

# The Clinic



## Gerhard Politz

Gerhard Politz is a member of the United States Dressage Federation (USDF) Instructors Certification Program committee. A British Horse Society Instructor and German Reitlehrer FN, Gerhard came to the United States from Stuttgart, Germany, in 1987. He has spent more than 30 years studying, teaching, training and competing through Grand Prix. Currently, he teaches and trains out of the Flintridge Riding Club near Los Angeles, California.

### Rider #1

What an impressive horse! I have great respect for riders who undertake the formidable job of training a horse in dressage when the horse is not exactly predestined for the task. And often they achieve incredible results, proving that all types of horses can benefit from dressage.

From this picture, it is not quite clear to me whether this magnificent Clydesdale stallion is on the diagonal or caught from the side in leg yielding. Judging by the placement of his right hind foot, he is probably leg yielding and crossing well with his right hind. If he is going straight ahead, then there is a serious shoeing problem causing him not to hit the ground level, and this will make him unsound, given time. If the horse is

indeed leg yielding, as I hope, it is not possible to comment on the execution of the movement from this angle.

The overall impression is one of contentment and relaxation. The horse is focusing on the job and thinking forward, as well as listening to his rider. He seems to be accepting the contact quietly, his mouth closed, yet he has not produced enough saliva to indicate that he is softly chewing on the bit. I would like to see the nose line a bit more in front and the poll higher. However, it must be said that stallions with such huge necks and fatty crests are at a disadvantage in that regard, and the mane does not help the overall impression either! On the whole, the horse does seem a little on his shoulders, and the left hind is rather far behind him.

I am favorably impressed with the rider's length of thigh on a horse that is probably rather broad.



I also like the straight line from the elbows through the hand to the horse's mouth. The rider should shorten her stirrups so that she does not have to balance

on her toes; the heel should be the deepest point. Her stirrups also are not level. I can see her right foot, toe pointing down, under the belly. When the stirrups are so uneven, it usually causes the hips not to be central in the saddle. The rider's torso needs to be more erect. She needs to open up her chest, bring her stomach forward and her shoulders back. She should look more ahead and keep her chin up.

If this rider works on improving her position, the horse will appear to be much more in front of her aids.

### Rider #2

My first impression is that this rider is very determined to "push" her horse forward into the medium trot. She has certainly succeeded in generating plenty of energy. The reach of the horse's hind leg is proof of that. The rider's position is very upright, with adequate length of leg.

She carries her hands well, and they are at the same level and not too far apart. Her elbow, hand and the horse's mouth are on a straight line, just as they should be. If anything, I would like to see a more clearly defined bend at the rider's elbow, but the picture is a little obscure, so I can't really tell.

My second impression is that this is not a happy horse. Look at the expression on his face. His ears are pinned back, and in spite of the fact that he has produced some saliva, his lower jaw appears to be tight, and the bit is pulled out of the right side of his mouth. The horse is stilted in his shoulders, and he is flipping



his left toe. Overall, this does not present a picture of relaxation! If the horse were in motion, I would expect to see that he is being pushed onto his forehead. In the medium trot, the rider should allow the horse to open up the frame. The poll should be the highest point in the neck, and the nose line should come in front of the vertical.

How can all of this be remedied? In my view, the key is the rider's seat and position. This is clearly a misunderstood version of the "driving seat." Her upper body is way too much behind the vertical, causing the seat bones to bear down too hard into the saddle, making the horse's back rigid. She is compensating her balance by bringing her lower legs back too much and clamping them against the horse's rib cage. They are more in the position for a sideways driving leg. In order to engage the horse forward, the legs belong close behind the girth. This body posture causes the nonallowing hand and tight contact as evinced by the rider's taut neck muscles and her clenched chin.

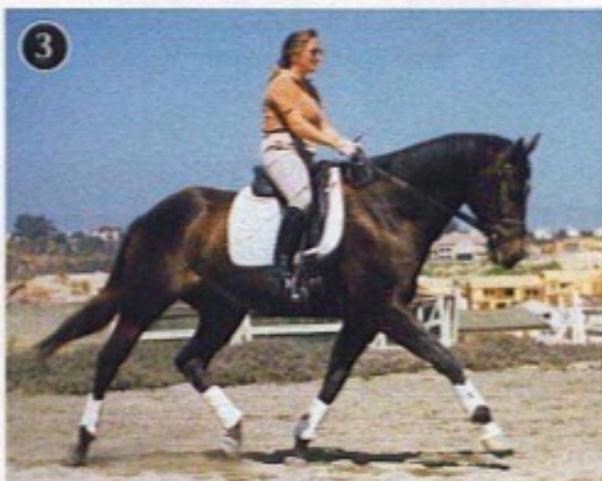
However, in spite of these serious faults, I think this rider has excellent potential that can be brought out by seat lessons on the longe line. Correct alignment in the vertical, with her leg hanging down quietly close behind the girth, will provide her with the feel for relaxed balance on the horse. It is also crucial that she carry her head in a natural way with her chin up.

Acquiring the feel for balance in the various paces is the key to becoming a sensitive rider. My guess is that this horse is also quite sensitive in his back, and therefore, it is even more important for the rider not to be behind the vertical. In the medium, I would even go so far as to suggest that going with the motion, to the extent that she brings her upper body slightly in front of the vertical, might help this horse.

One more point is the fit of the bridle. The cavesson of the noseband is too low. This could cause chafing at the corners of the mouth. The lip strap (flash) is also too low, so that the horse is restricted in the flare of his nostrils. The cavesson should be fitted just below the cheek line, leaving enough space so that it doesn't rub against it. A minor detail: The running martingale keepers should be cut off the reins for a dressage bridle.

### Rider #3

Now here is a picture of a happy horse-and-rider combination! Conspicuous, of



course, is the absence of a safety helmet.

I like to see this kind of relaxation in a horse. He is also quite active behind and has good reach from the shoulder. This is a good example of a big-striding, free-moving horse. Note particularly the parallelism of each diagonal pair of legs. The horse seems very content and focused on his job. His ears are forward, yet without tension. However, he seems a little bit tight in his lower jaw, and the absence of saliva leads me to believe that he is not softly chewing the bit. Incidentally, if a horse has problems in that regard, giving him sugar treats when you work him will do wonders!

Overall, the horse appears somewhat on the forehead and, unfortunately, the neck being set on low exaggerates that impression. Ideally, I would like to see

the poll a little higher, but given the structure of the neck, this may cause the muscle in his lower neck to become rather tight. Even with the neck carried the way it is, the lower neck muscle is quite strong, and so I would probably allow this outline as an acceptable compromise for this particular conformation.

I really like the way this rider goes with her horse's motion. Her torso is upright, yet not bearing down hard into the saddle, and her head is carried nicely with her chin up and no tension in her neck. Her shoulders are a little too round, and I would also like to see more bend in her elbow. However, there is a good line from her elbow via her hand to the horse's mouth, and her hands are also close enough together. Considering the rider's build, I think she has a very good placement of the thigh, and the knee is low and not pinching against the knee roll. This could be enhanced if she would shorten her stirrups so that the heel can be the lowest part of her leg.

Although I really like the overall harmony of this pair, one must consider the conformation of the horse's neck and the implications this has on his future training. I strongly advise the rider, when she is preparing this horse for collection—and especially when approaching the upper levels—that she take great care to allow this horse to go in "relative elevation"; that is to say, the degree of elevation relative to the ability to carry behind. Please do not be tempted to help the elevation by overusing your hands. If this horse is asked to carry himself with his neck "raised and arched" (FEI Rule Book 404.4.1 and 405.4.1) for too long a time, it will most likely result in a tightening of the lower neck muscles and a stiffening and hollowing of the back. In between periods of collected work, give this horse plenty of breaks in which you allow him to go deep and low to relax his back. 🐾