

Training Solutions

Bruno Greber gives riders the tools they need.

By Anne Crowell

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Bruno Greber

Nestled in the rolling countryside near Gordonsville, Virginia, there is a world-class training and breeding facility with ties to the Spanish Riding School (SRS) of Vienna. Owned by Manfred Nettek and Gabriele Heertje, Ashanti Farm is the home of trainer Bruno Greber, *SVBR Eid. Dipl. Reitlehrer*. A native of Switzerland, Greber received his professional training there, but he is the long-time student of Arthur Kottas Heldenberg, the former First Chief Rider at the SRS. Greber worked as assistant trainer in Kottas' private stable from 1992 to 1997.

Twelve horses and seven riders came to Ashanti Farm for a 2009 clinic with Greber. Rider skills ranged from Training Level to Grand Prix, and rider ages ran the gamut from early 20s to late 60s. Many auditors attended, as well. Here are a few of the problems that riders encountered and the solutions Greber taught them:

Behind the vertical: There were several young horses in the clinic, and this was a common issue for them, at times. Greber explained that good connection means that the horse understands the meaning of the bit/ reins, rider's hands, seat and legs. As the horse's training progresses he learns to reach for the bit, and to search for contact with the rider's hands through the reins. To the rider, this contact feels as if the horse lightly pulls on his/her ring fingers. This contact allows the rider to connect the horse's topline from hind to front. This is encouraged by the rider's driving aids. The goal is to get the horse to step forward to the bit and into the contact.

When a horse loses connection by going behind the vertical, you can reconnect by repositioning his head and neck by bringing your hands forward and upward supported by your driving aids. This shows the horse a better way to use his body. Once he is correct, drop your hands to their normal position and let the horse's neck lengthen slightly. The goal is a consistent, but not restricting, contact.

Choosing the right bit: One young mare was not responding well to a double-jointed snaffle. Greber said that when choosing a bit you must consider both fit and type. The size, shape and thickness of a bit will influence the horse's acceptance of it. The pressure on the horse's tongue is different in a single- versus a double-jointed snaffle. Some young horses respond well to a single-jointed bit. It is important for the rider to spend some time to find the best possible match for his horse. Don't be afraid to try different bits. Your horse will tell you which one is right.

The type of noseband used can also have a profound effect on how your horse deals with his bit. The noseband is there to help the horse respond correctly to the bit and to help protect his mouth. A noseband limits the space between the upper and lower jaws, and this helps to direct the rein aids through the whole

horse and not just the lower jaw. Without a noseband, he can be inclined to open his mouth and move his lower jaw away from the bit. A properly fitting noseband helps the horse learn to give at the poll and let the rein aids through his whole body. This also helps in an emergency situation.

Improving the rider's feel: Work on position every minute you're in the saddle, said Greber. This will help you memorize the correct feel, which is the quickest way to reproduce the same results consistently. The following is a fun way to learn how to trust your feel.

1. Talk with your instructor and explain that you are looking for immediate feedback as you ride. You want her or she to immediately confirm with a "yes" when you are in the zone and things are correct and with a "no" when you drop out of the ideal zone.

2. Decide what you will expect from your horse, what aids you will use and what movements you will perform. You can ride a dressage test, for example. This planning will help you be clear about what to do and when to do it.

3. When your instructor confirms the plan, begin riding the movements agreed upon. Become aware of how the horse's body feels and how your body feels the moment you hear "yes." For example, what does the correct frame feel like? How does the horse feel when correctly bent? What is the feel of your position, when the horse does a half pass?

The immediate feedback, coupled with your attention to how it all feels, helps you reproduce the desired results more consistently. If you need explanation during this exercise, stop riding, listen and then go back to riding once you are clear.

Flying lead changes, late behind: For a horse that knows the changes, Greber suggested trying the following

technique. Before asking for the change, use the current outside leg to straighten the horse's rib cage with a moderate pressure. This will also make the horse more aware of his outside hind leg. Before aiding the change, release the pressure on your outside leg and then ask for the change. The removal of pressure on the rider's outside leg should cause the horse to feel his outside hind leg free to jump through, which allows it to swing forward easily during the change and become the new inside hind leg.

Slowing a too-fast trot: This was a common problem with some of the younger horses. To remedy this, Greber said to control your posting—be like a metronome, 1-2, 1-2, 1-2. Don't let the horse determine how fast you will post. The horse will match your rhythm, if you keep steady. Also, keep the hips out in front of you as you post. Post tall and slow allowing the hips to move toward your hand to the front of the pommel. This will help create regularity and activity in the trot. Also, ride the up beat when you post to encourage the horse's back to come up.

The difference between bend and flexion: Bend deals with the horse's body shape, Greber explained. Imagine your leg is a fence post that the horse must bend around. Your lower leg is used to create forward energy, while your upper leg is used to help bend the horse. Think of using your inside thigh and knee to help bend the horse to the outside rein.

Flexion deals with the horse's side-to-side head position at the jaw. A horse that is flexed to the inside has his inside eye and portions of his cheek visible to the rider. Flexion is asked for with a rein aid. You can use a slight opening rein with a little lift to ask for flexion, or bend your hand at the wrist toward the horse's wither. Once the horse is schooled to flex correctly, a bend of the wrist should be sufficient. Remember to stay connected with both reins. It is easy to worry about



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Greber with Shannon Pedlar and Dragen (schooling Second Level).

the flexion and lose the contact with the outside rein. Be careful not use the hand in a backward direction when flexing the horse. It can cause him to stiffen his jaw. Don't focus on one rein only. You need to keep a teamwork going between both.

How to ride correct circles: Be prepared before starting the circle, said Greber. Horses should be in front of the leg and slightly flexed. Ride in shoulder-fore, as well. Try counting the strides as you ride your circle. Ride another circle, and see if you get the same number of strides. This will help you know if your circles are fairly uniform in size.

Trotting with more elevation: A talented young stallion at the clinic needed at little help with this. Greber said it more difficult to perform the more elevated trot, so we need to help the horse. At times during training we need to push the horse from his comfort zone, if we want him to progress. Use your body and hand together as a single unit—your seat is the lever and your hand and arms momentarily stay immobile as you sit taller—to help lift him up in front. Imagine you're on a speedboat. Think of how it feels when you accelerate forward. The energy from the propeller pushes the boat forward, but it also causes the boat to come up in front. Like the horse, the speedboat's power comes from the rear and pushes forward. You will need to use your legs to create this forward energy. Remember, riding is physics not strength. 🐾