

**MASTERCLASS****Vicki Thompson****Supple movement**

Dressage rider and trainer **Vicki Thompson** helps *Horse* reader Clare Leggat encourage her mare to relax in preparation for an important dressage test

**The expert**

Vicki Thompson is based at Oldencraig Equestrian Centre in Surrey. She trains clients in dressage from Novice to Grand Prix level.

Vicki has represented Great Britain at international level and has won 13 National Dressage championship titles. She represented Great Britain at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. Visit: [www.oldencraig.com](http://www.oldencraig.com).

**The rider**

Clare Leggat's homebred mare, Sapphire, is out of a Thoroughbred mare and by a Hanoverian X Trakehner stallion. Clare competes the nine-year-old, 17hh mare in a variety of disciplines, including Novice eventing, affiliated show jumping and Elementary-level dressage.



**C**lare Leggat and her mare Sapphire are just weeks away from their first one-star horse trials at Gatcombe Park. They both arrive at Oldencraig Equestrian Centre for a dressage Masterclass, courtesy of *Horse*.

With help from former Olympic dressage rider Vicki Thompson, Clare is keen to iron out some issues in the pair's flatwork in time for the event. In particular, Clare hopes Vicki might pass on some tips to help with Sapphire's submission issues, as her mare is often tense through the neck.

Vicki asks Clare to describe her usual warm-up routine.

"I normally keep Sapphire long and low in her outline, and perhaps ride some shoulder-in," says Clare. "I'd ideally like her to be softer through the back, as she can be stiff."

As the pair warms up, riding plenty of circles and transitions, Vicki explains that Clare should ride Sapphire with a lower outline. This will then begin to stretch her topline.

"I'd like to see her more round when being schooled, and she's quite tight in the jaw. She needs to relax more fully in this area, and show you some more flexion," says Vicki.

**Sapphire needs to relax through her jaw and also her topline.**

# 1 The benefits of leg yielding on a circle

Leg yielding from a smaller circle on to a larger one aids suppleness and flexion.



Clare's hands tend to turn so that her thumbs are pointing towards the withers.



Vicki reminds Clare to keep her thumbs on top and pointing forwards.

To help the pair achieve suppleness and flexion, Vicki asks Clare to ride circles of around 12m to achieve a good inside bend. Then, she tells her to leg yield out onto a larger 20m circle, using her inside leg slightly behind the girth to ask the horse to move over.

Clare is reminded to ensure she doesn't ask for too much bend in her leg yield, or to use too much inside rein, as her horse may 'fall through' the outside shoulder.

"Keep an even outside contact," Vicki advises. "Remember, we are aiming to ride this exercise with the horse in a low frame, rather than a dressage test outline.

"Maintain inside flexion and make sure you have a giving, rather than restrictive inside hand, to encourage the horse to become lower and rounder."

Vicki also points out that Clare's position is in need of fine tuning. "Be sure to carry your hands so the wrists don't turn in, as turning them in can make the mare even more stiff and rigid. It is also important to keep the elbows by your side, as flapping them affects the rein aids – a good position allows you to give clear aids," she says.

Clare rides the leg yield exercise on both reins, and Sapphire is attentive and obedient – but she does seem to find the exercise a

little difficult. While she is clearly able to cross with the foreleg, there isn't enough activity behind.

Vicki says she'd like to see Clare aiming for more flexion when schooling, as well as asking for a more active walk in general – lateral work will come more easily for the horse when she is more relaxed."

## 2 Transitions to improve balance

Transitions such as trot to walk are very useful.



Next, Vicki asks Clare to ride some transitions, which may seem basic but are vitally important. Clare rides from trot to walk, and then from walk to trot, but Sapphire's downward transitions are a little unbalanced. "I have noticed that Sapphire can 'set' in her jaw through the transitions, which I think is happening because the transition is mainly happening in her mouth," observes Vicki.

She also suggests that Clare is "doing too much" for the horse. "She can't carry herself in the transitions if she's holding onto the bridle – she must learn to do it on her own," Vicki says. "Restricting a horse in a downward transition is the equivalent of holding onto the horse over a fence when you are jumping, which of course we don't want."

Clare rides a few more transitions, focusing on closing her leg on the downward transitions, and slowing the pace with her body, instead of her hands. The transitions begin to improve, and are less abrupt – Clare is having a 'light bulb' moment, realising how much she unintentionally holds on to the mare when schooling. "I don't think I reward her enough by 'giving,'" Clare muses.

## 3 Lateral work for suppleness

In leg yield, Sapphire has to learn to maintain the inside bend herself, rather than relying on Clare.



Riding shoulder-in down the long side of the arena helps to improve Sapphire's outline.



Vicki comments that, while Sapphire is a nice, willing horse and easy to control, she is generally quite tight through her frame. "Ideally, Sapphire would be stepping through more with her hindlegs, so she is tracking up, or even over-tracking," Vicki says.

She asks Clare to ride a series of straightforward lateral movements, including leg yield. "Before your leg yield, ride your turn as a half circle, which will help you to position Sapphire on a diagonal line – this will make the leg yield easier to commence rather than simply starting from a straight position," Vicki says.

"I'd like to see you use less inside rein – Sapphire should manage to maintain the inside bend herself."

Clare also rides shoulder-in down the long side, which Sapphire appears to find easier than working laterally on a circle. Clare works on relaxing the mare's jaw, but actually looks tense herself – she sometimes 'hunches' her back, and Vicki explains the horse must be round in the neck in order for the rider to have a straight back. Clare's hard work pays off – Sapphire begins to become submissive, so Clare can sit straighter as she asks for a more relaxed outline.

## 4 Moving on to medium trot

To finish off the session, Vicki asks Clare to ride medium trot down the long side – the overall picture is very good, although Vicki suggests Clare could “let go” with her reins a little more, having first asked for flexion. The next attempt is much better, with Clare looking more relaxed through her upper body.

Sapphire’s working trot is also suppler now, as Clare goes large round the arena in rising trot. “This is what we wanted

at the beginning!” Vicki comments, impressed by the improvement they are showing. “Sapphire is ‘slow and low’, and you are both looking much more relaxed together.”

Vicki tells Clare she has worked very hard, and reminds her to focus on not over-using her rein aids when she is schooling.

“It is just a case of helping Sapphire to work out how to react to pressure,” Vicki concludes.

Riding in medium trot then improves the quality of the working trot.



## Conclusions

### Vicki

“The mare is very straight through her body, and needs to bend more, in order to use her muscles. Standing at her side and offering the mare a carrot will encourage her to bend to reach, and this will help. Clare also seems a little scared of upsetting Sapphire, but there’s nothing wrong with using appropriate pressure when you use your aids correctly.”

### Clare

“It all makes sense, and I now realise that I have developed some bad habits! I will definitely be doing lots of circles and lateral work to help us improve our suppleness and bend. We have our first one-star event at Gatcombe coming up soon, so I am sure this lesson will help with our dressage.”



## Vicki's top tips

- Don't rush: speed can equal tension.
- Look up – just turning your head can be interpreted by a sensitive horse as a weight aid.
- Most horses are considered to have a 'bad' rein. However, this is often a rider issue rather than a horse one, perhaps linked to you being left or right-handed – so make sure you are 'body aware'.
- Avoid turning your shoulders and upper body more than the horse's own body angle during lateral movements.

