

# The Dressage Connection

*The latest in the world of American dressage  
from the United States Dressage Federation*



<http://usfdressage.blogspot.com/>

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## The Song Remains the Same



Steffen Peters coaches Angela Jackson on Allure S, an 8-year-old KWPN mare by Rousseau and owned by KC Dunn. Photo by Jennifer Bryant.

I've never been to a spa, but I imagine the experience must be similar to that of attending the **Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers' Conference** with Olympian Steffen Peters and USEF national dressage young-horse coach Scott Hassler.

You strip off all that artifice -- shoes, makeup, baubles, clothes -- and steam, soak, and massage away your troubles and tight spots. What's left is your best self -- body and mind, calm yet invigorated.

Steffen Peters' riding is a spa treatment for a dressage horse. It's simplicity at its finest. No gimmicky equipment. No accessories. No funky "system." Just the legs, hands, weight, and impeccable timing of a rather slight man who can get more out of a horse than any other rider I've seen.

Peters works his riderly magic and horses transform. Bodies become more supple. Gaits amplify. Tension dissipates. Movements appear effortless. And where the horses' bodies go, their minds follow. They finish their work happier than when they started -- and that's the most beautiful thing of all.

During the conference, Peters and Hassler repeated their theme of simplicity that's been the common thread today, and yesterday, and last year. The horse must respond to light leg aids. Don't aid with the spur; *remind* with the spur. If he doesn't respond to a light leg aid, tap with the whip instead of spurring or kicking; rinse and repeat until the horse learns to respect the light leg aid. Sit quietly without pumping the seat. Core strong. Shoulders back and down. Don't make big movements with the legs, like the exaggerated drawing-back that we see so often in flying changes or piaffe. If the horse's response is anything less than "Right away, sir!", don't forge ahead with the planned movement (which is already doomed to mediocrity); repeat the transition. Make every step count.

It would be boring if it weren't so damned effective. And difficult.



JJ Tate piaffes aboard Faberge, a 10-year-old Westfalen gelding owned by Elizabeth Guerisco-Wolf. Photo by Jennifer Bryant.

I leave this Trainers' Conference, as I left last year's conference, feeling a mix of inspired and daunted. Inspired to strive to leave my own baggage behind and to concentrate on Peters' few simple principles. Daunted because the demonstrations I've just seen are reminders of just how lacking a lot of horses' dressage training really is. Which means that there are a lot of retrains out there in Dressage Land, and as Peters and Hassler told me today, retraining can be a tough business.

Speaking at the [2014 USDF/USEF Young Rider Graduate Program](#), which immediately preceded the Trainers' Conference, Olympian Lendon Gray said: "I cannot emphasize strongly enough the value of sitting in the corner, watching." Well, that's exactly what I did for the past two days: I sat in the corner and studied and studied Peters' riding. Watching great riding and training does rub off. Most of us are not fortunate enough to share ring time with elite-level riders every day. We become accustomed to a certain "look" and level of accomplishment. Even if that level is pretty good, every once in a while you need to spend some time around truly excellent and get your bar kicked up a notch or 10.

"Be your horse's coach" is a phrase Scott Hassler is fond of repeating. Show him the way. Do what's best for him, not your ego or the owner's ego. Train with boundaries but always with encouragement and patience. Understand that the horse is a sentient being that can feel confusion and aches and pain, just like you. Listen for him to tell you when to push forward and when to back off. Understand that progress is not linear.

Over the past two days, Hassler and Peters showed us the way. They didn't change their message, but they didn't have to. It's simple. It's humane. It's elegant and beautiful. It works. And I'm going to go home and emulate, and emulate, and try to hear their message again and again.

*Note: Watch for a full report on the Trainers' Conference in the April issue of [USDF Connection](#).*

Monday, January 20, 2014

## Trainers' Conference 2014: A Message That Bears Repeating



A packed house watches Steffen Peters instruct Ilse Schwarz on Don Joseph at the 2014 Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers' Conference. Photo by Jennifer Bryant.

In this fast-paced world, in which many people seem to have the attention span of a gnat, folks get bored easily and are always looking for the next hot trend.

Dressage, although it's by nature a little slower-moving, can fall victim to the same problem: "flavor of the month" trainers, trends in equipment, even "in" bloodlines. So it might seem counterproductive that, for the **2014 Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers' Conference**, the exact same clinician lineup and presentation format was planned. Been there, done that, right?

If the clinicians in question are Steffen Peters and Scott Hassler, however, the conventional wisdom goes out the window. Their 2013 conference was such a smash hit that the **USDF** decided not to mess with a good thing. The winning formula has proven to be golden, with attendance for 2014 up considerably over last year's.

About 300 trainers and riders flocked to Mary Anne McPhail's High Meadow Farm in Loxahatchee, Florida, for day 1 of this year's conference. They were rewarded with perfect weather -- sunny and 75 degrees -- and demonstrations of perfectly wonderful riding and training by Peters, with commentary from Hassler.

As I watched the day's demonstration horses, most of which Peters got on for part of the rides, I sighed to myself. I was here last year. I took copious notes and photos. I wrote a freakin' magnum opus on the conference for ***USDF Connection***. And yet here I was, going, "Oh yeah, I meant to do all of this stuff, and yet somehow I let some of it get away from me."

I *know*, for example, that the horse must respond to a light leg aid. Peters can get a horse to passage and piaffe merely by, as he describes it, reaching down into his heels and gently applying his entire

leg. No spurs, no whip, no kicking, no drawing back the leg or lifting the heel. Yet most horses do not respond thusly. So back to the dressage-training drawing board we go. We riders know these things intellectually, but somehow we let our horses sucker us into accepting less. So, just like our beloved horses, we need the lesson repeated again and again, until it starts to sink in.

Here's another lesson I have evidently forgotten in the past year. Peters told several of the demonstration riders to sit quietly. "It's tempting to push with the seat," he told one who was working on piaffe, "but it doesn't work. The seat stays centered, but the gas pedal is the leg."

Sitting quietly and not having to bump-kick-bang-spur, of course, is a big part of the reason Peters is such a beautiful, elegant rider. Another part is his impeccable feel and timing of the aids. The latter isn't so easily taught, but it's probably safe to say that if you get your horse to be responsive to light leg aids, you'll be able to make smaller movements and therefore will be "with" your horse's gaits more successfully. Smaller, quicker reaction times eventually make for sharper and more precise timing. Right? Yeah, I'm working on it.

Hmm, what other lessons did I hear repeated today that I know (I *know!*) and yet have gotten lax about? How about this one: If the rider has to work hard for every little thing, her job is going to become nearly impossible as the horse moves up the levels and the tests become fast-paced and complex. Peters' goal is to train the horse to do the basic stuff pretty much on his own so that he can spend his time in the show ring riding beautiful movements.

Of Angela Jackson's mount, Allure S, Peters commented during his ride on the mare: "She should offer the corners a tiny bit more. I have to manage the corners too much." What he meant was that he doesn't want to have to work at riding nice, deep corners during a test. Good corners should be practiced at home so much that they are automatic for both rider and horse.

(I *know*, I *know*....)

Scott Hassler shared one of his own favorite sayings -- one, of course, that I've heard before but that hasn't been sufficiently drilled into me.

Whether it's a gait or a movement, Hassler said, "You want to own it." By which he means that you don't just ride what the horse gives you; you influence the horse so as to create the gait or movement that you want to ride. You don't accept less.

This is a hard one for me because some horses are quite happy to give a subpar effort and can get rather, um, opinionated when a rider calls them on it. The trick is to remain calm and cool until the horse realizes the pressure isn't going away. Hopefully the drama is minimal, thanks to tactful riding. In my experience, these discussions don't happen -- or if they do, they're minor -- with the demo horses at the Trainers' Conference, for these horses are already pretty well trained. They're more apt to occur back home, with a spoiled individual. Which is why, of course, it's so much easier to train correctly in the first place than to try to change an entrenched, unwanted pattern of behavior.

My horse gets away with things she probably shouldn't. That's because her rider similarly lets things slide that she shouldn't. I need my lessons repeated just like my horse, and so I'm grateful I have the chance to absorb Peters' and Hassler's message once again. I, for one, can't hear their philosophies often enough.

See you tomorrow!