

Lessons from the World's Best

Gold medals are great, but the training is what really makes Charlotte Dujardin tick. She shared her expertise at a California symposium.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KELLY SANCHEZ



CONTROLLED POWER: Dawn White-O'Connor and Aristo work under the watchful eye of British Olympian Charlotte Dujardin

If she never enters at “A” again—she retires her 14-year-old wonder horse, Valegro, this month—Britain’s Charlotte Dujardin has earned her place in dressage history. Just 31, she’s already amassed a lifetime of honors: smashing all three of the sport’s world records; being named an officer of the Order of the British Empire; and earning her second consecutive individual gold medal at this summer’s Olympics in Rio.

In October, some 900 spectators gathered in California at El Campeon Farms, an hour north of Los Angeles, to watch Dujardin work with 13 horse-and-rider combinations. Her two-day appearance was part of an educational clinic tour organized by Scott Hayes’ SH Productions and Piaffe Presents.

Confident, at times brash, Dujardin doled out advice with a helping of her signature sharp-as-a-tack wit, uttering lines familiar to those who’ve seen her in action before (“Short reins win gold medals”; “I think you need a yee-haw”). She regaled the crowd with stories, took questions, and signed autographs and posed for photos with those making donations to The Brooke, the international equine-welfare organization for which she serves as global ambassador.

USDF Connection was there for it all. Read on for our report on the clinic—and our exclusive interview with the world’s top dressage rider.

Always Think Forward

Dujardin has some promising up-and-comers in her own pipeline, like 10-year-old Hanoverian gelding Barolo, seven-year-old Hanoverian mare Mount St. John Freestyle, and six-

Charlotte’s Quips

British dressage superstar Charlotte Dujardin is known for her direct manner and dry wit. Here are a few of her memorable lines from her October clinic in California.

“Shorten your reins.”

“Are you looking down?”

“Why are you going on the right rein? Is that easier? Let’s go on the left rein.”

“You’re going to have a dream when you sleep tonight: I must not pull on my reins.”

“Were your legs on holiday?”

“I want you to love your right rein like you love your left.”

“I think you need a yee-haw.”

“You’ll get time faults in your test if you ride that slow.”

“Pat him. Pat him like you love him.”

“Shorten your reins a lot.”

year-old KWPN mare Florentina. Training youngsters, she said, is all about establishing a proper foundation: “If you can get it right here, going up the levels is so much easier.”

A critical component in laying that foundation is teaching young horses to “think forward.” “They’ve got to learn to react to your leg,” Dujardin told Victoria Fedri, who rode her own three-and-a-half-year-old gelding, Rock Steady.

Once the horse learns to go forward from the lightest leg aid, Dujardin introduces rein aids and half-halts—but woe to the rider who pulls back on the reins. “I see a lot of riders with really long reins and then their hands are pulled in toward their body,” she warned. “That shortens the horse’s neck. It’s all about pushing your hands toward the horse’s mouth.”

Dujardin likes to introduce lateral work by riding leg-yield on a diagonal line, to familiarize the horse with the concept of moving away from the rider’s inside leg. Mistakes—especially when they’re “forward thinking”—are never punished.

Observing Sarah Lockman’s smaller and more compact five-year-old Oldenburg gelding, Dehavilland, Dujardin said, “Long horses you have to think of pushing together. A short horse like this you’ve got to stretch, make him use his body more, and lengthen his frame.”

The Olympian cautioned against pulling down and shortening the horse’s neck when beginning to collect the canter: “Sarah’s going to walk with her reins and canter with her legs.” ⇨



TO THE POINT: Dujardin is funny and warm, but her training assessments don’t mince words

As she's done in past clinics, Dujardin suggested a "yee-haw"—a near gallop around the ring—to get a horse moving off the leg. "But you have to be really brave to kick them and not pull." At home, she said, she trots her horses in the field to help them "find more push and more gears."

"My Sort of Horse"

Amelie Kovac and her five-year-old Dutch gelding, Toretto, were last-minute additions to the clinic, and Dujardin loved what she saw. ("You know when you see a horse and think, 'Damn, that's my horse!?'") She praised Toretto's powerful hind leg, ground-covering stride, and shoulder freedom. "He's very uphill naturally. I would develop the muscles at this stage of his training so that he learns to work a little more over his back by making his head and neck drop down."

After watching Toretto canter, Dujardin asked if she could get on, joking, "I just want to test-ride my horse."

She touched on what's expected of a five-year-old. "For him to stay in the frame I want him in all the time is difficult. I'll give him a long rein, but he's got to take my hand forward."

Dujardin complimented Kovac on the horse's training. "He has a super mouth, very good contact, he's not too strong, he's not too light; he's very adjustable....He's a very, very exciting horse for the future."

Charlotte Dujardin on...

...her impact on dressage:

"So many people have said they've taken up the sport because of me, and that's what it's all about—trying to get more people into our sport. I came from nothing; I haven't been bought expensive horses. I've worked my way from the bottom to get here. That's a huge inspiration for people who think you have to have lots of money to do this."

...life after gold medals:

"Everybody thinks I just ride Grand Prix horses. I don't. My passion is training horses. Finding young horses, getting that bond and that connection with them is what I absolutely love. And I love it when people think a horse isn't good enough, and then I put a couple of years of training into it and say, 'That's the horse you didn't think was good enough.'"

...retiring Valegro:

"We hold every world record. It was important that he finish at the top of the sport. I'll retire him at [CDI] Olympia [London] in December. There'll be six or seven thousand people there. He's going to have a nice, easy life at home."



IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION: Dujardin coaches David Blake through getting the mare Heide Spirit more "uphill" in her outline

The Rider Stays in Control

Again and again, Dujardin declared: "Lazy horses you have to ride with your legs off, and hot horses you've got to ride with your legs on."

Working with rider Carly Taylor-Smith and Nikki Taylor-Smith's expressive six-year-old Oldenburg gelding, Rosalut NHF, Dujardin stressed the importance of looseness and relaxation. "Some horses, when they get stiff because of tension, they get a bit 'holding' and behind your leg."

Dujardin teaches flying changes on a figure eight, riding a half 10-meter circle and then turning on a short diagonal to the corner to ask for a change. The turn helps collect the canter to a short, bouncy stride. So that Rosalut wouldn't anticipate the change, Dujardin had Taylor-Smith alternate three-tempis down the long side with a single change "so he never learns he's going to do the same thing and take over."

With her eight-year-old Dutch gelding, Daniel V, Helen Stacy wasn't just the sole adult amateur in the clinic; she's also been riding dressage for only five years. Riding schoolmasters can give novices a feel for the upper-level movements, Dujardin said; but "sometimes it's ten times harder learning on a horse that wants to take over than actually training one your way"

Noting that Daniel got excited and croup-high during the flying changes, Dujardin instructed Stacy to correct him through repetition. "You just repeat it, and then he finishes, understanding that he's got to think forward for the change and not come back at your leg."



STAY LOOSE: Dujardin helps Niki Clarke find the relaxation in the work with Quincy

Encouraging Looseness and Lift

Stacy's instructor, David Blake, was next, riding Pippa Bird's six-year-old Oldenburg, Heide Spirit. Dujardin worked on getting the powerful mare more "uphill" in her outline. She encouraged Blake to make the mare rounder through the poll using flexion, bend, and travers (haunches-in), all the while remaining relaxed through her body yet connected to the rider's hand.

Dujardin had Blake alternate between shoulder-fore and travers to encourage looseness. "Dressage is gymnastics," she said. "Don't think of riding one bend, one angle all the time. Play with it."

Asked how to create more suspension in the trot, Dujardin responded: "I always make sure I can ride forward into the contact; and when I half-halt, I use my seat and close around them and find that lift. It's a feeling. I just do it. The

Can the Saddle Fitter Help? by Jochen Schleese CMS, CSFT, CSE

Saddle fitting is a term with various meanings. As the interface between horse and rider, the saddle should allow the rider to sit and balance comfortably (in a gender correct saddle) in order to give proper aids without clamping the thighs, relying on hands, or being unbalanced on the back. The saddle needs to provide freedom of movement without restriction so the back muscles come up, move freely and accommodate the horse's changing conformation.

Sometimes saddle fitting is analogous to buying shoes – selecting which are comfortable, perhaps adding orthotics or inserts to 'improve' the fit. With a non-adjustable saddle (wood or plastic tree), the saddle fitter assesses whether a narrow, medium or wide tree provides the 'best' (not necessarily optimal) fit. Improvements are made through re-flocking, though the angle and width of the tree cannot be changed. Saddles with rubber panels are not adjustable, so the saddle fitter tries to improve the fit through pads and shims. But similar to a shoe that pinches, extra thick socks (ie pads and shims) will not improve comfort.

Saddles which are designed to provide optimal fit have trees that flex with the movement of the horse, gullet plates which can be adjusted to the horse's changing shoulder angle and width, and flocking can be adjusted to the unique and changing back shape. The saddle fitter is able to evaluate and make adjustments to the gullet plate and flocking on site, taking into account any asymmetry and unevenness.



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RIDING THROUGH THE TENSION: *Correct reactions are a must, even when a horse spooks or is nervous. Ashleigh Luca-Tyson rides the Westfalen gelding Wellknown.*

horse has to be pushing from back to front to find that lift.”

She coached Niki Clarke through the process of finding that cadence with Jennifer Mason’s eight-year-old Oldenburg gelding, Quincy. “I want [Clarke] to half-halt so she slows the front legs,” Dujardin explained, “but he stays quick behind and starts to find a tiny bit of lift. Half-halt, slow the front, touch him with the whip on the top of his bum. Don’t think too much toward passage, or you slow it down too much. Tap him in rhythm. She’s got to create power and energy, and contain it.”

The rider must always finish by properly stretching the horse, Dujardin said. “When you’ve done a test, whether it’s been good or bad, always think about coming out and stretching in the warm-up arena. It’s important that you finish each session with loose, floppy muscles.”

Fit to Ride

Riding nine to 11 horses a day is only part of Charlotte Dujardin’s fitness regimen. Working with a personal trainer three to four times a week helps her to maintain a strong core: “I do gym balls, loads of situps, ab crunches, planking—all the horrible things you don’t want to do.”

She also does twice-weekly cardio (usually spin classes) and gets regular sports massages and acupuncture treatments. Correct body alignment, she says, is essential for a dressage rider: “I have to be as even as possible for my horses so they can be straight and supple themselves. A lot of riders are one-sided and create that in their horses.”

Dujardin and her mentor, British Olympian Carl Hester, make sure that their horses get plenty of work outside the arena, as well. They all go out in the field and are hacked regularly. “And Valegro did water treadmill two or three times a week before Rio. It really loosened his back. I do it with all my young horses as well; it helps them get stronger and fitter.”



SECURITY BLANKET: *To encourage the tense mare La Fariah to relax her body, Dujardin sat more heavily in the saddle and stayed relaxed herself while repeating the exercise*

Riding the Spooky or Tense Horse

Tense and nervous horses frustrate many riders. “Horses that spook that still go forward aren’t as bad as horses that draw themselves back and are looking,” Dujardin said. “The bigger deal you make of it, the worse they become.” Riding leg-yield and shoulder-fore, she said, can encourage confidence.

Working the nine-year-old Hanoverian Wie Cantabrico in canter, Verena Mahin concentrated on getting the sensitive, long-backed gelding to take more weight behind. On a circle, Dujardin asked Mahin to keep her leg loose but supportive. Giving small half-halts while collecting encouraged the horse to rebalance and “sit.”

Dujardin recommends lots of walk breathers for tense horses. “As a rider, it feels like you need to keep going and going and going, but actually it’s the wrong thing because all you do is work with tension,” she said. In a test, a tense collected walk will earn low marks—something Dujardin counters by riding it more like a medium walk. Better to get a 6 for “not collected enough” than a 4 for a tense walk marred by loss of rhythm, she reasoned.

The theme of dealing with tension continued into the next session. Watching Ashleigh Luca-Tyson warm up Alison Swanson’s eight-year-old Westfalen gelding, Wellknown, Dujardin talked about the challenges of riding descendants of the KWPN stallion Jazz, who have a reputation for being hot. “I actually have a Jazz myself. He’s seven years old, and I’ve only just taken him to his first show because I’ve never been so petrified in my entire life.”

Wellknown gets stiff when he’s nervous, so Dujardin had Luca-Tyson work in travers and ride him round and over his back. “Even when he spooks, you’ve just got to move the bit and soften. When she gives the rein, he mustn’t speed up or slow down or stick his neck up or push his neck down. He must stay the same.”

She asked the pair to ride on a circle and focus on self-carriage. “Because he gets spooky, he draws himself in and gets behind the leg. She’s got to keep those reactions—thinking forward without pulling.”

Channeling Energy

Dujardin prefers “hot, sensitive horses” but admitted that they require brave riders. “Otherwise, you end up trying to slow down all the time, and then they just want to run.”

Watching Rebecca Rigdon-Blake ride a few changes on her seven-year-old Rhinelander mare, La Fariah, Dujardin wanted more separation of the hind legs, and advised that the mare needed to relax, strengthen her core, and lift her back.

Getting into the saddle, Dujardin said: “I love that she has all this energy. She just needs to do a little less and find that relaxation button.”

When La Fariah stiffened in the bend, Dujardin sat more heavily in the saddle to channel the mare’s energy and encourage her to relax. “If I stiffen and tighten when she tightens, then all the work I do with her is done through tension.”

Sitting “heavy,” Dujardin added, doesn’t mean pushing down on the horse’s back. “I’m letting her know I’m there. I’m her security blanket. I don’t mind when she makes a mistake, gets tense, or worries; I just keep doing the exercise until she’s relaxed about it.”

Preparing for Grand Prix

In readying the horse for the counter-changes of hand (the canter “zigzags”), Dujardin rides leg-yield in canter from one side of the arena to the other. She asked 2015 US Pan Am Games veteran Sabine Schut-Kery to ride Nicole Bhathal’s 11-year-old Oldenburg gelding, Sir Cedrik H, in travers to encourage looseness. They then continued to play with the bend in half-pass. “When you make that line steeper, the horse wants to slow down and you have to keep the activity and speed,” Dujardin said.

Of the Grand Prix-level zigzags, Dujardin said: “It sounds pretty easy. Well, you try and ride it. First, you’ve got to count. And then each half-pass has to be even on each side of the center line. You want to have the same bend, and you’ve got to have a good, expressive change.

“When you have seven judges ’round the arena, they see absolutely everything,” she added. “You can’t afford for your horse not to be even or supple in the bend.”

Schut-Kery and Sir Cedrik H also worked on the halt and rein back. “Some horses duck their heads and fly backward, and other horses just do not move,” said Dujardin. “If they run backward, you do two steps and stop and two steps and stop so that you stay in control of each step.” Having



PREPARING FOR THE NEXT LEVEL: *The getting-ready-for-Grand-Prix horse Sir Cedrik H and rider Sabine Schut-Kery*

a helper at the horse’s shoulder or tapping lightly with the whip can encourage the “sticky” horse to step backward.

Riding for the 10

When she competes, “I don’t go in the arena and ride for a 7 or an 8,” Dujardin said. “I want a 9 or a 10. There’s no point me going in there and riding a safe, nice test.”

If she makes a mistake, she said, she follows the advice of those KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON memes: “You’ve got to put it to the back of your head.”

Working with Sarah Christy and Zamorin, a 13-year-old Lusitano gelding owned by Linda Alexander, Dujardin called Iberian horses “super fun.” She urged Christy to get the most out of every movement, particularly in the extensions, which aren’t typically Iberians’ strong suit.

In the canter pirouettes, Dujardin advised thinking of a small start and a big finish. “You see a lot of riders either make a huge start and a small finish, or the horses whip around really, really fast. You’ve got to stay in control of every step of the canter and keep it in balance.”

With Dawn White-O’Connor and Carla Hayes’ Aristo, the emphasis was on increasing the activity when the 11-year-old Dutch gelding got slow behind in the pirouettes. “Think shoulder-fore, not quarters-in. He braces forward with the front leg and makes really big, slow steps; and he needs to make shorter, quicker, bouncier steps.”

They also practiced halts on the center line, with Dujardin having White-O’Connor ride a collected canter as if she was going to halt, but not halting. “I would live up and down that center line doing exactly this until I knew I could collect him and he wasn’t going to take over.”

In competition, Dujardin pointed out, “You’ve got to go with what you’ve got.” But the day-to-day training—making mistakes and getting the best out of the horse—is clearly what she lives for. ▲

Kelly Sanchez is a California-based freelance writer and a regular contributor to USDF Connection. When she’s not thinking about horses, she writes about design and architecture for Dwell.