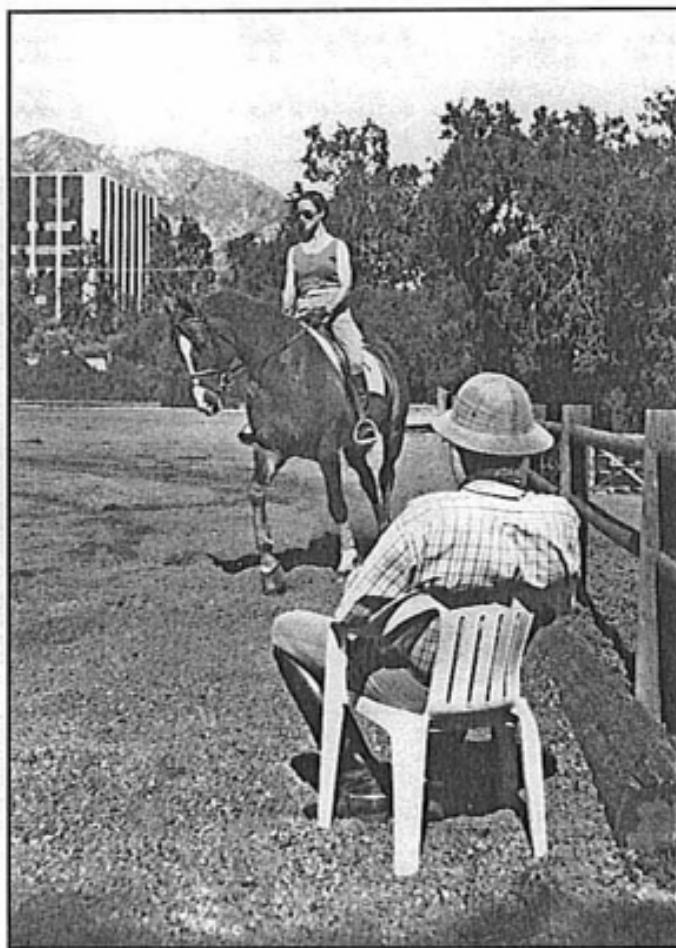


Rachel Saavedra, Gerhard Politz' working student, is learning in a program similar to that required of apprentices in Germany who wish to become professionals.

using the new inside leg and rein, paying particular attention to controlling the new outside shoulder.

Instruction may continue with work in positioning. "This is a mild version of shoulder-in which is very effective in developing straightness and controlling the outside shoulder. It's also good for developing the canter of a horse that likes to swing his haunches in to avoid engagement, something that many horses do naturally." An example of the use of the positioning technique is demonstrated when Politz asks Rachel to come down the centerline at a canter, position the horse in a slight shoulder-in, then soften the angle of the position to bring the horse perfectly straight on the centerline.

Rachel's daily work also includes re-schooling problem horses. "One of the things Gerd has helped me with is learning how to be strong and influential with a willful, powerful horse. Gerd is very fit, very strong, and very effective. He's helped me, at all of my 115 pounds, to learn to ride so that a horse has a lot of respect for me physically, without my being rough. One horse was such an experience! It would take twenty minutes of busting myself to get him to care about responding to me at all. Gerd had me bombing down the long side, then collecting the canter almost to a halt, then volte, walk, and canter to finish the volte. Then repeat the whole process again. The



Echoes of the British raj? Not at all! Just Gerhard Politz giving a lesson to Rachel Saavedra riding Gabriel.

work was so exhausting, but when we were through, I had such an incredible horse under me, I couldn't believe it."

These suppling and collecting exercises are used again when Politz instructs Rachel in upper-level work. For example, she might be asked to collect the horse, ride a volte at a trot, put him in shoulder-in, lengthen the stride while in shoulder-in, then collect the horse again. This confirms that half-halts come through for lateral work. "Transitions within the lateral exercises keep the movement from deteriorating. These repeated small transitions make any movement malleable. We do shoulder-in, haunches-in, and counter shoulder-in each on circles, then volte out of the circle we're on. After so many changes of tempo and bend, the horse is very responsive to the aids, so that he doesn't rush through the lateral work, flatten out, and lose the bend.

"Once I rode like this for a long time and got a very fit but resistant horse totally through and submissive so that he was fairly dancing underneath me during his lateral work. When I finished I was half dead, but

exhilarated. Gerd said 'Now that was a professional ride!' It was the highest compliment he has ever paid me."

One of the most distinctive things about Politz' training, Rachel feels, is instruction in the use of the seat bones to indicate direction of travel. Politz begins each schooling session with leg yield at the walk with head to the wall. This teaches the horse to yield as much to pressure from the rider's seat bone as from the leg. This exercise is also done at the trot and, at a later stage, the emphasis on yielding to the pressure of a seat bone will be critical to advanced lateral work.

This is demonstrated in upper-level exercises when Politz has Rachel perform repeated transitions from the shoulder-in to half-pass and back to shoulder-in. "The shoulder-in positions the forehand slightly in advance of the haunches and engages the inside hind to insure proper collection and bend." The direction of travel is altered by changing the emphasis from one seat bone (the inside seat bone for shoulder-in) to the other (the outside seat bone for half-pass). The rein and leg aids remain essentially the

same for shoulder-in and half-pass. The inside leg is active at the girth, creating bend and impulsion, and the outside leg is back holding the haunches in on the bend. The inside rein flexes and supplies the horse laterally in both. The outside rein regulates the bend and impulsion, controlling the shoulder and its relationship to the haunches.

"This exercise really heightens the horse's response to the aids. It clarifies for both horse and rider that small changes in the language of the aids can be as distinct as the change of a consonant in a spoken language: it can indicate a radical change in meaning, a change in direction."

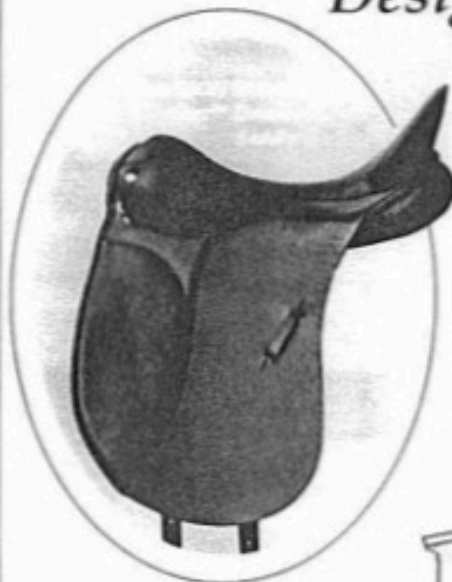
Politz teaches that both seat bones should be weight-bearing all the time and that the rider should remain straight behind the horse's shoulders, never leaning to one side or the other. "Riders tend to lean when they feel their legs are not effective enough. But when the seat bones direct the horse, the legs are free to live him up and bend him. Then the aids for moving forward, bending, and moving over don't all have to be done with the legs, ending in great effort and mutual cancellation."

Like the Bereiteren (advanced apprentices) in Germany, Rachel spends part of each day teaching dressage at Flintridge. "I've always enjoyed teaching, but I now find it even more exciting, since I'm constantly learning more things that I want to explore and impart to others. By imparting this knowledge I'm gaining, I recognize it! It becomes clear to me why I'm scrambling to live up to a German's expectations."

As the working student of a German trainer, Rachel must be prepared to be as efficient as possible. "Gerd expects performance. You put your nose to the grindstone. He sends me on errands around the barn, yet expects me to be back on a horse in ten minutes. It's a tremendous amount of mental energy trying to keep track of everything. Ten o'clock in the morning is the hour of death. By then I've been at work since 7:30, I've just gotten behind schedule enough to lose my coffee break and maybe part of my lunch time too. I'm already getting tired, but still have more horses to take care of."

The same output is expected during a lesson. While on a hot summer day Politz may appear for a lesson dressed in shorts, Hawaiian shirt, mountaineering sunglasses, and turquoise tennis shoes, his attitude toward teaching is never casual. "Gerd expects immediate response and correction

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from anything he says. I think he wants you to ride the way his mind would have his own body ride; he wants you to be an extension of himself so he can ride the horse through you. This is why he'll yell at you if you make a serious mistake, one that shows you were not thinking. He expects from his students what he expects from himself: outstanding effort with each element of every ride measuring up to standard."

It is this personal enthusiasm on Politz' part that keeps Rachel motivated and inspired through her long days. "He has a phenomenal enthusiasm for his work! Even in a schedule that would burn out the strong-

est person, he derives new childlike delight and energy from each burst of brilliance his horses give him. If you push through adequate and good to brilliant, your energy is recharged by the thrill. That is a lesson I am learning. When I feel I can hardly stand to get on another horse, I vow to get on the next one and ride my heart out because only by that and not by a conservation of energy will I get the satisfaction, confidence, and energy to ride the following two or three horses. I have to ride each horse like it's my last big effort of the day. That's how to push beyond adequate and nice to that extra, typically German, "remarkableness!" ¶