

Position & Basics

Jan Ebeling's encouraging style helped Colorado riders.

By Kathleen Mayger

I arrived at Steve and Vicki Cherner's picturesque Middle Fork Ranch in Colorado's Rocky Mountains to audit a clinic with Pan American gold medalist Jan Ebeling, who transformed each horse and rider with his relaxed teaching style.

Lessons began with an emphasis on tempo, which is the rate of repetition of the rhythm. This helped to ensure that horses were loose and beginning to work through their backs. Ebeling tested the horses by asking for changes of direction on three- and four-loop serpentines, while keeping the same tempo.

A young stallion, Romario's Image, owned and ridden by Nancy Verge, was not paying attention. Ebeling told Verge to keep the figures simple and to not make too many changes of direction, so the horse could settle down by looking in one direction and have an easier time keeping his balance. The young bay would pick up momentum heading toward the barn and lose momentum as he went away from it. So Ebeling had Verge do circles heading toward the barn to slow the tempo down; then, she put her leg on as she went away from the barn to keep him going forward. By the end of the lesson, Romario's Image began to relax and keep a better overall tempo. Ebeling stressed to Verge that this was a big step for the horse, even though it may not seem that way.

Correcting Rider Position

Ebeling had an eagle eye when it came to the key elements of rider position. Junior rider Taryn Anderson and her gray gelding, Nordic, worked with Ebeling to improve her seat. Ebeling told Anderson to keep her shoulders together, "like tak-

ing a deep breath but not leaning back and not collapsing." Anderson aimed to ride with her chin up while stretching tall. These and other changes helped her stay with Nordic's giant, elastic trot.

Rider Shari MacCallum Clark struggled to keep her seat with her steady, yet forward-moving, gelding. Clark asked Ebeling if he had any tips for sitting a big trot. Ebeling responded by telling her, "Generally, riders need to keep their hips more relaxed to ride the big trots." He suggested Clark needed to be more relaxed overall. "The rounder the horse is, the easier it is to sit the trot, but the more relaxed your seat becomes, the rounder the horse gets. The rider is the one that has to make that first step."

Jane Anne Lake rode Picasso, her 10-year-old schoolmaster, and worked on her position to learn how it affected her horse. Picasso had a tendency to avoid the bit when Lake became too wide with her hands. Ebeling urged Lake to keep her hands together and to not pull on the inside rein. Ride from your inside leg to your outside rein, he told her, to enable her horse to stretch out in his frame. Ebeling had Lake pat Picasso on the neck, "not because he did something spectacular, but just to get her to release the inside rein, especially in transitions between gaits." With the minor changes in Lake's hand position, Picasso began to relax in his neck and had more swing in his back.

Finding the Back-to-Front Connection

The position changes Ebeling made complemented his instruction about the rein/hand connection between horse and rider, often a constant struggle for riders. Ebeling emphasized to Clark, "Do not leave any slack in the reins; otherwise, you're at the horse's mercy to stay round or not."

Ebeling had Clark work on transitions to test the inside-leg-to-outside-rein con-

nection. "Pulling on the inside rein without any outside rein means the head is just going back and forth. You need an outside rein to make an honest connection, because you might get him round but not balanced," he said.

Ebeling was quick to spot when any rider was missing the inside-leg-to-out-side-rein connection. To help Taryn Anderson understand the feeling, he had her leg yield the entire diagonal in both directions. She learned that if she was tracking left, for example, she could use pressure from her left leg toward her right rein *as if she* was leg yielding but not necessarily going through with a leg yield. She then felt the horse stepping from her inside leg into her outside rein.

Another good lesson on this subject came when Ebeling rode Donnersmark (owned by Middle Fork Ranch), a son of the famous Donnerhall. His objective was to begin training flying changes. Ebeling's position seemed flawless, and it was apparent to the observers watching the flying change work how important the inside-leg-to-outside-rein connection is when riding flying changes. Ebeling said that the horse must be absolutely straight before you ask for each change.

Next, Ebeling began to school half-steps—preludes to teaching piaffe. He commented to Colin Bate, Middle Fork Ranch's manager and trainer, that he "had never met a Donnerhall that could not piaffe," and Donnersmark reaffirmed that statement. The half-steps soon began resembling a true piaffe. The next day, Bate rode Donnersmark and schooled the half-steps with Ebeling on the ground. Ebeling told Bate to "think of taking a deep breath into the half-steps; do less in the transition down to half-steps; and, do not chase him forward out of the half-steps." This caused the half-steps to become even more rhythmical and on-the-spot.

Participants went away with plenty of homework, while looking forward to Ebeling's return for the next clinic, t¹
