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FROM THE DRESSAGE TODAY ARCHIVES



Easy Is Anything But

Edward Gal and Hans Peter Minderhoud share their insight on how to make dressage look easy.

Story and photos by Kim F. Miller

El Campeon Farms in Southern California hosted Dutch Olympians Edward Gal and Hans Peter Minderhoud during the West Coast Dressage Convention.



Gal liked Kim McGrath's 14-year-old KWPN mare, Zilarda C, who had a tendency to be a little hot.

High spirits dominated the 2018 West Coast Dressage Convention featuring Dutch superstars Edward Gal and Hans Peter Minderhoud. Champagne corks popped at elegant tables in the tented VIP area as fans and friends from far and wide gathered to learn, lunch and shop at Southern California's equestrian slice of heaven, El Campeon Farms.

It was the horses, however, who brought the highest spirits to the April weekend. From Amelie Kovac's 5-year-old Ivar to Sabine Schut-Kery's Grand Prix mount Sanceo, the horses provided Gal and Minderhoud with ample opportunity to explain their tactics for putting equine energy to the best possible use. Minderhoud began each morning working with riders on young horses while Gal spent the afternoons with those on more experienced mounts.

Even with the horses' wide ranges of experience and abilities, the Dutchmen emphasized common themes. "Forward, forward, forward!" was the fix for many of the training and performance challenges presented. Using frequent transitions within and between gaits to teach and maintain control and quick responses was another, as was insisting that the rider be the leader—a kind yet firm one.

Coordination and timing of aids, variety in arena work

and constant vigilance regarding the quality of the horse's gait and attentiveness were more points of emphasis for all eight pairs riding in front of approximately 500 attentive spectators each day.

The West Coast Dressage Convention was organized by Scott Hayes Productions and followed similar educational weekends headlined by Charlotte Dujardin, Carl Hester, Anky Van Grunsven and other top horsemen and women. The host venue, privately owned El Campeon Farms, is a former USET training facility and occasionally opens its doors to the public. Schut-Kery bases her small training program there, and convention visitors enjoyed breaks strolling the gorgeous grounds that resemble Kentucky Bluegrass country in the perfectly named Hidden Valley neighborhood just north of Los Angeles.

Off to a Hot Start

French native Kovac entered the court with a lead-line assist for the 5-year-old Ivar (Desperado x OO Seven), and he heated things up quickly with his wide eye and hot temperament. Minderhoud recognized his abilities and potential immediately. Based in the United States for a few years, the 26-year-old Kovac received helpful advice for her small, young-horse-focused training program. "Especially with a horse like this, a clever boy with lots of talent and blood, you have to be the



Minderhoud coached Amelia Newcomb to get her 6-year-old Harvard to come up and under more to connect his hindquarters with his long body and neck.

leader,” Minderhoud said. “Don’t wait too much for him. Instead, let him work to help relax.

“Play with tempo, change reins and keep him more forward,” he requested as they began at the trot. “Normally, I like to give the rein and let the horse stretch his neck, but for now it is safety first for me, so I don’t have a problem that he’s a little short in the neck.” As Ivar eyed the tables and bleachers bordering the arena, Kovac was told to maintain a slight inside bend and even a “baby” shoulder-in. The idea was to keep him focused on his rider while also slightly pushing him toward the things he was nervous about.

Above all, it was “go forward.” Even as Ivar shook his head and spooked at various spots, Kovac was told to keep her aids on. “Keep on riding him. If he thinks ‘backward’ or is being difficult, go forward!” It was the first of many instances throughout the weekend in which “forward” was the answer. It was equally important in downward transitions,

especially if the horse broke to a lower gait in the process and during walking rest breaks. When any horse sucked back behind the leg, botched a lead change or slowed down in anticipation of the rider’s next cue, “forward” was the fix.

Minderhoud coached Kovac to use her leg to push Ivar into her hand, then relax her hand forward when she felt him going into the bit and maintain the forward. “Don’t let him stop until you tell him to.” The same applied to coping with extra-spooky ends of the court. “It’s fine to turn before that, but make sure it’s you making the turn, not him.”

He had Kovac begin canter collection work on a circle, which is easier for a young horse. Plenty of hindquarter power made it easy for Ivar to collect. On their second morning, Minderhoud noted that Ivar already had a pirouette-ready degree of canter collection. But he wanted to see that power source connected to an elevated front end and a slight backing off from the bit. “He comes back

nically on his hind legs, but he’s not coming back too much off the rein.” A quick half halt was OK to help achieve that elevated frame, but mostly “sit in the saddle to get him up. You don’t want the picture that you are lifting your horse up.”

As Ivar relaxed slightly, they worked on getting him into more of a competition frame. When she sensed some relaxation, Kovac moved her hand forward, inviting Ivar to lower his head and stretch his nose forward toward the vertical. Ivar’s fiery nature made it all the more important for Kovac to consistently assert her leadership. “He’s quite cheeky, so when you ride him he needs to know who is boss. He can play around 23 hours of the day, but if you are on him, he has to listen to you.” Not asserting leadership with a young horse is a common mistake, Minderhoud noted. Behaviors that are sometimes ignored as “sweet baby horse” antics can be trouble when the horse becomes a teenager. “Especially the smart, talented horses. They always find something out!”

The clinic schedule allowed for 45-minute rides, but Minderhoud emphasized that was much longer than normal. Schooling sessions at the Dutch duo’s Glock Horse Performance Center in The Netherlands are interspersed with ample walk breaks and the intense training part of the ride often ends after 20 or 30 minutes. Brevity is best within each exercise, too. A few strides of compliance from a young horse or one learning a new task are plenty, he noted. Ask clearly, get what you ask for, then move on, he and Gal stressed throughout the clinic.

And don’t fixate on mistakes. In fact, Minderhoud eschewed the word “mistake” in a young-horse training context. Missteps and misunderstandings are a normal part of the learning process, he stressed, and patience is paramount. When they



Sabine Schut-Kery and her Grand Prix mount Sanceo

happen, move on and try again, rather than continue with something that's not working. That's very confusing for the horse, the clinicians stressed.

Especially for a young horse with Ivar's talent, ability and energy, "It's important you take your time," Minderhoud cautioned. "It can be easy to keep working him because he looks like he will never be tired. So you have to protect him a little." The ample "sit" Ivar showed in canter set the stage for an ooh-and-aah-inducing finish to their second morning of work, when Kovac brought him into a few steps of passage. "We had a difficult start and a good ending," Minderhoud concluded.

Putting Things Together

Riding next was another young professional specializing in young-horse

development, Amelia Newcomb, and her 6-year-old Harvard (Charmeur x Tushinski) who presented different challenges. Minderhoud coached the USDF bronze, silver and gold medalist to get the relatively relaxed Harvard reacting faster to the aids and to come up and under more to connect his hindquarters with his long body and neck.

A better reaction to Newcomb's leg aid was step one. Minderhoud wasn't bothered when Harvard broke into the trot in response to Newcomb's leg at the walk. "You need to first feel that he thinks forward, then you can bring him back again. If he

doesn't react, be stronger with the leg so you get the feeling that he takes you somewhere." But not in quick steps, he clarified, as Newcomb sought the walk he wanted from Harvard. "You want a slower rhythm so when you slow him down he's almost thinking which leg he has to lift each time, then from there, going forward on your leg." This helped him learn to "walk out of the shoulder," rather than tip forward over

his front end.

Newcomb wanted to work on Harvard's green flying changes. Minderhoud's prerequisites for that were the quick responses to her aids and establishing easy collection in both directions. Maintaining contact on the outside rein when bending and circling was a balancing tool they'd worked on earlier.

They prepared with walk-canter and canter-walk transitions to sharpen Harvard's responsiveness. "He should react on the first aid, not the third or fourth," said Minderhoud. A double leg touch within one stride or a tap of the whip were progressive reinforcements if needed. Sustained leg pressure with no response is not an option and too much response is better than none, the Dutchman said frequently.

Minderhoud does early flying change work from the counter canter on the long side, using the wall to help the horse stay straight. Canterng across the diagonal and through the short side in counter canter, Newcomb was told to focus on maintaining balance and forward motion.

"The change should always be uphill and forward," Minderhoud explained. If the degree of impulsion going into the change lacks those qualities, keep working on that and skip the change, he said. The big horse's size made things more challenging, he added, and made it all the more important to "keep him quick in collection." He suggested counting out the strides preceding and through the change to reinforce the de-

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In this free video at ondemand.dressagetoday.com, Edward Gal teaches a rider how to establish obedience and responsiveness in her horse and how to stop him from leaning on one rein or the other. Gal focuses on self-carriage, sensitivity to the rider and general work toward improvement in the gaits. To watch more videos with Gal, subscribe to Dressage Today OnDemand, which starts with a 10-day free trial.



sired quick rhythm. Continuing the forward momentum going into, through and out of the change is critical to quality of the movement. “You don’t want him first coming back, then making the change.” In Gal and Minderhoud’s training program, lead changes are like all exercises in the sense that quality is much more important than quantity. “Especially if you only make one change, make sure it is not only correct, but also beautiful,” said Minderhoud.

Making Harvard shorter in his body was a constant goal for attaining more suspension, activity and brilliance in his gaits. Not giving too much with the hand was critical to that. Newcomb worked on containing his forward motion to gain throughness in the body by relaxing, rather than releasing, her hand. It should be subtle enough “that I don’t see it,” Minderhoud said. As Newcomb alternated between collected and working trot, Minderhoud said, “when he comes back, think more of a quick rhythm that comes from getting shorter in the neck and hind end.”

In the midst of these transitions, they mixed in shoulder-in and half-pass work to establish more push from the hindquarters. “You started with a 7. See if you can take it to an 8,” Minderhoud said. Asking for more in schooling was a recurring theme. “When you are training, it’s OK if something goes wrong,” he continued. “Don’t try to play it too much on the safe side.”

An introduction to pirouette work came next, using the first steps of a sequence of exercises the clinicians used with several horses through the weekend. Starting on a 20-meter circle, Newcomb

established and maintained a forward canter for a few revolutions. She then shrunk the circle to about 10-meters and collected Harvard’s canter. From there, she set his haunches a bit to the inside, while keeping his shoulder on the circle track. “Think travers, but not small,” Minderhoud said. “If you collect him more, don’t make the circle smaller. First do it on a big circle, and when that’s easy, you can start turning him a bit more.” For Harvard, the goal was getting more sit in his collected canter, developing

control can be a problem. Gal addressed that and another common amateur issue, conflicting aids, while working with Helen Stacy and her Intermediaire I partner, the 17.3-hand KWPN gelding Binck.

The elegant rider and former Stanford professor is relatively new to dressage, working with San Diego trainers David Blake and Rebecca Rigdon. She was coached to achieve more free-flowing forwardness by relaxing her hand and not overusing the curb rein. The big horse had come to lean on her hand

rather than carry his own weight on his hind end, an issue sometimes compounded by conflicting aids.

“Are my hand and leg consulting with each other and saying the same thing,” Gal told Stacy to ask herself. “Overdo it a bit. When you come with the leg, give your hands a way forward and try to relax in your upper body. It feels weird, I know. Don’t try to control so much. I don’t think anything bad is going to happen if you



From left: Conference organizer Scott Hayes, Edward Gal, author and trainer Monty Roberts and Hans Peter Minderhoud

hindquarter strength and establishing the source for more elevation in his trot and canter work.

More experienced horses took this exercise into working, partial and/or full pirouettes, with Minderhoud and Gal emphasizing the importance of maintaining a quality canter for just a few strides of pirouette instead of a full pirouette of mediocre canter. Those newer to pirouette often did two to four strides of the pirouette then were told firmly to ride out, emphasizing the priority of forward throughout the movement.

Clear Communications

Riders were constantly reminded to be a firm leader. Yet, trying to exert too much

let go a little.

“He’s big, but he’s not lazy,” Gal continued. “When you hold him too much, you have to do a lot to keep him going.” Much can be accomplished even when holding the horse’s front end too much, Gal noted. “But it’s not the same. It’s not pretty. You want it to look loose and easy.”

Seeking more expression and activity in Binck’s trot, Gal had Stacy work on shoulder-in, with forward and back changes of pace, focused on his inside hind leg coming up and underneath him more, thus elevating his shoulder. Next, she prepared for the same changes of pace within half pass. But Gal had her start with a few steps of inside bend only,

to counter his tendency to go immediately into a half pass and “run his shoulders through the track.” As she changed pace within half pass, Gal coached her to maintain the same frame in Binck’s body whether in a collected or working gait. With the clear aids that generated quick reactions to forward and back cues, Stacy gained more control of the big horse with less effort.

Short stretches of collected and working canter followed. “If he stays too long in the come-back, he loses activity,” Gal coached. The goal was for Binck to maintain his speed when Stacy relaxed her hand and wait for her leg cue to go forward. “You should feel like you are driving a car and you’ve taken your foot off the gas but not put on the brakes,” Gal explained.

They ended their second session with free-flowing extended trot on the diagonal, earning the crowd’s applause and Gal’s praise. “You are letting him go while keeping a connection without you holding him in front.”

One Hot Mama

Subtle distinctions between fast, quick and forward were a point of focus for Kim McGrath, a Grand Prix veteran based in Southern California, and Zilarda C (Florencio x Goya), a 14-year-old mare who clearly resembles her half-brother, Laura Graves’ Verdades. (Their dam is Liwilarda by Goya) The NA/KWPN Elite Sport Mare had less training than her age would suggest because she’s had eight babies, yet motherhood hasn’t tamed her spirit. “She’s my favorite type of horse,” said Gal, “hot!”

She needed to relax in body and mind and accept her rider’s aids without getting more tense. Her uphill frame lacked the engagement of the back that’s needed for true forward motion. So the goal was a lowered, reaching head and neck, more elevation at the wither and teaching her to “sit and

go forward at the same time.” Tempo changes dominated much of their session with Gal acknowledging, “It’s easy to say, ‘Get the horse more relaxed,’ and another thing to do it.”

Gal started them off on a trot circle with small changes of tempo to keep the mare’s attention on McGrath. Although the instinct on a hot, excitable horse is to avoid leg or hand pressure, Gal said, “You have to keep the contact a bit because they will really freak out if they are not used to it.” On the upward trot transitions, McGrath was encouraged to loosen the rein by moving her hand down and forward, encouraging the mare to follow with a lower head and to reach for the bit. An inside bend helped maintain Zilarda’s focus on McGrath, despite scary surroundings, and further encouraged softening into a lower neck position. “When you feel she’s dropping the neck, bring her back to smaller steps, like a pony step, so she’s not coming off the ground very much and it feels like a normal trot, then take her forward again. Do this a lot so she knows that when you ask her to come back, she can be ‘normal.’ Later on in her training you can ask for more. She doesn’t need to be spectacular now. We know she can do that.”

Doing the same tempo changes in canter brought the mare’s tension level down more. “When you feel she is not spooky, see if you can bend her to the

outside a bit and get the feeling to drop the neck, then give her your hand to stretch into.”

All the while, McGrath needed leg and some seat aid to maintain the forward, so that “she doesn’t get loose in the hand because she’s hanging back. You want the feel she wants to go forward without running away.”

The goal of frequent tempo changes was for the rider to feel she could get the horse forward or back any time she asked for it. “Even when you are taking her back, you should still feel you can go forward at every second that you want.” It also trains the horse to maintain what the rider has requested until asked to do something else. “If I do nothing, they should do nothing.”

In that view, Gal and Minderhoud seemed to share a priority with Monty Roberts, who gave a Saturday showcase of his natural-horsemanship accomplishments. “If your work looks hard, take a hard look at your work,” said the famous California horseman and author of *The Man Who Listens to Horses*.

Indeed, Gal and Minderhoud’s riding epitomizes their sport’s highest level in making the difficult look easy and effortless. As attendees left the weekend with notebooks full of the Dutchmen’s strategies, they had first-hand knowledge that ease in the dressage arena is the product of patient, persistent, clear and kind horsemanship. 🐾

Edward Gal was the Netherlands’ triple gold medalist at the 2010 FEI World Equestrian Games (WEG). He and his mount, Totilas, became the first pair to sweep the three available dressage gold medals following a season of multiple world-record scores. **Hans Peter Minderhoud** has a string of Young Horse World Championship titles, dating back to 2004 with the 5-year-old World Title in Verden, Germany, with Florencio. Between them, they have many WEG, Olympic, European and World Cup Final medals: most recently for Minderhoud, the 2016 World Cup Final gold medal and competing in the 2016 Rio Olympics, and for Gal, six World Cup Final medals, most recently silver in 2015, adding to three World Championship titles and Olympic bronze in 2012. Gal and Minderhoud operate Glock Horse Performance Center in the Netherlands.



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Weight Maintenance

Special considerations for the senior dressage horse

By Sarah L. Ralston, VMD

Dressage horses are frequently just hitting their prime at ages when in other disciplines the competitive edge is beginning to fade. It is not uncommon now to see dressage horses performing well into their 20s and even 30s. There have been many recent surveys/studies of performance and nutrition in aging horses that I will briefly summarize here.

Just because a horse is over 18 or 20 years old does not necessarily mean he needs changes in his feeding. As long as he is maintaining good body condition, energy and overall health, don't mess with success just because his chronological age is advancing. There is no magic age at which all horses need nutritional help. If the old campaigner begins to falter, however, with weight loss, chronic infections, long hair coat that fails to shed, arthritic changes, etc., it is time to re-evaluate the horse's feeding and nutrition. However, it is critical that before you switch the horse to a senior formula or supplement, you get a thorough veterinary work-up. The focus should be on common ailments associated with aging in old horses: metabolic disorders associated with pituitary dysfunction, liver and kidney failure, dental abnormalities and a wide variety of arthritic changes. Dental abnormalities should be corrected if possible and arthritic issues should be addressed appropriately, which might resolve any problems. The arthritic horse probably would benefit from being maintained in a leaner body condition (a score of 4 to 5 out of 9) than that one often seen in the dressage arena (a score of 6 to 7). Since thermoregulation is less efficient in old horses, maintaining lower body weight in the summer will help protect against heat stress. But in the winter, it would be beneficial to put a bit of added fat back on to help insulate from the cold.

As long as the liver and kidneys are not compromised, putting the failing old horse on a higher fat (7 to 10 percent), higher protein (12 to 16 percent) feed can sometimes help maintain that glow and peak performance. If there are metabolic issues related to insulin resistance/pituitary dysfunction, there are a wide range of low-carbohydrate feeds on the market now that might fit the above profile. Access to hay should not be restricted unless there are severe, uncorrectable dental issues that prevent adequate mastication of long stem hays/grasses. Even though most senior feeds are designed to be complete feeds that technically can be fed without access to long-stem forages, I am not aware of any that can be fed free choice or that have enough fiber content to prevent gastric ulcers/wood chewing if fed as the sole source



Amy K. Drago

Just because a horse is over a certain age does not necessarily mean he needs changes in his feeding.

of nutrition. The only supplements outside the usual salt and electrolytes that might be beneficial would be if there are issues with chronic infections and pituitary dysfunction. In that case, adding supplemental B vitamins, and the antioxidants vitamin C and vitamin E might help. As long as the hay/forage fed is of good quality, no other supplements should be necessary. If the horse is severely dentally challenged, you can meet his needs with a mixture of soaked hay cubes (preferably grass/legume mix, not straight alfalfa) and a pelleted or extruded senior feed that can be soaked.

If the horse has compromised liver function, avoid the high fat/protein feeds recommended above. In this case, the horse needs the higher sugar/carbohydrate content of sweet feeds and cannot handle high fat/protein in his ration. If kidney function is diminished, avoid all legume (clover/alfalfa)-based feeds due to the high calcium content that puts a strain on the kidney functions. 📖

Sarah L. Ralston, VMD, PhD, DACVN, was a professor at the Department of Animal Sciences, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, for more than 28 years. She received her VMD from the University of Pennsylvania in 1980 and her PhD in 1982. She is board certified by the American College of Veterinary Nutrition and was trained in dressage to Grand Prix by Col. Roberto Mondino of the Brazilian Military in the 1960s. She currently gives speaking engagements and equine nutrition consults.



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