

To Train with Conrad Schumacher

With a dozen years of preparation and a promising horse, Jennifer Baumert went to Europe to work with a German master. Excerpts from her rider's journal offer insights into the lessons she learned.

As a Young Rider, Jennifer Baumert (daughter of Dressage Today Technical Editor Beth Baumert) rode with German master trainer Conrad Schumacher whenever he gave clinics in the United States. Throughout high school and college, Jennifer studied German and spent countless hours in the dressage arena. It was her goal to train with Schumacher in Germany when she had a horse who was worthy, and she wanted to be ready.

In 1997, when Jennifer was 26 years old, the time finally arrived. She received an Asmis Scholarship from the U.S. Equestrian Team while she was riding Roy, a 9-year-old imported Danish Warmblood gelding owned by Dee Loveless. Roy was trained to Prix St. Georges, and Jennifer knew that he would blossom under Schumacher's tutelage. Jennifer shares excerpts from her training diary that reveal key ingredients of Schumacher's training strategy. The insights she presents offer food for thought for all riders.

Thursday, November 27

Despite delays, our flight to Brussels and land transport to Frankfurt were safe and uneventful. We arrive on America's Thanksgiving Day. Roy is tired from his trip. We begin with simple cavalletti work, but the cavalletti make him nervous, so now he feels a combination of nervous and tired. I am embarrassed that I have not done more cavalletti work with Roy. Mr. Schumacher explains that Roy has lots of activity behind, but he does not really work with his haunches. I am already aware of this. Lendon Gray calls this his "pretty trot." It is a way for him to avoid really working. Roy cannot fake it over the poles, but he tries. He is very uncoordinated and wants to jump. His mouth is overly active and a bit rigid. Since this is his first day, I'm not too worried. It's normal for him to be hot after time off. Regardless, Mr. S. seems happy. Any disobedience with the cavallettis is treated with patience. The horse must never be afraid. He must trust that the rider will never put him in a situation he cannot handle.

Goals for the winter: Mr. S. says we will work on basics for one month and start half steps in preparation for piaffe and passage. Roy must become stronger and more honest in his haunches. He has talent, but that is not enough.

Sunday, November 30

We begin with cavallettis again. Friday, I worked with Roy on my own over them. He felt much better. He trotted or walked over more poles than he tried to leap. I felt that we had made progress.

Today, his response to the poles is good and bad. Mr. S. cannot understand why Roy is nervous. We try two cavallettis, and he jumps and runs off bucking. Next, Mr. S. replaces

the second cavalletti with a bandage unrolled so that Roy cannot hit it. This is a good idea, but it does not work. Roy jumps it awkwardly or refuses. A lead horse is worse. Mr. S. really cannot understand this. He is concerned about Roy's obedience.

Mr. S. is very patient and never forceful. At the same time, certain things "must be." For instance, Roy must be able to do the cavallettis, but we do not force them. Mr. S. explains things very thoroughly and makes sure that you understand them. He is very comfortable to talk to. He is tough with criticism and often yells when he gets excited, but he is also quick to praise both horse and rider.

We move on to collected canter, canter-walk transitions and quarter pirouettes without stirrups. This work is very good. Mr. S. is happy that the cavalletti work did not upset the normal work.

Next, we work the flying changes. I do one toward the wall on the short diagonal. Mr. S. wants Roy's strides very short and active. In the United States, we don't dare talk too much about making horses short. Here in Germany, there is more freedom to express ideas that we in the United States could perceive as riding backward. Perhaps that's because the basics are so well understood in Germany. Sometimes I lose the shoulder-in and collection that Mr. S. wants on the diagonal because it feels too short and choppy to me. He says we will make the strides longer later, but for now it is important that Roy come under and sit. Once I catch on, it is good! Sure enough, later when the strides are longer, Roy stays sitting more and it feels wonderful. We move the changes onto a 20-meter circle. Four changes on the circle. They are mostly good. When they are not, Mr. S. scolds me for my lack of preparation.

We finish with a single pole that Roy trots over obediently and quietly. Mr. S. is happy. He says the work has made the cavalletti better. Later he says the cavalletti must make the work better.

Hallmarks of Schumacher's Training: Cavalletti work

Cavalletti work is important for strength, obedience and control, qualities that are needed for piaffe and passage. The cavalletti makes the horse lift his hind legs and bend the joints. When this lifting and bending are later combined with collection, piaffe and passage become better.

The poles are set up, as the diagram indicates, inside the track on a 20-meter circle. I try to trot Roy in a 15-meter circle through the poles. However, if he jumps one or is not prepared, I can go around.

Some days Roy is successful over the cavallettis, some days he is not. One day, Mr. S. took a pole off the wall during my warm-up. Roy had improved his engagement, so Mr. S. felt that perhaps Roy might do the cavalletti smoothly. Unfortunately, he was wrong. Mr. S. finally gave up, saying, "Well, perhaps he will be the first Grand Prix horse never to properly trot over a pole!"

Neck control. Mr. S. says, "Neck control is horse control. The neck is the horse's back in front of the rider." The neck must be ridden down, not pulled down, and ridden up, not yanked up.

You will rarely see a horse on the buckle here. They walk on a long rein with a controlled neck. After the work sometimes, Roy tries to pull the reins out of my hand because he is used to walking on the buckle. Mr. S. says that any avoidance of the bit is "the beginning of the end." He asks me to leg yield Roy when he throws his head.

Bend control. Mr. S. speaks of bend control in the same way that he speaks of neck control. Bend control must be a part of the work every day unless you are hacking. On an easy day, you warm up, work on bend control and end. When you are able to do shoulder-in and counter shoulder-in, Mr. S. stresses keeping the inside leg forward at the girth and the outside leg back.

Warm-up. Usually I warm up actively with trot-canter-trot transitions on a 20-meter circle. Before the canter transition, I ask Roy for a bigger trot in order to develop more contact before the canter. A variation of this simple exercise helps even more when Roy is hot or when he is reluctant to go solidly to the bridle. As we approach the centerline on the 20-meter circle, we make a 10-meter counter circle in trot. Then we go back to the original circle, strong trot and then canter.

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