

Gotta Crush on Him

The rider dutifully makes circles. Lots of them. Superficially obedient, but—pick your words—the horse is . . . not coming through . . . not using his topline . . . bracing against the hand with a dropped back . . . channeling “The Little Rascals do Montessori.”

It’s an FEI horse, too—not one scrambling to make the jump to Intro C. I see the rider’s legs rhythmically nudging his sides. He’s not even flicking an ear back at her. The rider’s hands are very soft. You might call the contact “two wisps of fog beyond ethereal.” On closer examination, the horse seems to be sporting a smug look. Jeez, I hope he didn’t *really* wink at me as he cruised by!

The owner/rider/“trainer” isn’t quite hysterical. She’s working up to that. I guess it’s time to get on him! On the way to the mounting block I whisper to a watcher, “This is where nasty little Germans earn our drachmas.”

So, of course, the horse objects to my leg. He hasn’t experienced one lately. And you better believe he objects to my hand—I WANT him to! The next ten minutes are a distillation of some sort of Hold and Drive filmfest. I am placid of mien but implacable of demand.

And this is where he pulls out all his evasive versions of upper level “tricks.” Some leaping on the circle and plunging, erratic one-tempis which usually earn him a walk on a long rein and an “Oh, don’t worry” pat on the neck? Not this time, not on my watch.

[Remembrance of things past]

“When I was a kid, my mother used to send me to the butcher shop with a note for Mr. McCloy. It always read: ‘2 lbs. of top of the round, trimmed and ground twice.’ The machine he rammed those chunks of meat through, extruded it onto the chopping block in even rows and as politely dressed as this horse is going to be,” I promised myself.

The short version of the outcome is “it worked.” That’s why it’s a cliché, after all—it’s based on a certain truth. Casey Stengel might have once said, “You can catch more flies with a glove than you can with honey.” That’s what I explained to Hermitage’s owner as the horse came progressively rounder and yielding. “You just make him believe you.”

“I didn’t want to ride him front to back,” she murmured apologetically, explaining her reluctance to ask him to face the bit.

“My contact is stronger than I’d wish, but the leg is still louder than the hand. And as soon as he offers a glimmer of understanding, I soften all the aids slightly and then slightly more. The goal, as soon as I can achieve it, is to Drive *and Receive*, not hold,” I explained. “You have to know when it’s not going to work. Then you back off and try a different route. But sometimes you just have to be a Michele Bachman sort of rider. Whether you make any sense or not, say what you believe with bug-eyed conviction! In this case, your demand has been recognized, been processed, and you have earned your place higher on the food chain than your horse.”

At this level he has to *offer* to come through as a precondition of advanced work. It’s his duty, and it’s in his own best interests. You can’t “hold and drive” your way around the Prix St. George, but at certain times with certain horses, you just have to make your demands 100% non-negotiable.