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USDF Instructor Certification Workshop Report

In the winter of 2011, I attended the three USDF Certification workshops: Riding, teaching, and lunging. All 3 were held in Walnut Creek, CA, with USDF Instructor Certification Faculty member Rachel Saavedra.

The first weekend was the riding workshop. We rode our own horses the first day, then each other horse's the second. I brought my wonderful Grand Prix horse (whom I have owned and trained since he was three). With him we worked mainly in the canter, using exercises (transitions walk-canter-walk and canter-school canter-medium canter) to improve the quality and the straightness. The 2nd day I switched onto a lovely 9 year old mare. We worked primarily on her throughness, getting her hotter to the aids, which really improved the quality of her gaits. The emphasis both days was on our effectiveness and our thinking-- how we evaluated horses, made plans to improve them, carried out those plans, and discussed all aspects of the ride. Here are some of the most useful notes I took during this weekend:

-Stiff/hollow side: Horses are usually hollow left, stiff right. We feel the stiff/hollow in the reins, but it comes from the hind legs. On the hollow side, the horse wants to avoid working correctly by stepping to the inside with the hind leg. They feel bendable this direction, but want to be crooked. The hollow-side reins tends to bend the horse. On the stiff side, the horse avoids by pushing the hind foot out behind, putting more pressure into the rein on that side.

Ideally, the inside rein is flexing rein and outside rein gives longitudinal connection to hind feet. On hollow side you get this. On stiff side, outside rein tends to flex the horse, while inside rein connects to hind. Work with this (more bilateral half-halts for collection), but work to strengthen horse so he becomes more even. You want to work towards having an inside and outside rein in both directions. You want more connection on hollow rein and a softer connection on stiff rein: encourage the horse to fill the rein on the hollow side. Some riders/horses have gotten good at masking the stiff side (overbending in that direction)—the hind, not the head, determines stiff/hollow.

To achieve this symmetry, you have to work the horse asymmetrically. -1st position—slight shoulder fore. Use on hollow side when hind avoids engagement by collapsing, stepping laterally. 2nd position- sl haunches in (HI). Use on stiff side when hind avoids engagement by pushing out behind. Counter canter (esp on hollow lead) and shoulder in (SI) (on hollow side) to renvers are also good for this—move horse longitudinally to the softer rein, connect leg to hand on hollow side, for straightening and strengthening. Use Uberstreichen on the stiff side, not the hollow.

Of interest: In tempis you have 2 outside reins. Piaffe you have 2 inside reins. In all other work, even on a straight line, you have an inside and an outside.

How to diagnose stiff/hollow sides: 1) Have them come down centerline away from you and lengthen. As they thrust off, the side the haunches deviate to is the hollow side. 2). In leg yield (LY), horses tend to lead with the shoulder and overbend when hollow side is inside. Easier when stiff side is inside to keep horse straight. Think about how to present LY. On stiff side, come centerline-LY (to help flexion). On hollow side, come centerline-change flexion—LY. Helps straightness. In a LY, if the rider gives the inside rein and loses the haunches, then the horse is going sideways from the inside rein aid. The inside rein is acting as an “outside rein” and that is the horses stiff side. Turn on forehand (TOF) is easy on the stiff side, since rein of opposition moves haunches around. Ie, a stiff right horse, you use the right rein to bring the nose right and the haunches go left. TOF is helpful on the hollow side, if done correctly. In SI, inside leg of rider wants to come back on hollow side (since otherwise haunches fall in).

-Ride transitions of: Length of stride, tempo, posture. If it's not working, make him: deeper, higher, faster, slower, straighter, more bent, etc!

-don't be afraid to ride physically—bring out your inner athlete. Mold the putty. Light is not always better—lightness must come from connection, not the lack thereof. Be greedy! Ask a lot, accept a little, praise often. Go up and down the pyramid to solve training problems. In general, ride young horses with a tighter noseband and slightly higher bit—so they learn to yield in their bodies, not by evading in the mouth.

-If an aid does not go through, first relinquish the opposing aid. Esp true for bend issues—allow convexity, then connect to outside rein.

-Collection should add something, not take anything away. More leg for collection, more power! The rein aid teaches collection, then you need it less and less. The release is key. Self carriage comes from the release of the aid—horse is responsible for own balance.

-Think of the withers as a dorsal fin—keep them upright. Inside thigh corrects a leaning horse.

-Straightness: straight horse on straight line, bent horse on bent line. Lateral work = bent horse on straight line. Lateral work is often a trade-off: you increase suppleness/engagement but often lose impulsion. Use blending: use medium and canter trans to improve impulsions. SI-medium or canter-trot-immediately SI. Dovetail trot and canter work. Marry engagement and impulsion. SI needs bend, angle, and consistency. For score 8 or 9 needs to improve the expression in the trot—horse should “grow” while maintaining the other qualities.

-Tempo: Be the mud. Think elbow heavier than hand. Extreme irregularity of tempo often leads to rhythm problems.

-hot/tense horses: versus getting out of his way for relaxation, actively ride—no pressure/force, but influence. Not all change is improvement, but there can be no improvement without change. Instead of sitting light with a low/wide hand and no leg, hug with leg and connect with elbow. Reshape the corridor the horse goes through. Your elbow belongs to their neck, but your body belong to you!

-Rhythm issues: lateral walks, lameness in trot, lateral canter. Also pedastaling the canter—outside front lands behind the vertical—common in school canter/pirouette canter.

-Suppleness is physical. Relaxation is mental and physical. Some level of arousal is needed for peak performance. There is a bell shaped curve for performance vs arousal—know when to push and when to back off.

-action =bending of joints in the air. Impulsion = bending of joints on the ground. Impulsion = snap or thrust from engaged position. Quick behind = quick off the ground.

The second weekend was the teaching workshop. Our organizer had lined up some super horse/rider pairs for us. My first level was a Junior on her 1st/2nd level mare, who tended to drop her poll and get crooked. We had a very productive lesson (though I was a bit overambitious in the information I wanted to impart!), focusing in particular on her mechanic in the canter and her position in walk-trot-walk transitions to improve the horses uphill balance. The second day I had the pleasure of teaching one of our local Grand Prix riders on her lovely 6 year old. This horse had tremendous quality in his gaits but needed to develop more carrying power. I utilized counter-canter and shoulder-in/straighten on the new line/shoulder-in exercises and he showed a super increase in rideability and collection in the canter. Here are some more useful exercises/notes I took during the weekend that I have since used in my teaching:

-Learning can be visual, auditory, kinesthetic. Teaching is mostly auditory, but use imagery, show with your bod, draw things in the dirt, trot around the ring. Place their bod, hold their reins and be the horse. Set up exercises so they feel what you want them to feel. Mimic what they do, but don't be negative about it. Be efficient—use 1 word directives when possible. Be clear—“move your foot 4 inches back”.

-With experienced riders, they usually do things for a reason—it serves them. If they won't/can't change think why—what tool is missing? Give them a new tool to replace the one you take away. (example-inside leg back in SI). Let the mistake happen, then analyze. Pick a spot in the ring to analyze position each time they ride by.

-Set up increments for success. Be a cheerleader for horse and rider. Confirm skills as well as teaching new ones. Identify the gap between what they know and don't know, and break it down into steps. Confirm each step. Dressage is very

present tense, immediate goals—look between the ears, not around the corner. Communicate the most pertinent ideas in the most efficient way, on a need-to-know basis--- what is pertinent for that horse in that moment?

-Don't get stuck on a lower-level problem in an upper-level horse. Explore with exercises. Sometimes a more advanced exercise (half steps, SI) can help a simpler problem (connection).

-Make plan. Keep it focused—1 focus, several exercises. Each exercise should answer a question or bring out a problem. Stiff/hollow, pushing/carrying power, purity of gait—does “X” improve it?

For example: rhythm issues in trot and canter. Contact issues- rider lacks influence thru contact. Tempo issues—horse hurries, leading to balance issues. Then make plan—Rider needs tools to regulate tempo w/o relying entirely on hand. Teach the mechanic of the walk (and canter)—halfhalt on backswing. Use thigh to regulate tempo. Use lateral work to unlock back. LY/TOF concept introduces the diagonal halfhalt for regulation.

-Treat mistake/issues as as eye-opening—“how fascinating!” --

-Exercises (movements, transitions) give information (horse was not through in the poll) and also increase qualities (after that SI he carried better weight behind). Old tests are a good source of exercises. Also try doing tests in reverse (opposite direction)—can be surprisingly hard!

SAMPLE EXERCISES

-Accuracy for 20 m circles: Think ride as diamond, hit 4 points then allow to curve, with eye (not whole head) on next point.

-Shoulder-In (SI): think of the bend for an 8-10 meter circle. Can be 3 or 4 tracks in schooling, but should match the bend. Alternate 3 and 4 tracks by changing amount of bend and thus angle. Try this on the quarterline—shoulder in not haunches out. Sometimes the rider keeps the inside leg back, otherwise the horse goes into haunches-in (HI). Instead of telling her to keep the inside leg forward, give her other tools. Outside rein half-halt to control shoulders and keep them from falling out. Guarding but not active outside leg—when used think squeeze not a quick aid. Squeeze = go, quick aid = sideways. Clarify difference between regulating, active, and passive leg. Inside seatbone also indicates direction of travel-inward for SI. Degree of outside leg in SI depends on stiff-hollow side: almost none on hollow side, lots on stiff side. Ride transitions SI-diagonal-SI: outside leg means impulsion, not HI. Improves acceptance of outside rein half halt. Remember-- SI is a bent horse on a straight line!

-Transitions SI-LY-SI, and vary angle in SI and HI (less and more). Helps with clarity of difference between LY and SI, and control of haunches/shoulder/bend.

-Try shoulder fore--straighten on that line (few steps on diagonal)-shoulder fore. Or SI in trot. Great exercise for engaging in canter, establishing outside connection. Similarly, LY--straighten on diagonal—LY. Can add lengthen in straight parts. Keeps horse from leaning in LY- withers upright, gives great control over haunches. Improves quality of trot in LY. Controls tempo. Teaches diagonal half-halt.

-Transitions within gaits: in canter, think shorter, quicker strides; longer, slower strides. Improves collection. Try transitions in lateral work.

-walk-trot-walk transitions—think of upward/downward transitions as same set of aids, with modifiers (amount of leg/hand). In trot-walk, think about keeping hind legs moving 1 step past when front feet stop. Good transitions W-T-W go via half-steps and increase engagement/collection.

-Reinback: preparatory W-halt-W transitions. From square halt with engagement—closed halt. Think short, high, active step—piaffe in reverse. Lighten seat, active leg back. Schaukel (RB, walk forward, RB, trot on) is a great exercise to improve collection.

-Trot-canter-trot transitions—think same mph, different rhythm. Aid for trot on beat 2 of canter stride (versus aiding on beat 1 to shorten canter). Outside rein dominates on hollow side, both reins on stiff side. Mechanic of canter important—circling arms, outside leg back—think lift heel, allow leg 4” back.

-Counter-canter: loops with 10 m circle in true canter before. Can also aid 10 m circle over X if needed. More advanced horses can do 20 m CC circle with 10 m circle in true canter over centerline.

-Tense/Tight horses: Bend/counterbend on wall. Spiral 15 m circle to 20 m circle. Spiral LY (with bend in neck, on circle). Use the half-stretch, the falling down neck. Half halts firm the body with very little rein. Helps relaxation

-Transitions into corners—helps horse wait for turning aid, helps rider to use bending/turning aids every corner.

-SI-medium-SI: transfers pushing power to carrying power. Teaches collection. Also transitions within SI, and SI-volte-HI with uberstreichen inside.

-Introducing LY: use nose to wall or ¼ line to wall. Discuss all aids, even sophisticated ones. Inside leg slightly back and outside reins creates sideways. Outside leg to control crossing, create impulsion. Inside rein keeps flexion. Inside seatbones pushes withers sideways. LY is on 2 tracks but is not a lateral movement (no bend). -LY nose to wall clarifies flexion vs bend, rider symmetry (shoulders should stay upright, no leaning). Differentiate inside/outside aids and how that varies with stiff/hollow side. LY on circle—spiral in/then out, then canter trans. Doing LY on circle adds bend- can help with thoroughness. Use movements (like that) beyond the test patterns.

-Differentiate flexion (poll) and bend (neck/body). Fingers belong to the bit, wrists belong to the poll, elbows to the neck, shoulder to the horse’s shoulder.

The final weekend, lunging, dawned in a massive west coast rainstorm, with pouring rain and howling winds. All of the horses were high as kites, which made things challenging. Still, it was a good lesson for all of us on how to bring a horse to focus, to put them to your aids on the end of the lunge line. We ended up postponing the 2nd day, lunging the rider, until the following month when we could hear a little better in the ring. We acted as guinea pigs for each other, so each of us got to both teach a lunging lesson and receive one. I got some great new exercises for lunging the rider that I have since incorporated into my training program. Some key notes (for both lunging of horse and rider) are below.

Lunging the Horse:

-equipment—make sure cavesson is tight enough to not slide around, and then it clears the eyes. Cheek strap must be tight enough and low enough for this to work. Noseband should be stiff and padded but not overly padded. Some horses don’t like the jingle of the cavesson rings. With bridle, most common is to run line around inside bit ring and clip to outside. Over the poll is gag—not fair with side rein—only for serious control issues, or for lunging w/o sidereins. Lunge lines: use loop on end if you use the cascading loop method—just fingers through. For coiled method, no end on line is ok. Rubber donuts on the end of line tend to just bang and get annoying. Cotton not nylon. Whips: shorter whips have a faster zing. Telewhips cast more—slow cast, fast return. If whip accidentally ends up on ground, don’t lean over to get it and risk getting kicked. Use toe underneath to lift it up. For telewhip, it’s ok if the tail drags behind you when it is under your arm. Pull the telewhip taut before you start. Side reins—donuts are usually safe, though some horses don’t like the banging. Solid ones for experienced upper level horses. Elastic only for very young/green horses—can teach unsteady contact. Generally start with long sidereins (safer than w/o). If horse can contact issues, can start with outside only. At

first the siderein just provides a corridor; later it provides contact. Hook up the outside, then the inside, then immediately send the horse forward—be organized before you hook up side reins.

-Assess the horse: temperament, reaction to whip—do turns on the forehand in both directions. Look at conformation and topline tendencies—is the horse the inverting type? The push-thru-you type? Push or carry type?

-don't be afraid to push the envelope—until you do, you don't know what will happen. Esp. horses who speed up and cut in, you must push them out to the end of the line so you have a half-halt—then use strong half halts to control speed. Push the energy—even if tail goes up!—to bring them to the contact and your influence, then ride short sharp halfhalts. If you lose control, come back to walk.

-Keep the circle round but shift it around the arena to keep from wearing a hole in the footing. Be aware of which places/areas horse wants to cut in. Can use the wall—driving horse along the wall—if needed. Learn to march an accurate small circle so they can trot an accurate large one w/o being chased—you need a sense of the middle. Don't wander. When you are on the spot think walk pirouette rather than pivoting—easier to keep yourself moving and not get body twisted.

-always safe to use even sidereins. It can also be argued that in order to allow horse to be straight on a bent line, inside one can be shorter. Needs to be significantly shorter—6 or 7 holes = 3 inches. When inside is shorter, you can lose the outside shoulder; however it helps the bend. Usually most helpful to stiff side. You can start w/o sidereins if horse is very quiet; else start with long sidereins then shorten as you change direction.

-in general, shorten sidereins in 3-4 hole increments everytime you change direction. In general, shorter side reins mean you can push horse more. Fasten outside side rein, then inside—have whip ready to go to push horse forward as soon as fastened. People tend to err on the side of too long side reins. When you change rein, don't do so into a wall—bring horse to middle so they do not feel trapped. With telewhip put out behind you, ok for lash to trail (like a tail).

-Think about the training pyramid—rhythm, tempo, relaxation, contact (side reins), impulsion (lunging quietly vs gymnastically), straightness (stiff/hollow side). Remember that bend issues are much more obvious from the outside of the circle. Use transitions. Use walk if the walk quality and the contact are both solid. Sometimes walk work helps the connection, othertimes it gets worse w/o impulsion.

-Give voice and body aids together. Use verbal half-halts “And” with a different intonation. Know voice commands in german—Schritt, Trabm Galopp—and the german Trill to slow down. Ask voice aids of the owner. Some horses are super sensitive to body language; test and use that. Where you are pointed—rear or front—can change things a lot. For horses who ignore downward trans aids (most often to halt)—step sideways towards their front end.

-ideally horse walks out away from you. You step back as they step away to put a safe distance. If they want to trot off, you have to decide whether that battle is worth fighting at that moment; often they settle with work and will walk out later. Start an unfamiliar horse to the left (usually the hollow side). For older horses, watch for soundness issues to the stiff side. In lunging, the stiff side is the empty side where they fall in and don't fill out the rein (kinda the opposite of riding...)

-keep whip up at halt, and when bringing horse to slower gait—you do not take your leg off a horse who is getting quick. Think 2-4 “castings” of the whip per circle so it stays moving (like a leg aid reminder). Telewhip casts forward, snaps back (opposite of other whips). The snap back can be very effective for lazy horses. Can cast towards shoulder for horses who cut in—show the horse the length of the lash. Vary the height of the castings and how far behind the horse it lands for different horses.

-Send and flex, send and half-halt in quick succession.

-achieve one thing—circle size, impulsion, etc—before you start to work on another.

-snake lines—vertical to move further out on circle, horizontal to slow down.

Lunging the Rider:

-horse is vehicle for training rider—horse goes on autopilot so trainer can focus on rider. Longer side reins (Vienna reins ok) versus for gymnastic lunging. Remove side rein for mounting/dismounting, and for long periods at halt (demos, discussions)—anytime you are not paying strict attention to the horse.

-Coaching: fix this, fix that, more bend, good. Quick modifiers. Teaching: slow things down, big picture, explain, what are we doing. Don't get stuck just correcting problems w/o exercises.

-run through a battery of standard exercises until it gets difficult for the rider to maintain their position. For experienced riders lose the stirrups asap (cross them over). Then arm circles, arms out/up/sideways, rotate left and right (head only, shoulders only), pronate/supernate through hips, etc, till issues are revealed

SAMPLE EXERCISES:

-ride w/ eyes closed, try to feel footfalls (have them tell you when each hind foot lands), posting diagonals.

-bicycling—allow knees to move (like riding a bike) to emphasize movements of hips with horses hind feet. Walk and sitting trot. Really stabilized feel on seatbones.

-for riders who hollow their lower back—have them curl backwards over the cantle of the saddle (must be leaning back to not stress lower back)—engage muscles used in crunches—then stretch up with both arms. Leaning back ok at this stage, a temp fix

-have riders go from correct to incorrect and back again so they feel the difference.

- For a rider who turns knees out, have them go in, out, in, out, then settle in correct position. The big thigh muscle often gets in the way—have them physically move that muscle to the rear so the inside of the thigh can rest flat on the horse.

-Leg position: differentiate between back/inside of thigh and calf. Think lighter feet=more mobile leg. Check for how much weight in foot/heel/stirrup. Angle of leg determines alignment.

-for experienced riders pay attention to isolation (for example, lower back flexion and upper back extension).

-work on mechanic of following hand in walk and canter. Canter think “scooping sand”. Bend in elbows and hand not too low.

-for riders with leg in front of plumb line and calf away: Muscles cannot fire to bring calf in (bow legged). Instead bring leg back from hip, use biceps to close calf. Then can easily change from passive to active to regulating leg aids.

-Position is functional. It must be adjusted based on horse/rider conformation, where the go button is, what horse is tolerant of.

-Seatbones can move many ways (much more than “weight on the inside seatbone for SI”). They can move laterally (LY), diagonally forward (canter depart), diagonally inward (SI), diagonally backward (HI). Lift one seatbone to weight the other (muscles pull don't push).

-Rider straightness:

-Collapsing hip can stem from: collapse, rotation, dominant eye (rider wants dominant eye in middle), horse dropping inside hip, displacement (one seatbone to middle, one sliding off), tipping.

-For collapse—tell rider to lift the dropped shoulder, to push ribs towards the elbow on the collapsed side, to lengthen the collapsed side and shorten the other one.

-For rotation (ie right): Tell ride left seatbone to midline, left leg fwd, left shoulder back, both legs rotate left

-first, the rider follows the horse. 2nd, the rider keeps herself centered regardless of the horse. 3rd, the rider uses asymmetry to bring the horse straight, then joins him. Passive, mobile passive, regulated, active.