

INSTRUCTOR SPOTLIGHT

A Clinic with Ernst Hoyos

The importance of basic principles in the work

By *Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel*

Riding is a constant quest for improvement, and top-level instruction is a difficult thing to find. But I have been fortunate that for the last 23 years, since I have been at First Choice Farm, the owner, Gene Freeze, has helped me develop as a rider and trainer. We were excited when Ernst Hoyos accepted my invitation to teach a three-day clinic last November. The First Choice Farm team—Eileen McKenna, Olivia Frost and K.C. Barnes—cleaned the place as if the pope was com-

Brendan Curtis



Ernst Hoyos works with Felicitas von Neumann-Cosel and Roulette in piaffe.

ing, and Gene not only gave us the use of his Maryland facility but also had lunch for us each day at his cozy house. We invited Jim Koford and his assistant, Brendan Curtis, along with Ryan Michelle Eskridge, a Young Rider from North Carolina. My student, Betty Thorpe, participated as well, while I filled the remaining rides.

As expected, Ernst's emphases were on very basic concepts. He insisted on making the horse soft and pliable in the warm-up. Longitudinal softness was improved through transitions, not just from one gait to another, but also within the gait. Laterally, the horse was challenged with exercises that helped to improve the bend through the whole body: lots of changes of direction with the use of small circles and shoulder-fore or shoulder-in, even through the short sides and on a circle to test the correct bend and to improve the connection.

Work on the quarterline helped to make sure that horses would not fall out through the haunches but truly brought the shoulders in. Ernst constantly corrected riders for not keeping enough of their weight over the inside seat bone and over the inside leg, particularly through all the lateral work. It was clear to see how easy it is not to sit enough to the inside—particularly in the half passes or pirouettes—when the rider starts to struggle with the use of the outside leg.

Ernst made it clear how important the balance of the upper body is and pointed

out the need for a strong core to maintain it. Upper-body balance combined with proper leg position greatly influences the performance of the horse. The need for a soft and long thigh without gripping of the knee and calf became apparent. If the leg does have to engage, the thigh has to stay relaxed. Keeping the bone on the inside of your knee behind the stirrup leather was a good reminder, as well as turning the toe toward the horse's shoulder, which relaxes the leg out of the hip joint. The horses relaxed through their middles and were able to move freer. The rider's ability to move the leg quickly in a more precise aid also increased. With a loose leg, the upper body has to stay more balanced, laterally and from back to front. This is true particularly in transitions, so the rider's weight should not be left behind, which hollows the horse and creates tension.

Hand position was also corrected: a hand that is too high is often a sign of loss of balance in the upper body and does not allow for a steady contact. In a moment of conflict, a quiet hand is important. He preferred the rider to half halt into the horse's shoulder, rather than pull back. He suggested holding a bridge with the rein to stabilize the hands. Only in the passage (or if the horse was diving down and losing his balance) did he say to think of half halting into the horse's ears, but always with a quiet hand.

Jim brought two horses to work in piaffe and passage. On the ground, Ernst used a bamboo stick and a long whip to create the desired effect. He was able to gauge the horses' training, ability and temperament. The 8-year-old Hanoverian stallion, Don Principe (owned by Mariana Haymon), showed a promising piaffe and passage in a short period of time.

Brendan's 7-year-old Regal Ranier (owned by Valerie Russell) had some confidence issues by one door that were

also addressed by putting him on the aids through some shoulder-fore and small circles. Brendan and Ranier showed some nice work in the half passes, again with emphasis on the rider's weight over the inside leg and upper-body balance. They also worked on some basic transitions to improve relaxation through the back.

Ryan, with her 13-year-old Rubin, was getting ready for her first Intermediaire II test and wanted to work on one-tempi changes. Ernst helped her to get the horse's canter work more engaged and to wake him up with quick impulses of the leg. Again, leg position was important. Her leg had to be loose enough so the horse did not get slower with a constant leg pressure. She also had to be able to move her lower leg quickly in the one-tempi changes. After a while, they both became more confident and got into the rhythm easier. They also showed promising piaffe and passage.

Betty Thorpe, with her 8-year-old gelding, Bomol, was working on improving her canter transitions out of the walk. Ernst explained the sequence of aids from a small circle toward the wall. The horse needed to be in a slight shoulder-fore position with a lot of weight over the rider's inside leg to confirm the bend. As she approached the wall, just dropping through the outside knee was enough, in combination with a half halt on the outside rein. On the last day, Ernst worked Bomol in-hand for some piaffe, which was truly great to watch. Knowing this horse's high flight reflex combined with some resistance, I loved to see how quickly he settled and started to work for Ernst with confidence. In a relatively short time, the horse started to sit and offer some collected steps. Ernst knew exactly when Bomol had reached his limit for the day and finished with success.

The first horse I rode was the 8-year-old Lusitano stallion Tónico (owned by Linda and Joe Denniston). I was looking to improve the basic quality of his gaits,

his pirouettes and the beginning stages of piaffe. Ernst made a point of explaining the awareness of the horse's four-wheel drive for the pirouette. This means not just to ride the hind leg but to remember the horse's forehand has to move around. He reminded me to turn the horse's head, then the neck and middle. We approached the pirouettes by first working on good canter transitions from the walk so the horse would maintain the canter off the outside leg and the outside rein. The idea for the pirouette was again a lot of upper-body weight to the inside, so the horse would maintain the bend without my tightening the inside leg. The outside leg should be loose but not too far back in order to give an impulse.

Because of Tónico's tendency to be quick in the canter, Ernst encouraged me to sit extra slow. In the end, the pirouettes as well as his basic canter quality were improved. We also worked a little on the flying changes. The changes improved with a relaxed leg. The aid could come more out of the thigh rather than a strong lower leg, which makes the horse's middle tense. We also worked a little on the piaffe. Ernst encouraged me to sit extra forward to allow the stallion to bring his back up, and again a soft thigh was important so my horse could work under me.

I also wanted to improve the pirouettes, piaffe and passage of the next horse, the 9-year-old Oldenburg Graf Montekalino (owned by Juergen Strauss). With the same approach as before, the horse started to settle and improve. With the piaffe, it was important to sit forward enough to allow him to use himself, while in the passage it was important to sit into the horse. In passage, it was crucial not to grip with the knee so the horse could stay relaxed through his middle. By the second day, I could feel the horse taking an elastic connection from back to front in piaffe and passage.

After that, I rode the 6-year-old Ha-

noverian stallion Where's Waldo (owned by Bonnie Watrous). In his warm-up, the focus was on bending without falling out with his haunches, particularly on small circles. We challenged the outside hind leg in some walk pirouettes. Then, we mobilized the haunches through some half steps, which the stallion showed talent for. This was the preparation for some big canter pirouettes to strengthen the outside hind leg. Finally, we spent some time working on the flying changes that were still a little strong and green. Ernst suggested a small serpentine on the short side so we would change toward the wall and turn immediately into a small circle in the new direction. It was important not to let the haunches fall out before the change and to ride the change up into the new outside rein, so he wouldn't lose balance and get strong.

We finished with the 11-year-old Oldenburg gelding Roulette (owned by Gene Freeze), focusing on the pirouettes and piaffe and passage. With his level of training, the expectations were accordingly higher. The pirouettes are actually quite nice, and Ernst reminded me not to stay in the exercise too long if the horse is working that hard and doing well. In the beginning, we did a lot of work in the passage in the rising trot, which helped the horse to raise his back and get more scope. The last day, I did the work without help from the ground and with a reminder of my position and the use of the leg with a relaxed thigh, we got nice work in the transitions in and out of piaffe and passage, as well.

Having Ernst as a guest instructor was a total pleasure. He was open to talking about horses and the horse business, giving advice and sharing ideas. His instruction was always clear and to the point. My head is still "smoking" from focusing on the details that continue to complement my daily work. By refining my aids, I have been able to improve communication with my horses. 🐾

