The Pursuit of Happiness

“Happy athlete” ideal is Christoph Hess’s focus at USDF Trainers’ Conference

FOCUS ON EXCELLENCE: Christoph Hess looks on as Jennifer Baumert rides shoulder-in aboard DeWurt.
The way Christoph Hess sees it, the road to dressage nirvana is paved with free forward movement, absolute acceptance of the aids, true suppleness, fabulous equitation, and a little bit of fun.

The German master, who recently retired as director of training for the German Olympic Committee for Equestrian Sports and an FEI 4* dressage judge, conducted the 2012 Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers’ Conference with supporting sponsorship from World Development Group. Approximately 200 trainers, instructors, judges, riders, and other eligible attendees traveled to Mary Anne and Walter McPhail’s High Meadow Farm in Loxahatchee, FL, for the January 16-17 event.

Although both days of the conference had a similar format—six demonstration pairs, interspersed with audience questions fielded by USDF certification examiner Lendon Gray—Hess, 62, organized his presentation into two parts. As he explained in his day-two introduction: “Yesterday we had our trainer and rider glasses, but today it is important to look with judges’ eyes.”

What Hess meant was that, although he gave every horse and rider a training evaluation and advice, on day two he offered additional “view from C” critiques, explaining the judge’s criteria and giving real-time scores.

An enthusiastic ambassador for the sport of dressage, Hess loves to teach and train. He loves to share photos and video of what he considers superlative riding. Despite admitting to some jet lag from flying over from Germany the day before, Hess went strong for more than eight hours, took the microphone again for an evening lecture and multimedia presentation (he brought so much material, said USDF senior education programs coordinator and conference organizer Kathie Robertson, that she had to rein him in for fear he’d outlast his audience), then got up early again for a second long conference day with undiminished energy. After the conference-goers went home, Hess conducted another day-long session exclusively for USDF-certified instructors (see “Certified Instructors Get an Extra Day with Christoph Hess” on page 36) and then was off to teach some private clinics elsewhere in the States before heading home to Germany.

In this article, we’ll share highlights and key points from Hess’s arsenal of dressage knowledge.

Correct Training: A Tonic for Body and Soul

We dressage enthusiasts boast that our sport makes horses more ridable, beautiful, graceful—but to Hess, its benefits go even further.

“The more you school correctly, stretching correctly over the back, the less you will need the vet,” he said.

What’s more, said Hess, developing suppleness can actually influence the horse’s mind, tempering the tendency toward tension or laziness (most horses are inclined one way or the other): “Correctly achieved suppleness will make anxious horses more quiet and lazy horses more active.”

We’ll get into the details of how to achieve this Zen-like state in a moment. But first, in case you were of the opinion that judges, and especially German judges, are dour taskmasters who wring the joy out of dressage, consider these statements by Hess:

“Judges have to be positive for the horse, not against the horse. A judge has to be a horseman.”

“We have to make the horse more happy.”

“Look into the face of the rider. Is she looking happy? Feeling with the horse?”

Of course, dressage is not all sunshine and rainbows. Training is hard work, and Hess is a stickler for detail. He wants the rider’s standards high and the horse fine-tuned like the magnificent instrument he is. But through correct work with great clarity and generous rewards, Hess believes, horse and rider will become better partners and, yes, happier.
Hess’s Basics

Watch any clinician work with multiple horses and riders, and you’ll usually see a pattern emerge—repeated phrases that indicate the expert’s training priorities. Hess was no exception.

**Forward, march.** Hess wants the horse in front of the leg—not kinda-sorta in front of the leg, or running from the leg, but moving freely forward with looseness through his entire body and with 100-percent immediate and correct response to the leg aids.

Hess is not a fan of using the spur or the whip behind the rider’s leg to correct the lazy horse. In fact, with the five-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding Glorious, Hess had rider and co-owner Nancy Later Lavoie remove her spurs, shorten her stirrups, and canter in a light seat (hunter/jumper types would call it a half-seat) until Glorious opened up his stride and his body. This entailed some long minutes of cantering around the perimeter of the arena while Hess repeated a favorite phrase: “Whip at the shoulder. Whip at the shoulder.”

The logic is that a horse that’s behind the leg is more likely to kick resentfully or to tense up at the whip instead of going forward, while a tap on the shoulder corrects the lazy leg reaction in a less-sensitive area. Later, after the horse is in front of the leg, a tap behind the leg or on the croup is more likely to create correct engagement behind, Hess explained.

Glorious dawdled in the walk and fussed with the contact when Lavoie asked him to go more freely forward. Hess remained steadfast.

“He must march the whole time, not do a grandmother’s walk.” And “when he is finally in front of you, I am absolutely sure he will come into the right contact”—which indeed showed improvement.

Particularly with young horses, Hess favors what we might call a modified hunter/jumper approach, as demonstrated by Endel Ots on the four-year-old stallion Exodus. Ots entered the ring in a jumping saddle, his stirrups shortened, and displayed Exodus’s powerful gaits in a light seat.

An audience member asked whether the pair’s turnout would be considered appropriate for a Materiale class. “Yes; just right,” Hess said. “No spurs, shorter stirrups, a short whip, and a light seat.” (He prefers whips about one meter in length, especially for young horses, because they’re easier to control and won’t touch the horse too far behind the rider’s leg.)

**Balance, tempo control, and suppleness.** The horse can’t just careen around, of course. If he gets heavy in the
bridle or falls on his forehand, the solution is “many half-halts and thousands of proper transitions,” Hess said.

The goal of the warm-up is “to get the horse to stretch into a longer rein and take bigger strides,” Hess explained while Caroline Roffman finished warming up the five-year-old mare Sanskara. “Now, after all the loosening and big-stride work, riding transitions puts the horse together.”

Hess had Roffman ride multiple loops, performing trot-to-walk transitions as she crossed the center line. To make things a little more interesting, he had her hold the reins in one hand and a microphone in the other so that she could explain how she asks for a down transition (without pulling on the reins, of course!).

Hess summed up: “When you ride a down transition, your belly button goes in this direction” (pointing toward his navel). The action he described was that of engaging the abdominal muscles into a pelvic tuck.

One of the main differences between top riders and trainers and everybody else is that the top people are über-sticklers for detail. In dressage, this means unflagging at-
tention to tempo, energy, and length of stride: every stride the same.

“A lot of horses slow down when the rider shortens the reins,” Hess said. And it’s extremely difficult to keep every stride the same into and out of a transition.

Remember Hess’s tantalizing proclamation about suppleness making tense horses less anxious and lazy horses more forward? Here’s where that comes into play.

In dressage, the horse must learn not only to move forward away from the rider’s driving aids but also sideways. The rider who gains control over the placement of the horse’s hind legs effectively gains control of the horse’s entire body.
Hindquarter control therefore equals submission in terms of obedience to the forward-sideways driving aids. Submission, in turn, equals prompt response as well as a willing frame of mind. Thus Hess’s statement: “If the horse is naughty or lazy to the leg, the best exercise is leg-yield.”

Lateral work, like everything else we do in dressage, has a purpose. Or as Hess put it, “We ride horses to develop the gaits, not to ride special tricks.”

With Chrissa Hoffmann on her five-year-old Hanoverian gelding, Scrabble, Hess showed how correct lateral and bending work would continue to develop the big horse’s big gaits and increase his elasticity and reach. He had Hoffman ride a shallow trot half-pass line the length of the arena (“the proper way for a young horse”), demonstrating the correct way to establish the half-pass line. For those of us who have heard “half-pass is travers on the diagonal” but still couldn’t figure out the riding, Hess’s instruction was refreshingly simple: Go on the diagonal line first; then ride haunches-in.

**Stretch to the bit.** An important component of suppleness and relaxation (and balance, and…) is the horse’s willingness and ability to stretch over his topline and neck toward the bit. As two demonstration horses showed, it’s also a key component in solving very different types of training issues.

At one end of the spectrum we had Zairo Interagro, a seven-year-old Lusitano stallion co-owned by rider Heather Bender. A talented and willing but hot type, Zairo Interagro showed a tendency to anticipate, to take short and hurried steps with a short neck, and to play with the bit, the latter a sign of tension. Hess’s training prescription was lots of simple circle and transition work, continually giving the reins and ensuring that the stallion was responding properly to the aids, until Zairo Interagro relaxed and began to reach over his topline.

“He must learn to wait for your aids,” Hess told Bender.

Another demonstration horse that needed better stretch to the bit was Rising Star, a fourteen-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding owned and ridden by Barbie Asplundh. This horse had been competing at Intermediate II; but, sensing some holes in his previous training, Asplundh had been taking a couple of steps back at the time of the conference.

The long-necked, long-backed Rising Star was the physical opposite of Bender’s baroque Lusitano. And lacking natural self-confidence, the chestnut gelding had a propensity for backing off the contact, Hess said.

“There is a very soft contact between the neck and the mouth,” Hess observed. “He is easy to ride with a [too] short neck. It is a big challenge to get him to stretch the neck. He needs to lean more on the bit.”

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Before the 2012 Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers’ Conference, we asked fans of USDF’s Facebook page (United States Dressage Federation Official Page) to submit questions for Christoph Hess. In an exclusive interview, we got a chance to ask him some of your questions (and a few of our own).

**What do you look for in a horse?**

That he’s happy, loves to work, is motivated, and has good elasticity and ability for the movements. I am not a person who looks to see how many mistakes the horse is doing; I look to see that the horse has been trained in the right direction. For me, the right direction in training is the most important.

**If a horse has been trained in the wrong direction, then would you decline to buy it?**

I have to see if it is a wrong direction that I can correct, or wrong direction with no chance of correction. Very hot horses that are very short in the neck, horses that are afraid of the rider, extremely lazy horses—these are things I wouldn’t do.

**How can I tell if my horse is overfaced in his work or not suitable for dressage?**

This is difficult to say without knowing the horse. If you are not sure, ask experienced people. Good riders are those who ask. They ask: What can I do better? Is this a training problem with a proper dressage horse, or is this a problem because he is not talented enough for dressage?

**How do I motivate a lazy horse?**

Come with both legs as much as possible and give with both reins so that the horse can jump forward. You do this two or three times, and then most horses are in front of the rider.

When horses are in the field, they kick sometimes. They don’t kick twenty or thirty times; they kick one time. Maybe it’s more pain, but then it’s OK. The more we do this with the leg [nag weakly], the less the horse is moving.

**I don’t have access to an indoor arena, and my area is snowy and cold in the winter. What can I do to continue working with my horse?**

A good rider says “What can I do?” instead of focusing on what he can’t do. There are a lot of things you can do even if you have only a tiny area to ride in. You can do walk-trot transitions. You can do leg-yield, shoulder-in, half-pass, and pirouettes, all in walk.

**How do you introduce piaffe?**

It starts with work in trot, especially proper half-halts and transitions. Then I start riding transitions from trot to walk or to halt, not coming [all the way] into walk or halt but trotting again. The last two, three, four steps before you are in walk or in halt are the first steps into the direction of piaffe. When you do this properly, the horse gets the feeling of the two-beat rhythm, and this is the first step toward piaffe.

The next step would be with a ground person with a whip behind, starting to jog from a walk.

For me, piaffe is not a special movement; it is part of the whole gymnastic process.

**What is your opinion of “rollkur” (hyperflexion)?**

If you make the horse a little bit short in the neck, if the horse is stretching the neck, no problem, with an experienced rider on some occasions. To make the horse a little more round and deep, no problem. But rollkur ridden with the hands is a no-go.

Many people look only at how short the horse is in the neck; they do not look at how the whole body works. When everything works well—good in the hind leg, good swing in the back—but the horse is a little bit short in the neck, this is not good but this is not rollkur.

**If you could change anything about the sport of dressage, what would it be?**

I would ask for tests with more basic movements. At Grand Prix: riding with one hand, giving reins, riding on a long rein, so that the judge can tell whether this horse-rider combination is on the right way or the wrong way [of training].

**What’s next for your dressage career?**

After retiring as the director of education and training at Warendorf [the German National Equestrian Federation] at the end of January 2012, I will become the ambassador for education and training for the German Federation, and director of a group of 56,000 people who are personal members of the Federation [similar to USDF’s participating members]. My staff organizes a lot of clinics and seminars, and the personal members get a magazine every month. I am responsible for this. I give maybe 10 percent of the clinics.

I like my job. It’s part of my life.

**HAPPY TRAINER: Christoph Hess loves his work**
Through patient, simple bending lines and transitions, Hess and Asplundh showed Rising Star that he must, indeed, go forward from the leg into an accepting hand that does not constrain him but that allows him the freedom to stretch forward and slightly downward.

“I only go to the next step when we have the basics under control,” Hess said. “[Many riders] accept too many small mistakes. A small mistake in the basic work will be a terrible mistake down the road.” He praised Asplundh’s tactful riding and horsemanship sense in choosing to reaffirm the basics in her talented horse.

“Top Class” Moments

If Hess really likes what a rider is doing, he praises it as “top class.” A few lucky riders got to hear that phrase during the Trainers’ Conference.

One who did was Sharon McCusker on her eight-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding, Wrigley. Hess started off by complimenting Wrigley’s correct reaction to McCusker’s leg aids and his “swinging, marching” walk.

“The walk is the mirror of good training,” Hess said.

As the pair went through their paces—lateral work, pirouettes, tempi changes—Hess piled on the superlatives. “This is perfect riding. I don’t say that very often.” Of the
Most of us train in the isolation of our own barns. A day to observe and discuss real FEI training issues with both trainers and riders has just been superb.”

“Good riding is so important to see as well as do. This format has given us a chance to refresh our eye and challenge our ability to articulate what we see. I was initially intimidated, but the atmosphere was so open and easy, it made it much easier to speak up.”

These were just two of the rave reviews from USDF-certified instructors who were able to spend an extra day with 2012 Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers’ Conference clinician Christoph Hess. Hess conducted the FEI Workshop for Certified Instructors, organized by certification examiner Lendon Gray and held January 18 at the beautiful Hampton Green Farm in Wellington, FL.

In the workshop, Hess and the attendees observed riding and lessons taught by USDF certification faculty members and examiners Ann Guptill, Vicki Hammers-O’Neil, Bailey Cook, and Rachel Saavedra to Fourth Level certified instructor/trainers Jennifer Baumert, Heather Bender, and Mica Mabragaña.

A positive, encouraging, and motivated teacher, Hess led a discussion at the end of each session about what was needed, what was well done, and what could be added, consistent with the current instructor-workshop format. He worked with some of the horses in hand to demonstrate its use in enhancing the horse’s gaits and understanding of collection.

In training, Hess said, the trainer must use a positive approach, have a clear direction resulting in improvement over the course of the session, and use work in hand where appropriate. Some of his other insights:

• At the FEI levels, the rider is an active participant in the horse’s training and must be allowed to make decisions “in the moment” and be open to discussing them.

• Not all horses are capable of the Grand Prix. Many can be excellent “small tour” horses. These horses should not be punished for what they cannot do (especially those that cannot coordinate piaffe) but valued for what they can do.

• Likewise, not all riders will make it to Grand Prix. As in training horses, an instructor must be aware of the rider’s skills and aspirations, neither berating a student who rides for pleasure nor sugar-coating the lessons if a rider has real talent and ambition to excel. As certified instructor and Olympian Courtney King-Dye recalled of her lessons with mentor Lendon Gray, “Lendon was so hard on me but so nice to the lady who rode after me. When I asked her why, she said, “You want to go to the Olympics. She wants to have a good time.”

• Whatever the rider’s level of accomplishment and aspirations, her seat and coordination of the aids must continue to develop.

With a renewed focus on education, the FEI workshop was open to all certified instructors. USDF hopes to make this an annual event.

The USDF Instructor/Trainer Program is growing and expanding in scope, with plans to add FEI-level certification categories for small tour (Prix St. Georges and Intermediate I) and large tour (Intermediate II and Grand Prix). For information about the program, visit usdf.org or contact the program liaison at instructorcertification@usdf.org or at (859) 971-2277.

—Kathie Robertson
horse: “He came in the ring a little tense but in a good frame of mind. Our goal is a happy athlete.” And he admired Wrigley’s correctness in the move-off into trot: “It was the correct tempo, not short, not lazy.”

Another who drew praise (and had fun, too) was Mica Mabragaña, a former working student for Olympian Lendon Gray. She rode Nexus, a rangy sixteen-year-old Danish Warmblood gelding.

“This is top-class riding,” Hess said of Mabragaña, who patiently coached her mount through several series of tempo changes, some with mistakes. “I think you are one hundred percent the right rider for this horse. He wants very much to do a good job. It is a misunderstanding because you give very correct and sensitive aids. I think he was trained more ‘movement oriented.’

“I think there were some bad days in his life where he was punished,” Hess said of Nexus. “You pat him, [and] don’t punish him for a mistake. The only thing that matters is that he is in front of you” (in front of the leg in the changes).

Dressage riders have to be multitaskers, continuously monitoring every aspect of their bodies and their horses—sometimes while taking instruction or riding a test at the same time. To challenge Mabragaña’s “walk and chew gum” ability, Hess handed her the microphone, asked her to put Nexus through some one-handed working canter pirouettes—and, as if that weren’t enough, then asked her to tell him about the polo players in her native Argentina. (She coped admirably.)

The Proof Is in the Horses

Many skilled clinicians can help horses to perform at a higher standard. But not everyone can have an obvious effect on horses’ minds, as well.

Every horse at the Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers’ Conference left the arena more relaxed and confident than it began—and not just because it was tired.

Scrabble, Chrissa Hoffmann’s mount, was lathered with nervous sweat just minutes into his session. Hess predicted that the work would take care of the problem.

Sure enough, Scrabble actually worked himself dry. The lather was gone.

“When the horse is dry by the end of the work, it shows he is happy and relaxed in his work,” Hess said.

Don Principe, a twelve-year-old Hanoverian stallion ridden by Jennifer Baumert, started off his session with some noisy breathing—much of it the result of tension, Hess said. As the Grand Prix-level stallion relaxed during his session, the breathing sounds subsided. ➔
A Round of Thanks

The USDF gratefully acknowledges those who helped to make the 2012 Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers’ Conference a success.

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Rukeyser
Sharon McCusker, Ashby, MA,
and her own Wrigley
Endel Ots, Wellington, FL, and
Exodus, owned by Gail Rodecker
Caroline Roffman, Wellington,
FL, and Sanskara, owned by Anne
Schmidt.
Hess’s respect for the horses and his inclusion of the riders, all of whom were asked to comment to the audience about their mounts and their thoughts on their training sessions, made for a supportive and productive learning atmosphere. Riders and auditors alike came away with exercises and approaches to improve their horses—and greater clarity as to why developing the three basic gaits pays off, both in and out of the competition arena.

“For me,” Hess said, “the highest goal is to give the people a feeling for good riding. When they understand what good riding is, then I am happy. I want the riders to be more feeling and more thinking in the saddle than just doing technique. This is my inspiration. This is my mission.”

Another of Hess’s oft-repeated phrases: “The finger [of blame] should always point in this direction [toward the rider], not in that direction [toward the horse]. If I say, ‘My horse is not doing it,’ then it’s like I am not responsible. I must start by saying, ‘I will do better in order to make my horse better,’ not ‘My horse has to change.’ This is a change of mind in the brain and in the heart. This is important from grass-roots level to Grand Prix level. ▲