

Quest for the Pyramid

Charlotte Bredahl-Baker teaches at a USDF Adult Clinic.

Text and photos by Becky Lamas



Cathy Willson (left) and clinician Charlotte Bredahl-Baker

I met the Indiana Jones of dressage, and I must say the quest for the Training Pyramid ended successfully. That's right. The first U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) Adult Clinic, hosted by the Deep South Dressage and Combined Training Association, featured Charlotte Bredahl-Baker and took place last October in Live Oak, Florida. Magnolia Farms, owned by Cathy Willson and George Ash, provided a super backdrop with spacious accommodations for

the four-legged actors and all us two-legged extras on the scene.

If you are an adult amateur who competes or just wants to ride correctly, this clinic is for you. As a former Olympian and FEI "C" judge, Charlotte is well-qualified to train riders and improve their horses. Her clear explanations and kind approach is best expressed in the way she compares dressage to ballroom dancing. "When I dance with somebody really good, I feel like a good dancer, and I have no trouble figuring out what my partner wants me to do. The reason is that his lead (aids) is very clear. On the other hand, when I dance with somebody much less experienced, I find myself constantly second guessing what he wants me to do, and I lose my confidence. I can only imagine what a horse goes through."

Charlotte's approach is as exciting as any Indiana Jones adventure but with a kind and well-thought-out plan that addresses the elements of the Training Pyramid—rhythm, relaxation, contact, impulsion, straightness and collection—every step of the way. Here are just a few practical things I brought home with me.

The Warm-Up

Charlotte starts the horse's warm-up on a 20-meter circle at extended walk, stretch-



Bredahl-Baker instructs Jillian Costello.

ing him into the contact while on the bit with a relaxed topline. Her judge's eye looks for a pure walk with a clear rhythm (the first step of the Training Pyramid). The extended walk should be elastic with energy and a clear overstep. She continues the warm-up at posting trot on a 20-meter circle between V and P.

To improve relaxation, suppleness and contact, Charlotte had riders leg yield their horses outward on both open sides of the circle. With the horse's head slightly flexed to the inside at the poll, the rider uses her inside leg to ask the horse to step in front of and across his outside hooves, moving forward and sideways on two tracks. Maintain a supporting outside rein and an elastic connection with the inside rein, while



thinking medium trot. This helps the horse stretch into the contact while thinking forward. The rider wants to contain the energy and not let it out. If the horse is not supple with impulsion, the connection cannot be correct. So, the steps of the pyramid do not stand alone but interplay with each other to achieve a horse that is rhythmic, supple and forward into proper contact.

Next is the warm-up canter on an oval. To ensure the horse transitions smoothly into canter from the rider's outside leg, make sure he is in front of your inside-driving leg and stepping under himself with his inside hind leg. Some horses are asked for a stride of leg yield at the trot to get the inside hind leg more underneath the body before

adding outside leg aid for canter. The horse should not transition to canter until pressure from the outside leg is applied.

While on an oval, think medium canter with impulsion on the open side to get the horse round and over his topline. Bring him back as you approach the track, while keeping him round and supple. If his haunches fall in at any time, ride shoulder-fore to align his shoulders to his haunches and get him straight again. This is especially important in canter transitions when horses like to travel with their haunches in on their hollow side. Repeat this exercise in the other direction. When performing changes of direction, always wait until your horse is straight before executing

any transitions. Keeping the horse's suppleness in mind, Charlotte does most of the warm-up on the curved lines of circles, figures-of-eight or serpentines.

Longeing

If a rider has a somewhat stiff horse or one who depends too much on the inside rein, Charlotte showed us a great technique for longeing horse and rider. First, she runs the longe line through the bit on the inside of the circle and on to the girth below the flap on the same side. Then, she asks the rider to drop the inside rein, allowing her longe line to become the inside rein. The rider then concentrates on using her inside leg to connect the horse to her outside rein. The key is to obtain bend in the body of



Lisa Giltner rides half pass on Roter Milan, her 9-year-old Hanoverian gelding.

the horse while not allowing the horse to overbend his neck to the inside from the longe line. The rider should work on keeping her outside hand down while allowing the bend from an elastic contact.

Once the connection is correct, the horse will maintain the proper bend throughout his body without popping his shoulder to the outside. Thus, he becomes straight on the circle with correct bend—his hind feet step into the tracks of his front feet.

When it all works correctly, the horse stays relaxed over the back with a better topline. This exercise can be done sitting or posting. However, should the rider become tired at the sitting trot, it is best to post so that the rider's position does not take away from the horse's gait. If the horse becomes sluggish, go straight and

get him in front of the leg. Then, ask again for the bend from the inside leg to establish a good connection on the outside rein. When the rider and horse obtained the correct connection, Charlotte gave the inside rein back to the rider, and they formed a nice picture of suppleness with a better topline.

Once the horses were nicely warmed up, supple and relaxed, Indy, I mean Charlotte, went on to the movements, and so the adventure began.

Shoulder-in

The shoulder-in became a building block for the other movements throughout the weekend. In shoulder-in, the horse is bent around the rider's inside leg. His forehand is brought in about 30 degrees from the rail until his outside shoulder is in line with the inside hip, making three tracks. Charlotte had riders shoulder-in left on the centerline to better feel the horse's balance without being dependent on the rail. If the horse drifts in, then he is not listening to the inside left leg.

Once in shoulder-in, nothing changes in your body position except the pressure from the legs. If done correctly, the horse becomes more elevated in the front with more pushing power behind and more expression in his gaits.

Travers (Haunches-In)

In travers, or haunches-in, the horse is flexed and bent in the direction of movement. The forehand remains on the track, and the hind end is moved inward. The rider should step down into the inside stirrup to maintain the bend around the inside leg. The horse must stay soft on the inside rein while moving forward in the lateral work. The outside leg, slightly behind the girth, obtains more angle for steeper lines of travel.

However, in haunches-in, do not sacrifice forward movement or gait quality for angle. Look for quality over quantity.

Half Pass

Charlotte develops the half pass from the shoulder-in. The half pass is a forward and sideways movement similar to the travers but performed at collected trot or canter along a specific diagonal line. The angle and bend correspond to the angle of the diagonal. Charlotte first gets a good shoulder-in and then keeps the feeling into the half pass. If at any time you or your horse struggles with the bend, go back to shoulder-in to reestablish the bend for half pass. It is important that the horse maintains the bend and forward motion from the inside leg with his shoulders leading.

Here are a few simple exercises demonstrated at the clinic to train the half pass:

Exercise 1, Training bend. On the long side, track right, developing a good shoulder-in. Then, half pass right from the rail to the quarterline. If the horse loses the bend, leg yield back to the track to reestablish the bend and try again.

This exercise gets the horse listening to the rider's inside leg and teaches better bend in the half pass. It also is the best way to remind the rider to use her inside leg. Repeat on the other direction.

Exercise 2, Training the shoulders to lead. On the centerline, ride shoulder-in with the horse's inside hind leg underneath him. Then, ride half pass to the wall. If the haunches begin to lead, go back to shoulder-in to properly align the horse's body so the shoulders lead. Once the alignment is correct, proceed in half pass. When properly done, this exercise ensures the horse's shoulders always lead and the bend and engagement are maintained.

Exercise 3, Training half pass at canter. This exercise is for more advanced riders. To train the horse's inside



Heather Walters works on flying changes with her half-Andalusian, Sombra de Luna.

hind leg to reach underneath his body at the canter half pass, ride a 10-meter half circle at counter canter from the long side to the centerline. Do shoulder-in down the centerline, then half pass to the track. Repeat from the other short side and, later, in the other direction.

The key to all these exercises is to start the half pass through a good shoulder-in, keeping the feeling that you could go back into shoulder-in from the half pass at any time.

Turn on the Haunches

Charlotte had riders do half turns on the haunches (180 degrees) from a collected walk—the horse’s fore hooves rhythmically step around the inside hind hoof. Concentrate on keeping the horse forward and staying connected through his body. Charlotte prepares for a turn on the haunches away from the rail using shoulder-in. The first few steps of the turn should be like a big shoulder-in to keep the horse thinking forward. Then think half pass for the next two steps. The horse’s inside leg needs to step under instead of sideways, while keeping the bend in his body (like a banana) from your inside leg.

To stay marching and forward,

Charlotte offered this exercise:

1. Ride shoulder-in away from the wall in collected walk.
2. Take two steps of half pass. Don’t push too much with the outside leg as this causes him to step sideways instead of underneath himself.
3. Take one step forward in shoulder-in followed by two steps in half pass.
4. Repeat steps 1 through 3 while maintaining the bend with the shoulder leading.

As you ride the turn, your horse should feel as if you can step forward out of it at any time.

If he drops down in the poll, he is not working his inside hind leg. If you can bring him back on the spot, while keeping him sitting and quick behind, you are ready to try a canter pirouette, and a similar approach is used. Begin from shoulder-fore on a 20-meter circle.

Counter Canter

When judging, Charlotte sees many horses with their haunches out in the counter canter. Counter canter is a balancing, suppling and straightening exercise in which you ride the left lead canter while on the right rein or vice versa.

To get the horse straighter and better connected, make sure he is responsive to your inside leg. Then ask for slight outside flexion before transitioning to counter canter. For example, while on left lead counter canter, sit on the left (which is now your inside seat bone) and ride shoulder-fore from your left leg. This will keep your horse straighter behind and underneath himself. Use flexion but be careful not to overbend the neck. On the long sides, ask for medium canter to get more jump and better connection. Collect in the corner where the horse naturally wants to compress his body.

Flying Changes

When schooling flying changes, horses often become tense and short strided. They may even anticipate. Ideally, a horse must allow the rider to set him up for the change. If you cannot set him up before he changes, he is anticipating the change. As a result, the quality of the change suffers. Go back to quality basic work and break it down. Here is Charlotte's solution for one horse that became tight, tense and anticipated the changes:

First, she asked the rider to counter canter on the circle while asking for counter flexion (counter canter with flexion away from the leading leg). If at any time the horse became tight, tense or anticipating the change, the rider immediately asked for true flexion. Once he relaxed, she asked for counter flexion once again. Eventually, the horse relaxed his neck and became supple over the topline, and the rider encouraged him into a longer, more ground-covering stride and more open frame. Now the horse was giving the rider his back and allowing her to set him up for the change without anticipating. We learned that once the horse does this, you can ask for the change but only if he is totally relaxed. Don't count strides, just ask when it feels right. The counting can come later when the horse is more confident.

In summary, we all had a great time and were treated to a weekend of good training with good ole southern hospitality from Deep South's president, Barbara Petti, and the USDF Liaison, Holly Hilliard. If you are an adult amateur, this is the ideal clinic for you.

The USDF Quest for the Pyramid series is happening in most USDF regions continuing through May 2010 (usdf.org). Charlotte showed us that if we give clear aids in our riding, we will develop confident horses and become better dancing partners for them. 🐾

