

Learning from experience

Bea Asprey discovers how a lesson on a schoolmaster can revitalise your riding and help you discover the secret to performing advanced dressage movements



Our rider

Beatrice Asprey is editorial assistant and products editor at *Horse*. Although a rider for over 15 years, dressage has taken a back seat until recently.

Our trainer

Vicki Thompson is based at Oldencraig Equestrian Centre in Lingfield, Surrey, where she trains and brings on her own horses, as well as teaching. Vicki has represented Great Britain at international level, having ridden at the European Championships and the Atlanta Olympic Games, as well as being National Dressage Champion 13 times.

● For more information about Vicki Thompson and Oldencraig Equestrian Centre, tel: (01342) 833 317 or visit: www.oldencraig.com.



Words: Beatrice Asprey Photography: Garry Ashton-Coulton



Although the concept of dressage is not entirely new to me, for years I have been riding a horse whose love is jumping. As a result, the rider I have become is one who spends most of their time in a forward seat.

However, I have often wondered what it would be like to sit on a schoolmaster, looking elegant and effortless as the horse struts around, while I do not break a sweat.

The simple life?

I believed that this stylish and graceful look would be effortlessly achieved, when I was sitting on a horse that knew his job well. Dressage riders never give the impression they are working particularly hard, and I thought that life with the horse's feet on the floor would be an easier option.

As the day approached, I became more apprehensive – I was going to have to live up to my expectations of looking good while the horse did all the hard work.

I arrived at Oldencraig Equestrian Centre on a beautiful sunny day. The sight of some professional-looking riders schooling their horses made the reality hit even harder that I wanted to impress.

Meet the schoolmaster

I was introduced to Beetle, who would be my partner for the lesson. At 24 years old, his appearance belied his age, and I was relieved by his kind look and 'well-covered' appearance. He was laid-back, but do not let this description fool you – he can move!

Vicki Thompson, my teacher and Beetle's owner for the past 10 years, has competed with him at Intermediare levels I and II, and in Grand Prix competitions. These days, he enjoys some light work, in lessons like mine, as well as proper work with Vicki's grooms.

When I ask what the secret is in keeping him looking so well, Vicki replies: "Working keeps him young. You have to give older horses a sensible and fair workload, and



A lesson on a schoolmaster enables you to concentrate fully on your position.



Travers – Beetle shows how it should be done.

respect them. Do not forget that a horse who has spent his life in the stable and in work, would feel forgotten and unloved if he was retired out in the field."

Getting started

Vicki's teaching was thorough, and while I was warming up on a circle, she started by explaining that the straight flap and large knee block of the dressage saddle is designed to help keep your leg in place.

She also spoke about the benefits of having a lesson like this on a schoolmaster. "Achieving the top dressage levels takes years of training and practice. A lesson like this is a good way of having some fun, and giving an insight into what you are aiming for," Vicki says. "This way, when you are out in the cold, wind and rain, you'll remember today and have an incentive to keep going."

Vicki encouraged me to shorten my reins, while pushing Beetle forward. "A horse is like a tube of toothpaste; you need to squeeze from the bottom, but not let it spill out of the front. Although he needs to have energy and impulsion, this does not mean that the movement needs to be fast."

Following this advice, I concentrated on trying to get Beetle to carry his own head and neck in an outline, without letting him run on to the forehand.

Leg yielding from the centre line was something I was familiar with, but doing this exercise on Beetle taught me exactly how it is supposed to feel. He responded immediately to my leg aids and performed the exercise smoothly.

Advanced movements

Shoulder-in, travers and half-pass were movements that I had only ever watched. Having had the aids explained to me, Beetle obliged despite my inexperience. Vicki made everything clear so I began to understand how certain aids could translate into the corresponding movements by the horse.



Bea experiences the power of the piaffe as Beetle struts his stuff on the spot.

Before I attempted shoulder-in, Vicki told me how to position the horse's body correctly. I started the movement as if I was riding a small circle, then asked Beetle to move along the track while keeping the same degree of bend.

My favourite part of the lesson was doing transitions from walk to canter and then back to walk. I had found Beetle's trot incredibly bouncy, and it showed that my seat was not deep and developed as an experienced dressage rider's would be. However, his canter felt like sitting in an armchair, and he was totally obedient.

Piaffe – trotting on the spot – was the last thing we attempted, and it was this move that I found most unlike anything I had done before. This helped me to understand why a dressage horse is rarely used for jumping, and vice versa. Asking the horse to go forward, while at the same time telling him to stop, is not something that a jumping horse would understand.

Riding Beetle allowed me to concentrate on my riding, instead of worrying about what my horse was doing, so my position improved during the lesson. Vicki's teaching broadened my understanding of how the horse should be going and what I should be doing. I now feel more inspired to give flatwork another go at home.

The lesson was certainly enjoyable, and I learnt how wrong I had been in assuming that no hard work was done on the rider's part. Looking so easy and graceful must take a great deal of practice! It was wonderful to be taught by a combination as experienced and knowledgeable as Vicki and Beetle.

● Thanks to Puffa for providing clothing for this feature. Beatrice wears the Breast Cancer Campaign polo shirt, priced at around £30, and also the Breast Cancer Campaign Ladies reversible Stradbroke gilet, priced at around £65. Visit: www.puffa.com; www.breastcancercampaign.org.