

Cypress Gardens Syndrome

Years ago I traveled the country conducting Instructor Workshops for the USDF. In order for the participants to have “victims” upon whom to perform their practice teaching, the local organizers were tasked with lining up suitable demo riders from their area. At one venue as we analyzed each successive demo who presented herself, they all appeared to share a particular misconception. Every single one of them let her horse hang on the bit.

The cause became apparent the next day. One of the Participating Instructors had supplied seven of the eight guinea pigs from among his students. Naturally, when it came time for him to practice teach, I assigned him the eighth demo with whom he wasn't familiar. At the outset he explained to her how to ride on contact and invite her horse to accept the bit. “Imagine you are waterskiing behind a speed boat,” he began, “and try to let your horse pull on your arms.” Hmmm . . . [realization dawning] the last seven demos rode that way because they'd *been told* to!

Well, OK, in case there's a crumb of doubt, I'm telling you right now NOT to.

Until you've experienced the real thing enough times, discovering what contact is supposed to feel like and being able to generate it with your horse is one of the mysteries of dressage. It's a rider's recurring mental quandary: *How much do I hold? When does creating an affinity for the contact cross over into my horse using it as a crutch or even a weapon against me? At the other extreme, where's the line between light and absent?*

Ever been to a new, pretentious but obscure restaurant where the dishes they served didn't quite work? And the only conclusion you could come to was “this chef has never been somewhere real and tasted the stuff he's trying to prepare!” Too often, that's what waylays many riders. Articles and videos and all that aside, the best thing you can do (he said self-servingly) is to have someone knowledgeable stand there with his thumb up or down to reflect when your efforts are on the money. Then you (just) have to memorize that feel and replicate it at will!

This same chronic problem presents itself when inexperienced riders try to produce lengthened or Medium trot. I have this peculiar vision in my mind: A brace of Great Danes are being walked on their leashes. They spy the neighbor's cat. Suddenly, their petite owner finds herself being dragged face-first down the sidewalk, still clinging desperately to her “pets”.

A ballistic sort of lengthening—GO until you hit something or run out of gas—is a common sight. And like the waterskiing coach above, at times I hear it being encouraged.

As you embark on First Level lengthening or later when you are developing the Medium trot, remember that all the qualities that exist in a good Working Trot mustn't desert you. Don't let your horse set up against you. Don't be dragged down the sidewalk. The use of unilateral suppling aids, mild bending, and rebalancing half halts *that go through* plus the instantaneous availability of a transition back all must be close by in your horse's mind during the movement if the exercise is to produce a good score or be of any real benefit in the long run.