very dressage trainer who has headlined USDF’s Adult Clinic Series has brought a wealth of expertise and an impressive resume. But those riders and auditors who are lucky enough to participate in the 2013-2014 Nutrena/USDF Adult Clinics are going to be learning from a bona fide American dressage legend. Not too many dressage professionals have literally done it all: won an Olympic medal, trained and coached scores of horses and riders to Grand Prix, judged at the highest levels, bred successful sport horses, and served in numerous sport-governance positions, including as a driving force behind the California Dressage Society.

That would be Hilda Gurney, 69, of Moorpark, CA, whose Keenridge has been a West Coast dressage Mecca for decades. The 2007 Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame inductee was on hand at the 2012 Adequan/USDF National Convention in New Orleans to share her history and outline her plans for the USDF Adult Clinics.

A Keen Teacher

The story of Gurney’s most famous equine partner is proof that dressage success can be had without vast sums of money. Gurney, who taught special education for years before turning to dressage full time, bought the 17.2-hand Thoroughbred gelding, Keen, off the track for $1,000 “because he was too big to fit in the starting gate,” she said.

The big chestnut was a huge mover with loads of dressage talent, but he was a pistol. “He was very sensitive, including about the way his saddle and bridle fit,” Gurney recalled. “He was almost too hot to handle on the ground.

“Keen taught me about harmony,” Gurney continued—and “Harmonize with Your Horse” is the theme of her Nutrena/USDF Adult Clinic Series.

“We have an obligation to harmonize with our horses as much as possible,” Gurney said. To that end, in training Keen, she had to find ways to channel the horse’s hot tem-
perament and boundless energy constructively. Years of patient training produced a partner who wanted to work with his rider, and Gurney’s efforts were rewarded when the pair won team bronze at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. The highest-placing US horse and rider, they were tenth individually.

Gurney’s excellent care and training helped Keen to lead a long and productive life. Her horse, who is a fellow member of the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame, continued to work and compete until a month before his death, she said. Gurney’s student Kathleen Raine, now an international competitor in her own right, showed Keen at Grand Prix when he was 23, Gurney said.

**Patient, Correct Basics**

During her convention presentation, Gurney showed video clips of assistants instilling correct basics in young horses through ground work, lungeing, and careful introduction to under-saddle work. Then she showed a video demonstration of correct riding position. Her on-screen narrative discussed how the rider follows the horse’s motion, correct hand position and stirrup length, and the use of the hips and core.

Gurney’s clinics, one in each USDF region, will be held in a symposium-style clinic format and will include a lecture. Riding participants must be 22 or older; auditors of all ages are welcome. For the schedule and for application and registration information, visit usdf.org/education/clinics/adult.

You might assume that, after a lifetime spent in the saddle, the thrill has worn off for Gurney. But she lit up like a kid on Christmas morning as she shared video of her current mount, the new-to-Grand Prix homebred Wintersnow (Winterprinz – Lavinia).

“I still love to ride my horses,” said the woman who still rides between ten and 20 per day. “I feel so lucky in my life to have such a passion. I work every day to try to harmonize with my horses.”

**Teacher’s Helper**

Olympian and 2013-2014 Nutrena/USDF Adult Clinic Series headliner Hilda Gurney may have learned about dressage from the ground up, but a new device that she discussed at the 2012 USDF convention gives new meaning to “riding by the seat of one’s pants.”

Gurney’s Adult Clinics video previews included footage of assistant trainer Sean Cunningham using the Equisens equestrian balance sensor (equi-sens.com). The rider dons a pair of shorts-length pants that fit over regular riding attire. The seat contains a sensing pad that transmits feedback to a microprocessor controller contained in an outside pocket. A small vibrating motor sits on each side of the rider’s waist. When one seat bone is weighted more heavily than the other, the corresponding motor vibrates and an LED indicator illuminates: red for the right seat bone and green for the left. If the weight is even, the LED indicator shines blue.

In Gurney’s video, the LED indicators made it easy to see how Cunningham’s weight shifted during lateral exercises. A mediocre half-pass ridden with the rider’s weight incorrectly on the outside seat bone improved instantly when Cunningham changed his position to weight the inside seat bone.