

DRESSAGE



HELPING CHILDREN "TURN ON" TO DRESSAGE

Katharine Lark

Circle after circle, spiral after spiral, young riders often become sour to dressage because of the repetition. They glance longingly at a course of stadium fences. An instructor can explain, quite articulately, to a child that jump courses are ridden *between* the fences and that their dressage, or flat work, will improve their jumping. The child nods, sighs and leg yields back to the track.

The secret to creative dressage work is to avoid boring anyone—horse or rider. There are so many subtle movements, varied figures and challenging steps, that dressage can become just as much fun as jumping. The instructor must have the imagination and drive to make it so.

As a teacher simply feeling or watching a horse flex, step further underneath himself or softly chew the bit will be satisfying in itself. Most youngsters do not have the concentration to recognize these progressive, submissive acts by a horse. They need help learning to *feel* so that they are aware of results and can gain some satisfaction of their own.

The first step is to be certain the child is mounted on a schooled horse. He must be able to feel a correct response when he asks properly. Without this, he will become frustrated and cease to care. Reinforce every positive movement and remain encouraging; to teach a child requires patience.

The young rider, like the young horse, has a short attention span and frequent rest periods (mental as well as physical) will aid progress.

One key to avoiding boredom and frustration is to concentrate on one, perhaps two, things at a time. When working to secure the lower leg, don't constantly point out every other body fault the child is experiencing, this floods the child with so much information he cannot concentrate on the work at hand. Tell him only the facts he needs to solve the problem of the moment and inform him when something is correct.

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(Belcastro Photo)

Jennifer Gilbert works Prince in a 24' x 24' box. The box, at this measurement, can be ridden at the walk or the trot and encourages the horse to bend.

lesson after warming up. (For the child who is timid over fences, work on the flat first to build confidence). The child will be in a good mood for dressage rather than just "agonizing" through it for the chance to jump.

Have a lesson plan and explain it before starting. If the goal is to get a decent shoulder-in on both reins at the trot, do exercises to prepare, work on the movement, and when the child has done well, stop. Be fair and honest. Never decide that since the shoulder-in went well the child should try haunches-in. And never do "just one more" after a good job. That is a sure way to create a problem that must be solved immediately.

Remember that dressage is progressive and stick to the lesson plan. If things come together splendidly in a short time, have the student take the horse out for a hack or move on to some gymnastic work over fences. Repetition is necessary for perfecting movements, but drilling after things have been done correctly is asking for trouble.

Make figures fun. When doing spirals, put four rolled red bandages at equal tances on a 20-meter circle. Then put four green bandages equal distances from each other inside the red circle with room to ride between. Repeat with four blue bandages. This exercise will keep the young student on concentric circles during the spiral, and will help him to spiral in and out gradually as he moves from one color to the next.

To keep the child from leaning in on a circle, have him extend the inside arm out "like an airplane" with both reins properly in the outside hand. This will also encourage seat and leg aids more than hands.

Mirrors or filming the lessons will help. If the rider can see what is happening, he will be more aware.

Canter transitions over a ground pole help the rider's accuracy, preparation and, on a circle, helps insure an inside lead.

Use rolled bandages to mark other fig-

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ures. They are safe, simple and work wonders.

Mark a line in the soil and have the student canter a 20-meter circle that crosses the line. Have him work to place the horse's leading fore on the line each time he goes over it. Then mark a similar line 30 feet from the take off side of a jump (for low fences make it 24 to 26 feet) and explain how the exercise puts the student two strides to the base.

For lengthening and shortening strides, use music to help a student feel the unchanging rhythm.

Never struggle, when things go awry the rider must do less, relax more, breath deeper and laugh a little.