

## **A Journey Through Required Reading**

*By Meghan Laffin*

The USDF Trainer Certification program has a required reading list of 18 books. Thanks to this generous Training4Teaching scholarship, I've been able to purchase these books, and begin absorbing the prerequisite information for my eventual enrollment in the instructor certification program.

Thus far, I've found the reading list enlightening in both predictable, and surprising ways. Predictable, because the fundamentals from one author to the next follow a string of classical techniques that encourage sensitivity and synergy between horse and rider. What surprised me, however, is the stunning relevance to what I incorrectly assumed to be more modern day issues. Namely, the rushing of young horses.

### **REASONS NOT TO RUSH**

'Basic Training of the Young Horse,' by Ingrid and Reiner Klimke was first published in 1980. The book begins by saying that "at horse auctions, 3-year-old animals have been shamefully offered for sale as top dressage horses or eventers. Horses who were only just broken to saddle are already believed to have the attributes to go far in a specific discipline." And that, "in many cases degenerative bone conditions are caused by physical wear and tear and are the result of specializing in a certain discipline far too early... one must wait until the horse is sufficiently mature, confident and balanced enough before commencing training."

As a young professional and aspiring trainer, this warning bell rings loud and true to me today. The Klimke's point out that "nowadays, too many riders are more interested in boasting about their recent purchase than in learning about stable management and the details of training the horse." This serves as evidence to me that it's not only the young horses we're rushing, but the riders also.

This is a cautionary tale against shortcuts: harsher bits, heavier hands, front legs that flail, and reins that draw. It is a testament to me that as trainer, it will be my job to advocate for fair treatment of the horse, both in the way I ride, and in the way I teach. It may not be as flashy, and there may be far less instant gratification, but it will be worth it in the end.

It is through this lens of taking the high road (which is also probably the long road), that I was able to find a deeper appreciation for how best to teach the fundamentals.

### **RIDER POSITION**

In my opinion, the book that provides the most clear and comprehensive illustration on rider position is "When 2 Spines Align," by Beth Baumert. Baumert's use of analogy boils even the most complicated things down to simple pictures.

Baumert uses 'Powerlines' as means to describe how a rider's position is meant to balance a horse. If the horse attempts to move "out of bounds" he will run into stretchy, firm powerlines. When these powerlines are "open," they create positive and elastic tension. But when they are "closed" powerlines, the body is clinched and creating negative tension.

The first powerline is the vertical powerline. It stretches from a rider's ear, down to their shoulder, hip, and heel. Baumert refers to this posture as a "tower" that must stay aligned. She says that, "when the rider clings to the horse she's stuck in her horse's balance, and cannot influence him to better balance." This same theory is echoed in other books on the list, including in a more technical text "Anatomy of Dressage" by Heinrich and Volker Schusdzjarra. They say that, "With the center of gravity at the ninth thoracic vertebrae, a slight tilt of the body to one side or the other is enough to shift the rider's center of gravity over that of the horse... a straight rod is more capable of balancing than a bent one."

The next powerline Baumert discusses is the connecting powerline, which travels more horizontally from the rider's upper body, through the arms, and into the reins. Baumert says that the elbow is the rider's most important joint. She discourages tight fists as a baseline position, and instead encourages the tightening of the fists to be used as an occasional and intentional aid. I also thought it was wonderful that she pointed out how we as children are hit over the head with the importance of hand-eye coordination. And so it makes sense that as riders we'd be tempted to use the hands first... but that truthfully we must go to them last. And that "the horse should draw on your hand like a fish on a line."

Then there is the spiraling powerline, that swivels the rider's hips and waist. Baumert explains that the hips should stay traveling with the horse, but the waist, shoulders and head are tools to turn and swivel. They will influence the horse. She points out that the horse's tail is an extension of their back, and that it should swing accordingly without intervention of our powerlines.

Lastly Baumert discusses the visual powerline. She is one of many, many authors on this required reading list, who warn that a rider's tendency to stare at the horse's head creates a commitment to being on the forehand.

The vision powerline plays a huge role not only in our sport of dressage, but also in cross-training opportunities, like over cavalletti or jumps. In jumping, riders are forced to look up to find the next jump on the course. It isn't dissimilar from dressage riders asking for a movement at a particular letter, but sometimes tools like jumps or cavalletti encourage riders to focus on things other than the horse's head. In "Cavalletti For Dressage And Jumping," Ingrid and Reiner Klimke boast that cavalletti training can improve rider's position. They say they "have seen a vast improvement in riders who are given simple exercises over cavalletti. These are so much fun that all stiffness and tension disappear, and the rider learns to ride in harmony with the horse in a very short space of time."

## TRAINING AIDS

One of my favorite books from the list was “Dressage with Kyra” by Kyra Kyrklund and Jytte Lemkow. They strongly emphasize the importance of light aids. Saying that, “If your goal is to ride Grand Prix dressage, you might as well face the fact that if at the beginning of training you are unclear or inconsistent with your aids, you will find it necessary to use more and more strength when teaching the horse increasingly difficult movements, and so will never achieve a good result. From the very beginning it is extremely important to succeed in making the horse react to the smallest signals possible, and to work on refining your own aids.”

Right from mounting, Kyra breaks down the core fundamental aids into:

- 1) Forward driving aid
- 2) Restraining aid
- 3) Turning aid

Kyra describes this process from the moment she first gets on a horse as her “ABC’s.” Where most people try to see-saw the horse onto the bit, Kyra says “if you start to force a horse to give in the poll and to work in a fixed frame without really being submissive, the first tensions and resistances are created.”

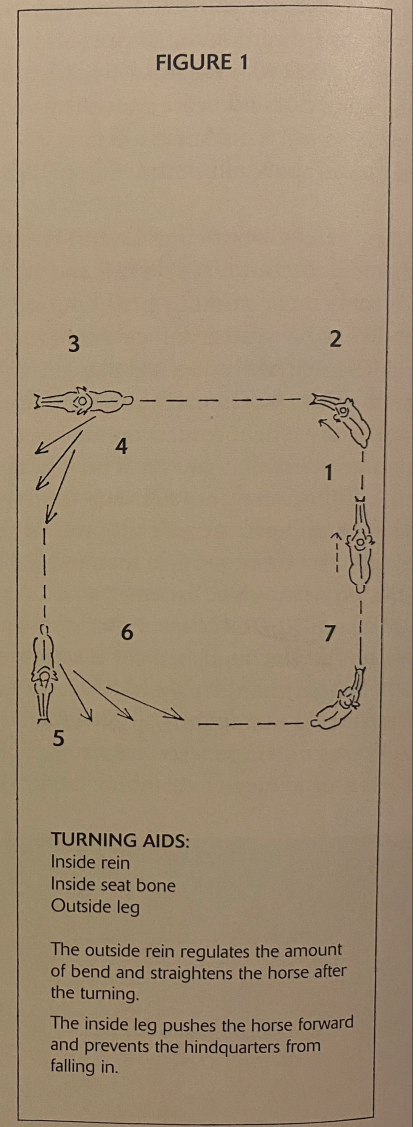
Instead Kyra asks for a halt first, with a firm hand that immediately releases once the horse stops. Then she does the same thing with her lower leg aid. Asking for the horse to move forward, and as soon as he does, she releases. Once that’s clear on a straight line, she combines them. This becomes a square exercise of halting, turning on the haunches, and straight lines as shown in Figure 1.

Kyra details that in this exercise, “the rider should always aim to bring the forehand in front of the quarters, and not the other way around. If you cannot control the forehand of the horse you will never be able to control the quarters.”

Kyra’s ABC can best be trained on a square, inside the track so that the rider can decide exactly where the horse is going to go (1 – 2).

If the horse does not wait for the rider’s turning signal but turns by himself or falls in or cuts the corner, this exercise should be practised:

3. Halt.
4. Turn directly from the halt.
5. Halt.
6. Turn directly from the halt.
7. The horse is now expecting to halt so the rider can then give a correct turning signal, which the horse won’t have anticipated.



This exercise exemplifies how simple and soft the aides need to be before things may be added to the equation. Beth Baumert also amplified the importance of listening to your horse. She says that the riders aides first prepare the horse for action, then must listen to whether they are ready to respond. Finally the aide asks for action. Baumert beautifully describes those listening moments as the quiet moments in between notes of your favorite song. Because while they may be silent, they carry an important tune.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Not dissimilar to riding in multiple clinics, or atop multiple horses, reading 18 books from the USDF required reading list provides a broad spectrum of solutions to problems faced by all riders and trainers. The core fundamentals may be nearly identical, but the approaches differ in technicality and nuance, which is appropriate! There are so many horses and so many students out there. None are the same, and why should the approach to teaching them be the same? Of course having core beliefs at the center of your program is important, but so is willingness to help people in ways that they are most receptive to. One person may appreciate analogies from Beth Baumert, a different person may prefer more technical specificity and anatomy from the Schusdziarra's. And on any given day the many exercises given from authors like the Klimke's, or Kyra Kyrklund, could come in handy.

I am grateful for this opportunity to learn from so many wise and incredible horsemen and women. I am grateful for this scholarship from the Training4Teaching program. And I have cherished this chance to be well-prepared for the Trainer Certification program!