



WORDS TO THE WISE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DRESSAGE LEGEND WALTER ZETTL

BY NANCY HUMPHREY CASE | PHOTOS BY MARK NEIHART PREMIER EQUESTRIAN

To listen to WALTER ZETTL talk about riding is to feel you've been honored with a rare opportunity. The man, who as a 21-year-old in 1950 was the youngest rider ever to receive the German Federation's Gold Riding Medal, has acquired over the decades, a depth of understanding of horses few have come close to. Yet this internationally-revered dressage master is humble enough to teach Training Level riders and generous enough to patiently explain the principles of classical dressage to anyone who sincerely wants to learn them. One senses he is aware of being a link in a fine chain of classical wisdom that must be passed along.

"WALTER ZETTL IS PASSING ALONG to us exercises and values that masters entrusted to him way back when," says Zettl protégé Eddo Hoekstra of Peterborough, Ontario. "And he does everything with respect and love for the horse. It's very hard to find that quality in teachers. It makes Walter stand out from the others. He doesn't just say stuff about love and respect for the horse. He practices it. That makes him a role model."

Born in Czechoslovakia, Zettl moved to Germany at the age of 16 to begin an eight-year stint at a riding school in Ludwigsburg under the direction of Col. Herbert Aust. The German master had a profound influence on Zettl, shaping his character as well as honing him as a rider. The work was demanding, and at one point, the young Zettl was tempted to give up. "One day I thought I was not firm enough with the horse I was riding," Zettl says. "I thought he could do more, and I tried to make him do more. It was a disaster. I told

Aust, 'Maybe this is not for me.' Aust replied, 'Look, we've all been through this—one day happy with our work, the next day discouraged. You're a great jumper and a great dressage rider.' He never lost patience with us."

Zettl earned his professional instructor certification at the minimum age of 25, and after many years of successful teaching, coaching, and competing in Europe, was recruited to Canada in 1981. While serving as Managing Director of International Equestrian Sport Services (I.E.S.S.), a large training facility in Cedar Valley, Ontario, he coached a Young Riders dressage team to three consecutive gold medals at the North American Continental Young Riders Championships. In 1984, he coached Canada's Olympic three-day event team in dressage. While teaching and coaching in Canada, Zettl became aware of the discrepancy in access to good instruction between German riders and their North American counterparts, largely

due to the expansive geography on this side of the Atlantic. Wanting to help, Zettl set out to write a book that would serve as a teacher of dressage for anyone needing it. Titled *Dressage in Harmony*, the detailed instructional book published in 1998 has become a best seller and is now popular in Germany as well Canada and the U.S. Since then, Zettl has published *The Circle of Trust* (2007), *Ask Walter* (2013), and a DVD series titled "A Matter of Trust."

The strongest theme in all these publications is the foundational need for the horse's trust in his rider or trainer. "The horse must respect us, but he must never fear us," Zettl is fond of saying. "When a horse is tense and afraid, he can't do anything correct. If he's afraid of you and your aids, forget the riding. You need to get his trust back."

According to Zettl, when a horse does something the rider did not intend, (or doesn't do something the rider did intend), it's a misunder-



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standing. "In the eight years I was with Col. Aust, riding eight horses a day, he never got angry with a horse and never blamed a horse for anything," Zetl says. "He taught us that if something was wrong, it was because of something we did. Maybe we gave the wrong aids, or gave the right aids in the wrong moment, or gave them too strongly."

"A horse is a very fine instrument, like a violin," he goes on. "A little too much pressure with a finger, and a different tone comes out." In order for riding to be art, Zetl feels the rider must listen more to the horse. "The rider must have a lot of patience to study the reaction of the horse and learn his language," he says. "How can you communicate with anyone if you don't speak his language?"

Zetl emphasizes getting to the root of a mistake, which is often something very basic. "One guy came to me in a clinic and said he was having

difficulty with the pirouette," he says. "I asked him to show me a canter circle, and I saw that the trouble was, his horse had a four-beat canter. I told him, 'Forget the pirouette. You need to fix the canter.'"

Because many problems arise from not getting the basics good enough, Zetl sees "shortcuts" as hindering real progress. Instead, he advocates taking plenty of time to develop the horse gymnastically and to develop the partnership between the horse and rider. He remembers seeing trainers in Germany ruined by time pressures. "In Germany, you have to learn three years under a professional teacher, then take an exam, then you can be a professional rider and earn a good salary," Zetl says. But after awhile, the owner that the rider works for will say, 'We have expensive horses; can't we do a little more with them?' So the rider gets nervous and the horse feels it and gets tense.

It puts pressure on the poor guy. Many good riders get lost that way."

A common mistake Zetl sees in riders is not getting the horse forward enough. "There is no *schwung*," he says, referring to the German concept of the power that is developed by engaging the horse's hindquarters and channeling his energy over his back and withers, up to the poll, down to the mouth, and into the rider's hand. "I always tell my students, 'Open the door and let the horse go through,'" Zetl says. "They shut the door in front and after awhile the horse can't go forward anymore but makes short little steps behind. It's like a person in a dark room. Whenever he walks forward, he bumps into things, so after awhile he just stays in the middle of the room."

In its extreme, this becomes the practice of riding the horse in a short and deep frame, called hyperflexion or rollkur. And this practice particularly

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disturbs Zettl. “It makes the horse helpless, like a machine,” he says. “The horse is almost biting himself in the chest. He throws his forelegs up in the air and the hind leg has to make short steps to balance the poor horse out. He feels trapped and the rider needs spurs to make him go. It's a master-slave relationship, whereas it should be a partnership.”

Besides being cruel to the horse, Zettl sees this practice as counter-productive to the dressage rider's goal—brilliance of movement. “Brilliance is in natural movement,” he says, “like a stallion showing off.” He cites the success of the British and German dressage teams at the London Olympics. “They don't just ride dressage,” he says. “They ride cross-country and over jumps. They let the horse show his beautiful natural gaits. And they did a great job in the Olympics. Their horses were nicely in front of the leg.”

Walter Zettl is still teaching and giving clinics. For more information, please visit walterzettl.net.

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