

From the Judge's Perspective

by Anne Cizadlo

“The value of a ‘schoolmaster’”

I was judging a dressage show in Houston, TX, this past weekend and I noticed that a large percentage of the horses in each class were schoolmasters. A “schoolmaster” is typically a skilled older horse that will get things right even if the rider isn't exactly on the mark with the aids. Schoolmasters are often ridden at a level a bit below their training, but at a level that is more appropriate to the skill of their rider. These horses typically don't overreact to the rider's aids, or mistakes, or even to environmental stimuli. This can be a huge advantage in the competition arena.

Even Schoolmaster mounts are not a guarantee for success. Although the horse may know the drill, that doesn't mean that he is willing to make up for the rider's lack of skills or preparation. Often a schoolmaster will tattle on a rider when they make a mistake. For example, if your legs, hips, or weight changes even the slightest bit in a counter canter, you may find yourself on the opposite lead after the schoolmaster does a flying change! A lesser trained horse might just lose his balance and get quick or really slow as a result of the same mistake, and both riders will end up with the same score in the long run for their mistakes.

The benefit of riding a schoolmaster is that the rider will gain the confidence that the aids are correct, since the horse will go correctly when ridden correctly. Sometimes a lesser-trained horse will only respond accurately after being ridden correctly, consistently, for a certain amount of time. Horses that lack balance do not develop instantly in response to a balanced rider. Balance is often a product of strength and training. While it is a good learning tool to school a horse lacking balance and strength, learning together, the process will also take longer when the rider is unsure of the destination. Conversely, on a schoolmaster, the horse clearly knows the destination, and the rider just needs to find it as well. Often the schoolmaster will even help the rider find balance by making some subtle adjustments on their own.

When a riding a schoolmaster, often your aids do not have to be perfect to get a movement started. As your aids become clearer,



the quality of the movement increases, and often a schoolmaster reacts quite predictably. If the inside leg comes too far back in a shoulder-in, for example, the bend of that movement will not be very distinct. If your legs are in the right place (inside leg at the girth and outside leg back) then the bend will probably be right on target.

While judging the show, I was impressed with the quality of the riding on the schoolmasters. These horses had obviously taught their riders well by tattling on the rider when they made a mistake. The horses were quite steady and stable and did not miss an opportunity to point out mistakes that their riders made, but never in a manner where the horse had a bad attitude or was intending to frighten the rider. The shoulder-ins would occasionally drift off the rail, or the horse would throw in an extra flying change when the rider's leg aids got sloppy at the canter, but they certainly didn't put the riders

in any life-or-death situations.

Often in the dressage world, riders like to take their green horses and build a relationship in the show ring. I would easily recommend finding a schoolmaster-type horse for most riders, even if you have to borrow one for a short time. It is worth getting the feel and understanding of even some of the basic concepts like rhythm, steady contact and correct tempo at each of the gaits. Often riders are so used to their horse's canter being so fast that they don't have an idea of what a canter rhythm is supposed to feel like! Jumping instructors would never put an inexperienced rider on an inexperienced horse to jump fences, so why do inexperienced dressage riders insist on riding inexperienced horses? Dressage is certainly safer than going over a 4 foot fence, but the feelings that riders need to have in their heads to convey to their horses are equally as important as the feeling and confidence to get over a 4 foot fence. Rider confidence is difficult to create or strengthen with a green mount.

If you have access to a schoolmaster, take that opportunity! Every rider with an experienced mount that I watched at a recent competition came away from that show with a stronger feeling of confidence (and several homework tips from the judges!) than they had at the beginning of the weekend. It was all due to the help they received from their horse. If you think that judges, competitors, or audience members would look down upon a competitor with an already trained horse, you are mistaken. Judges love to see horses helping their riders learn, and also prefer to watch a good team versus a rider unable to communicate with a nervous mount. It is certainly its own challenge to have a schoolmaster since the blame can no longer be laid on the horse, and is worth the education if you have the opportunity.


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She has recently earned her USEF “R” dressage judge's certificate, and travels throughout the nation judging and conducting dressage clinics.

She is a USDF Bronze, Silver & Gold Medal winner, and has won Multiple Championships & High Points at all levels.

Anne has many successful students competing.

She has experience teaching from pre-Training level to Prix St. Georges. Check out her website, at www.annecizadlo.com



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