

The three Ps of Patience, Practice and

Charlene Strickland talks to Gerhard Politz, a German who has built a successful dressage yard in his own country

Reitlehrer - translated, the word means 'riding teacher' and Gerhard Politz brings to life the essence of the term. Based at Flintridge Riding Club in Pasadena, California, he exerts a tremendous influence over the development of dressage in the United States. Politz has pursued his dedication through a classical education and 30 years as a rider, trainer and coach.

As a student in England, he passed the British Horse Society Instructor's examination and participated in hunting, jumping, eventing, and dressage. In Germany, he studied with such master horsemen as Egon von Neindorff, General Albert Stecken, Willi Schultheis, and General Kurt Albrecht.

Like the masters before him, Politz has achieved personal success while assisting others. He obtained the Reitlehrer FN degree and operated a training centre near Stuttgart, training horses and teaching riders. He also trained and competed many horses up through the Grand Prix level and won medals for winning FEI level dressage competitions.

While living in Germany, Politz travelled to the U.S. to conduct clinics. He immigrated to California in 1987, and he now concentrates on promoting classical riding through his instruction. In just two and a half years of competing on the West Coast, he was able to join the small group of riders who have obtained all the U.S. Dressage Federation medals: Bronze, Silver, and Gold. During that period, he trained four horses to the FEI levels, and all gained top scores in the lower 70s.

CS: You had a successful training barn in Germany. Why did you decide to move to the US?

GP: I wanted to change what I was doing a little bit. I had my own training stable with about 45 horses. That keeps you very busy. I had five or six apprentices and a Bereiter, but even so, all the horses in training had to be worked thoroughly every day. So I rode between 15 and 20 horses. They were warmed up by the apprentices and I rode them for anything between 20 and 45 minutes, whatever they required. It was very concentrated and very hard physical work. Of course, there were lessons in the afternoons and evenings, too. In addition, the apprentices and the Bereiter had to be prepared for the exams. There were never enough hours in the day, and every weekend there was a show. It was a question of: 'When is it going to take its toll?'

I'd been coming over here (the US) for several years to teach. I had some people from the States bringing horses to me to train in Germany. They kept saying: "Why don't you come over to the States to do more teaching?" They seemed to think that good quality teachers are needed here. I thought, 'That's not such a bad idea. I'm not getting any younger. Training and showing that many horses, it's foreseeable when that aspect of my career will have to be phased out. I can't envisage a life without horses, but I'm not ready to retire for a long time yet.'

I thought, 'If I get more into the teaching aspect, it's going to be financially a viable proposition and it will still keep me into horses. I can share my knowledge with other people and introduce them to the European traditions. I think that's still what's lacking in the U.S.'

CS: Were you breeding horses in Germany?

GP: In Germany I bought youngsters, three-year-olds, and trained them to the FEI levels. I always believe in buying horses from the breeder and then bringing them along myself. I always had a stallion, but more for competing than for breeding.

CS: So you acquired horses privately rather than through the auctions?

GP: Yes, I've always preferred that. Then I'm able to bring them along gently. I think auctions are great money-makers for the breeders and the promoters, but you don't necessarily get an unspoiled horse. A three-year-old that looks perfect cannot be anything but forced. So generally one should always give those horses some time off before putting them to work again.

CS: Overall, could you describe your philosophy of horsemanship?

GP: First of all, promoting the classical principles of training and improving the rider. Not just getting the ribbons, although that's nice, too. That should be the logical sequence of classical riding.

CS: Do you view dressage as art or sport?

GP: I think that the two aren't necessarily contradictory. It is the judge's responsibility to ensure that such a difference is not accentuated. Classical horsemanship - by that I mean a horse trained according to the principles of the pyramid of training - should always be rewarded.

CS: What do you personally do to promote classical horsemanship?

GP: In every clinic and in every training session, I work according to classical principles. I hate gimmicks and I hate quick results. I certainly believe in improving the horse. If the rider has shortcomings, I try to teach them in such a way that at least the horse benefits, even on a short-term basis. Mostly, rider problems are more long-term to fix. The rider has to be very willing to work on his or her own position and development of feel. Most of the apparent shortcomings in the horse are rider-related. Some people seem to think it's always the horse's fault, or the horse has no talent, but the horse will only go as well as he is ridden. Some horses are more generous than others, but the horse's generosity comes out more readily when he is treated well. For instance, no horse is a born rearer. If he never learns to rear, he won't

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America is short on top class riders with class and Graf Georg, but Gerhard Politz is gag soon

3 Principles of Dressage: Patience, Persistence and Perseverance

Major Lindgren, a German trainer of the classical school who gave up his home country to spread the classical word to the United States

ever do it. But if he learns that rearing is a sure form of evasion, then you have to ask yourself, why is the horse evading? I've never had horses that I trained myself with problems like that. Although I can be tough when the situation warrants it, I never get a horse into a state when he wants to escape, let alone when his only means of self-defense is to rear or to throw himself to the ground, all those weird things that one hears about. A little sugar goes a long way!

A horse's attention span is fairly short, and if you want to teach the horse something new, you should do it frequently but for a very short time span. Don't go grinding and grinding until the horse finally says, 'I can't do this anymore.' That's when you get resistance. You must give plenty of breaks in between. Let the horse meditate on the new things he is learning.

CS: You're very active in the USDF Instructor Certification. How were you involved with starting that concept?

GP: USDF contacted me and asked me to be one of the examiners. Initially the program was a little slow getting off the ground, but now interest from the USDF membership is steadily increasing. The requirements are clearly set out in the 'candidate testing procedure,' which is available from the USDF office. There is no doubt that this is a very in-depth examination, and candidates should prepare for it very thorough-

ly. If they fully understand the requirements and know how to do things correctly, they should not have any problems in passing. The aim of this program is not only to encourage students of dressage to seek the help of certified instructors, but first and foremost to encourage instructors to improve themselves!

CS: In the Certification, how do you incorporate the European riding tradition?

GP: It's very much related to it. Classical principles of dressage are quite clearly outlined in the German manuals. Other European federations work with similar guidelines, and so do the Canadians. The USDF system doesn't really differ from the European systems in its philosophy and aims.

CS: How will the certification link with the current USDF seminars?

GP: Unfortunately, Major Lindgren officially retired this year from his involvement with USDF, but I hope that he will continue with his program on a private basis for as long as he is able. His program is a first-class stepping stone towards certification. This tradition is now carried on by Maryal Barnett. In addition, certified instructors qualified through Fourth Level are conducting workshops in lungeing the horse and rider, teaching private and group lessons, and training and evaluating the horse. The examiners also teach those workshops, as well as evaluating candidates in pre-certification clinics. The workshops conducted by the USDF University are also helpful in that regard.

CS: Some USDF members have expressed concerns about the exam's confidentiality.

GP: Personally, I feel there is no need for that - we have nothing to hide. Auditors should be encouraged. We have had some people say that having observed a testing, they feel much more confident about the process and are amazed at what a thorough job everybody involved tries to do.

CS: From your nine years in the U.S., how do you see American dressage approaching the European level?

GP: There has been amazing progress. Not only in numbers but also in quality. But, there is still a long way to go! And the Europeans are not at a standing still either; they are improving, too. A big problem here in the US is that the pool of really first-rate riders and trainers, with first-class horses, is still much too small. There are just not enough American trainers like Michael Poulin and Lendon Gray, for example, who are able to consistently develop horses from a youngster up to the Grand Prix level. Another big problem is that people here are looking for quick results, the instant success in the show ring. If they don't get it from one trainer, they just switch to the next one. Generally in Germany, riders stay with the same trainer for years. That is part of their success, because they really have to learn how to ride! What I mention often in my clinics are the three P's of dressage: Patience, Practice and Perseverance - because you're a champion in competition doesn't necessarily mean you are a good professional. I think the willingness to work for it and trusting trainer on a long-term basis is probably what's lacking here. If you don't get instant gratification and instant success at shows, you go somewhere else. I very much believe in sound basics - if you don't develop the pushing powers of the horse first, you can't work towards collection. You only get pseudo-collection, which lacks impulsion.

If the horse is not straight, he cannot load the quarters evenly and his piaffe and passage will be irregular and the changes crooked. The basics take a long time to get right, but if they are solid, progress can be made relatively quickly. A lot of people don't understand that, and they want to skip parts of the process. And, up to a point, they can even be successful in the show ring - until the gaps start to show. Hopefully, instructor certification will help to raise trainers' consciousness of their responsibilities towards the horse and correct and humane education of horse and rider.



Riders with class horses such as Michael Poulin and Lendon Gray are going some way to reversing this trend

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