Breaking a slump, as any baseball player can tell you, is hard work. The toughest part can be regaining the confidence that takes a beating with each additional loss—while, maddeningly, the guy on the winning streak seems to gather momentum with every victory.

Some would say that Team USA dressage has been in a slump lately, with the failure to medal at the 2012 Olympic Games and to secure a team medal at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games. And while everyone loves a winner, not every fan supports his or her team through a bad run. For the sake of morale, national pride, and—yes—financial support, new United States Equestrian Federation dressage national chef d’équipe and technical advisor Robert Dover knows he needs to get a team back on a medal podium, soon.

With his three fellow USEF dressage coaches, Dover presented a “Roadmap to the Podiums,” as the session was called, July 18 during the Adequan/FEI North American Junior and Young Rider Championships presented by Gotham North. Addressing a standing-room-only audience in the Mary Hotchkiss Williams Grand Prix Seminar Room in the USDF National Education Center at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, the coaching staffers outlined their plans for success.

The Big Audacious Goal

Dover laid out his vision for US dressage: We should be at the top of every medal podium around the world in every division. It’s a bold statement, to be sure, even for a man who’s stood on his share of podiums: Dover was a member of the bronze-medal-winning US dressage teams at the 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 Olympic Games; and he was also on the 1984 and 1988 Olympic teams. He also competed at four FEI World Equestrian Games (winning team bronze in 1994) and seven FEI World Cup Dressage Finals, and he won the Grand Prix at Aachen (Germany) in 1987.

“What will be required to bring us to being the top in the world? We have to create a world-class ‘machine,’” Dover said. “We have to use a bottom-to-top pipeline as in a pyramid. In order to do this, it is of paramount importance that we have not only adequate funding but incredible funding.”

One of his first priorities in the job that he’s held for less than six months is to create “a strong fund-raising mechanism” so that American horses and riders can be sent to Europe to train and compete, he said.

“Fully funded annual European tours are something that’s always been important to me. We need to always be sending riders to Europe, where the game is played at a very, very high level, year in and year out,” Dover said.

Just going to Europe isn’t enough, of course. “We need to have the finest horses in the world in every single division, from the ponies to the international elite,” said Dover. “All of our jobs as coaches is to make sure that this happens. We also have to have the finest competition facilities in the world. Unless you have a facility that looks and feels like Aachen [Germany], you’re not going to have riders who are comfortable in that environment.”

Dover showed his audience slides of top equestrian show grounds as examples of what he believes the US needs to emulate. Aachen, he pointed out, is the same size as the Global Dressage Festival grounds in Florida—which he believes can easily rank among the world’s best facilities. Spruce Meadows in Calgary, famous for its summertime series of FEI-recognized jumper shows, “offers huge prize money to the jumpers and attracts people who wouldn’t normally go to Canada,” he said.

Prize money? In dressage? Yes! Dover believes that “we [US dressage shows] need to have prize money equivalent to that offered in Europe. Even at small [dressage] shows in Europe, they have a pot. Our sport needs to be as it’s run in Europe. If not, it will always be looked at as something like a hobby.”

The medal-winning machine of Dover’s dreams won’t be possible without deep-pocketed supporters. Reminding his audience to express gratitude to those who help them reach their dressage goals, he said: “Owners, sponsors, and all stakeholders have to feel appreciated, and they have to be dedicated to our cause, which is success. They have to feel a bit part of the guiding way forward for us.”

Specific Steps

As chef, Dover explained, “my role is to produce a road map to the podiums—training and competitive programs, and a specific four-year plan. I did this, not only with the other three coaches [Debbie McDonald, Scott Hassler, and Jeremy Steinberg] but also with [USDF president] George Williams.”

BY EMILY KOENIG
Dover lauded Olympian Lendon Gray’s efforts in developing youth, including her Emerging Dressage Athletes Program and her Winter Intensive Program. In addition, he said, he’d like to make better use of the US Pony Clubs as a resource for teaching horsemastership.

Another goal: “We need to create an American youth mentoring program. We will ask top professionals to give back a minimum of two days a year” in giving a leg up to promising young talent, Dover said.

Not surprisingly, Dover also wants to see every major dressage event host a corresponding fund-raiser, he said.

**Youth, Young Horses, and Developing Horses**

Next to speak was Jeremy Steinberg, the USEF national dressage youth coach. Among the long-term goals he hopes to implement are to oversee two training sessions for USEF elite youth riders; to attend shows to assist and observe youth riders; and to extend role of the youth coach to include the USEF National Young Adult “Brentina Cup” Championship. (Eligibility for Young Riders ends at age 21; Brentina Cup riders may be up to age 25.)

Steinberg, a former YR competitor, said he himself experienced a gap in support after he aged out of the YR ranks, while he was trying to establish himself as a dressage professional and high-performance competitor. He said he wants to work with USEF national dressage developing coach Debbie McDonald on creating more of an overlap between the coaches’ roles, to cover the transition between Young Riders (Steinberg) and Brentina Cup (McDonald).

“I want to see an abundance of Brentina Cup riders,” Steinberg said. “It doesn’t make sense that we have so many kids with good horses that disappear at twenty-one and pop back out at twenty-five, saying, ‘It is my last year; I am going to do it’ and [they] are not ready. If we could get these riders support at twenty-one, those riders would be coming out at twenty-two or twenty-three with these Brentina Cup horses and have two, three, or four years to hone their skills and really be able to compete.”

USEF national young-horse coach Scott Hassler, who has shepherded the USEF young-horse program since its inception twelve years ago, reviewed that program’s objectives: to support and inspire breeders, owners, and trainers; to help each combination meet its fullest potential; to develop combinations that can progress; and be fully accessible to any capacity as needed.

Hassler repeated a frequent mantra: that the FEI Young Horse classes, while prestigious, are not the sole path to success for a dressage horse. Some horses need to stay home and train for a while; others are best suited to coming up through the traditional national dressage levels.

“I think the main goal is all about guiding each horse along as an individual for a successful future,” Hassler said.

Another of Hassler’s goals is to continue to develop the breeding of top-caliber American sport horses. Five thousand warmblood foals are born here each year, he said; in contrast, Germany produces 50,000. Although US breeders are producing excellent quality, it will take time for the USA to be recognized as on par with Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands in that regard, he said. He applauded the continued sponsorship support for the USEF Young Horse Program by Markel Insurance.

USEF national dressage developing coach Debbie McDonald concluded the “Roadmap to the Podiums” presentation by outlining her program’s current goals: observation of eight shows with one selector and herself at each show; find promising combinations that can represent the US; help riders to set goals and plans; hold mandatory training sessions to determine riders’ desire, commitment, and team-player spirit; and have riders submit applications and plans to assess motivation.

With these plans in place, Dover concluded, “I guarantee you that we are going to be on a rise very quickly in every level in the dressage sport.”