

photos courtesy of Walter Zettl



Legendary Dressage Master

Walter Zettl

Finds Harmony with Parelli Principles

by Cynthia McFarland

A lifetime of riding and teaching has literally taken dressage legend Walter Zettl around the world. Born in Czechoslovakia in 1929, he began his riding career in Germany at age 14. Just two years later, he was already riding at the professional level.

A dedicated student of horsemanship and equine education, Zettl gives much credit to his mentor and instructor, Colonel Herbert W. Aust, with whom he began riding at the age of 16. "I rode with Colonel Aust for eight years," recalls Zettl, "and every day with him was a lesson."

Under Colonel Aust's guidance, Zettl was awarded the German Federation Gold Riding Medal, which recognizes success at the upper levels of dressage and jumping in a single competitive season. At the age of 21, he was the youngest rider ever to receive this prestigious honor.

In 1952, Zettl was selected to ride on Germany's dressage team for the Olympics, but wasn't able to participate given his professional riding status. A year later, he became a professional instructor, and in 1955, at age 26, he became an assistant to his mentor, Colonel Aust. Together, they had the distinction of coaching three young riders who won the same Gold Riding Medal Zettl had earned just a few years earlier. Such a momentous accomplishment had never happened previously and has never happened again, he notes.

Zettl continued to compete successfully at the international level in Grand Prix jumping and dressage. For nearly 30 years,

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he was a chief trainer in Germany, coaching riders of all ages to championship victories in jumping and dressage. Then in 1982, Zettl was recruited to move to Canada, where he became the Managing Director of the Canadian International Equestrian Sports Service. He coached the Canadian 3-Day Event Team for the 1984 Summer Olympics, and has coached the Young Riders Dressage Team from Ontario to multiple medal wins in the North American Continental Young Riders Championships.

Zettl lives in St. Catherine, Ontario, but routinely travels around North America giving weekend clinics, which teach riders the art of dressage and how to communicate with the horse. He believes dressage should be the foundation for of all types of riding, and has written numerous articles for both German and American publications, as well as the

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book, *Dressage in Harmony*. His most recent release is the video/DVD instructional series, "A Matter of Trust."

In 2004, Zettl met Linda and Pat Parelli for the first time when they attended a United States Dressage Federation clinic he was giving. The following year, Pat and Linda rode in a clinic in Texas given by Zettl and reining whiz Craig Johnson. A friendship developed as Zettl and the Parellis realized how much they had in common with their love of horses. Pat and Linda invited Zettl to their Florida center to give them private lessons, and their professional relationship and friendship continues to grow as they plan more training and learning sessions together.

We caught up with dressage master and natural horseman, Walter Zettl, now 77 years of age, to discover more about his views on today's dressage world, on putting the horse first, and what it takes to communicate with the phenomenal animals that are the focus of his life's work.

WHAT WAS THE GREATEST LESSON YOU LEARNED FROM YOUR EARLY INSTRUCTOR AND MENTOR COLONEL AUST?

"I was riding all types of horses then, from young horses to experienced horses. Colonel Aust was a role model for me. He was the kindest teacher and rider. He never lost his patience with a horse. Even if he lost his patience with a person, he was always nice to the horse. From him I learned that the well-being of the horse is the most important thing. He taught me that, 'Where force starts, the art stops.'"

YOU WERE A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL COMPETITOR YOURSELF FOR MANY YEARS. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHANGES YOU HAVE SEEN OVER THE PAST DECADES IN THE WORLD OF DRESSAGE?

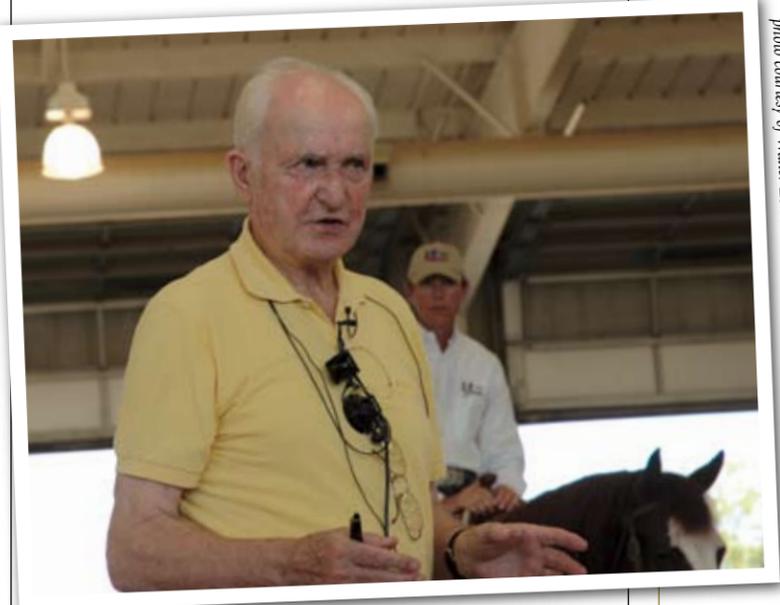
"I see now that dressage riders are having too strong of aids and riding their horses too much behind the vertical.

They are over bending their horses and the horses are being forced. This started changing in the last 10 to 15 years. When you use strong correction, strong aids and over bend the horse, he gets very frightened and starts resisting. As soon as the horse gets frightened, he will make more mistakes.

"We are hand-oriented, so we have to always remind ourselves to be soft and gentle with our hands. The horse's mouth is his most sensitive spot. When we hold a horse tight in the front (end), we shut the door for him from fleeing when something happens. It's no wonder the horse gets frightened because he sees no room to get away. Using force to train a horse is the wrong way and does not have anything to do with the harmony between horse and rider. Force enslaves the horses.

"The way to avoid this is gentleness. I was taught that we should build the partnership between horse and rider based on respect and kindness to the horse. If you teach with kindness and soft aids, every horse can do dressage at some level."

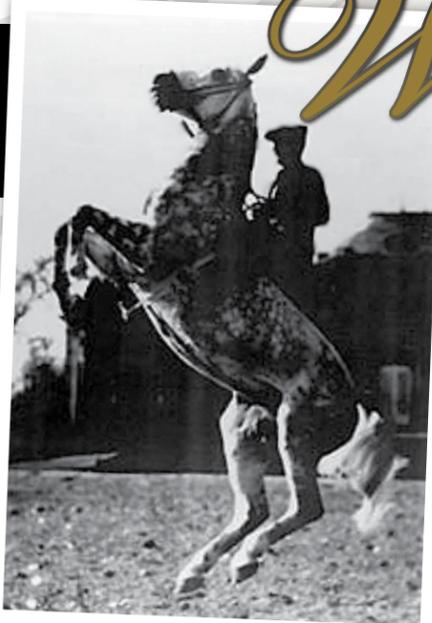
photo courtesy of Walter Zettl



YOU'VE NOTED THAT TOO MANY RIDERS TODAY ARE LOOKING FOR "QUICK SUCCESS" WITH THEIR HORSES. WHAT DO YOU THINK IS WRONG WITH THIS TREND?

"We are very demanding of our horses. Now it often seems that the horse is only a slave and the rider is the master. I see too much force used in training and a desire for quick success. I would like to warn those who would sacrifice the horse in trying to achieve quick success not to

photo courtesy of Walter Zettl



be blinded by the success of a few who use this method of training. It is a violation of our horses, whose well-being should be our first responsibility.

"I've seen such beautiful horses being made to look ugly and 'tight' because of how they are being ridden. It comes from trying to get quick success. I'm a little bit scared when I go to shows and see this fighting between horse and rider in the warm-up ring."

HOW DO YOU THINK RIDERS SHOULD BE DEVELOPING THEIR HORSES?

"We have to find out how to make our aids more easily understood by the horse, and we have to know what aids to use so the horse understands. When the horse does something wrong, you have to ask yourself, 'What did I do to cause this?'"

"We have to use the right aids, and give them in the right moment so the horse can understand. We also have to change our response in relation to the horse and what he's doing at that moment according to what the situation needs. Most of the time when something goes wrong, we don't look at ourselves, we look at those around us."

"We have to go to the limit of what the horse and rider

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know, but never over the limit because this will frighten the horse. Every time the horse gets tense or tight in an exercise, I have to do something different to make it easy for him, and then start again so he doesn't get frustrated and frightened.

"If you have a kindergarten-age child, you can't expect him to do the things he will do in first or second grade. He'll lose trust and become afraid. We have to train and build from the simple, basic exercises which lead up to more difficult ones. When the horse can do the most difficult thing without realizing it's difficult, then we know we've prepared him properly."

"My jumpers were never worked fast, but in competition they often had the fastest times because I could turn them without fighting. I just had to think it and the horse goes to the spot where I want him."

YOU OFTEN SAY THAT WE SHOULD "LET HORSES BE HORSES." WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THIS?

"We keep these beautiful animals in unnatural ways. Most horses are kept in stall or paddock like a prisoner. We have to be kind to them and let them 'be a horse.' Every horse needs time every day to get loose and have freedom and play."

"As soon as we put a saddle and rider on the horse, the horse gets out of rhythm and balance. Most riders put a horse in a frame right away to control his temperament."

We are making horses into dressage or jumping machines. Too many riders don't trust themselves or the horse to just let them be a horse."

WHAT IS YOUR CLINIC SCHEDULE?

"I travel all over North America giving weekend clinics; in 2005 alone, I gave 42 clinics. I focus on training both the rider and the horse, and both dressage and Western riders attend."

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST IMPRESSION UPON MEETING PAT AND LINDA?

"We met at a USDF clinic I was giving and I hadn't known them before this time. They said to me, 'If this is dressage, then this is dressage we like.' They said it could be used in Western training too, because it was about harmony, softness and kindness."

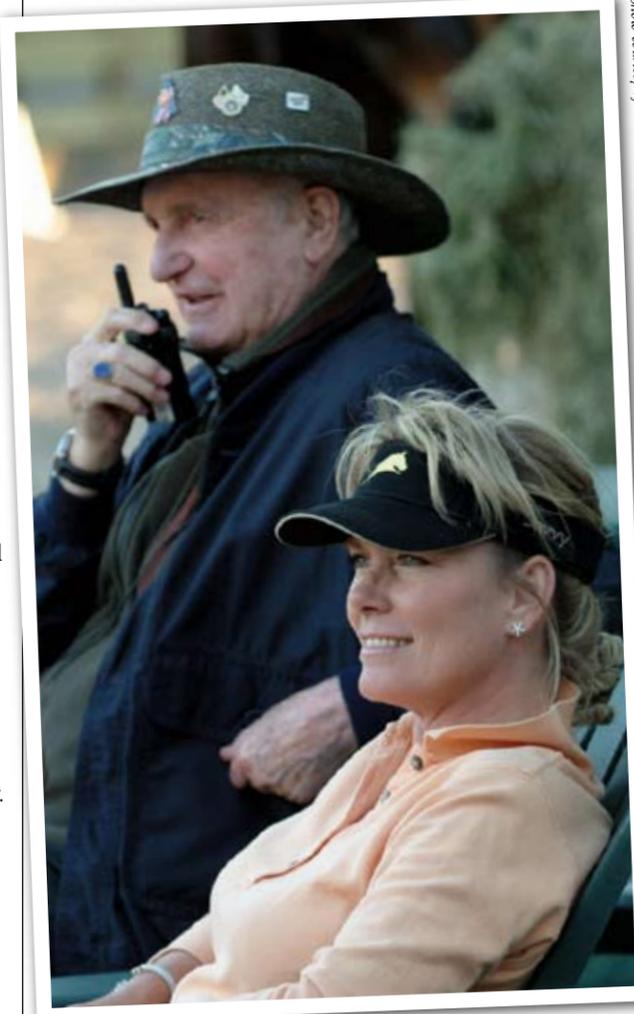


photo courtesy of Coco

"We had such a great time and we saw we had a lot in common and could learn from each other. I always try to learn from my students. I was so impressed with them as riders. The more they learned, the more they wanted to learn, and that's what impressed me. I also saw that they had respect for the horse and put the horse first."

TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE AT THE PAT PARELLI CENTER IN FLORIDA WHEN YOU TRAVELED THERE TO WORK WITH PAT AND LINDA EARLIER THIS YEAR.

"Pat and Linda booked me to come and give private lessons with them and with Caton. My first impression upon arriving at the ranch was what a deep love, understanding and respect Pat and Linda have for their horses. This same deep love and admiration for the horse was apparent in all their instructors and students as well."

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"I was so touched by the young gentleman Caton, who has overcome his handicaps and progressed further than anyone could have imagined. What a remarkable, sensitive horseman he has become! It was an honor to have him as a student. When I saw him give his father a hug and a kiss, I was so touched. What love between those two! It made my tears come."

"Working with Pat and Linda was a very special treat. They were able to execute my instructions with precision and accuracy. One could see the willingness of the horse to perform relaxed and effortlessly to the best of his ability. There was a true partnership between Pat and Linda's horses with them. This was demonstrated not only in their rides but also with the groundwork that they are famous for. To them this is play, not work."

"Their Parelli instructors were there watching these lessons, and all of these people saw Pat and Linda learning. They could really see that everything could be done in a soft manner and the horses were doing brilliant things. Pat and Linda are the smartest students; they have such knowledge, feeling and balance. Every correction came instantly."

WHAT FUTURE PLANS DO YOU HAVE WITH PAT AND LINDA?

"My wife, Heide, and I are going to Colorado this summer. I like to learn from Pat, and he likes to learn from me. We have the same thinking: the well-being of the horse and helping the rider understand that we have to think like a horse."

"I am so happy and thankful to have the opportunity to work with Linda and Pat Parelli. They share the same philosophy, ideals and love toward the horse as I do. It's a wonderful feeling to have a group of people unite and share a common belief system, one of love, respect and admiration of the horse."

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO TELL THE DRESSAGE WORLD ABOUT NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP?

"First of all, we need to know the mind of the horse and why he reacts in the way he does. Riders need to learn much more

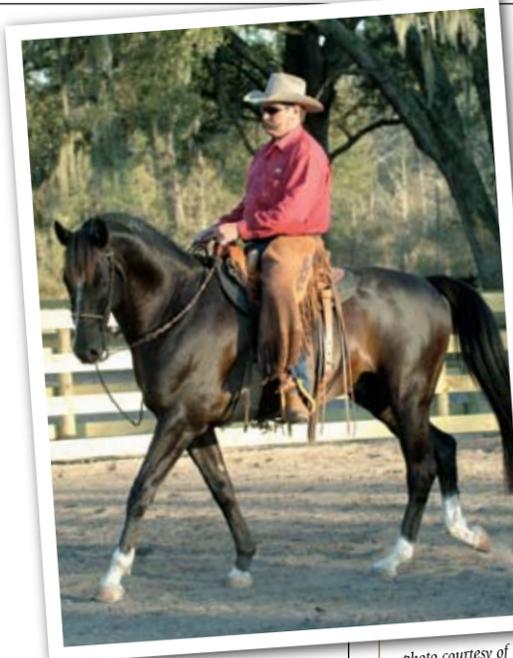
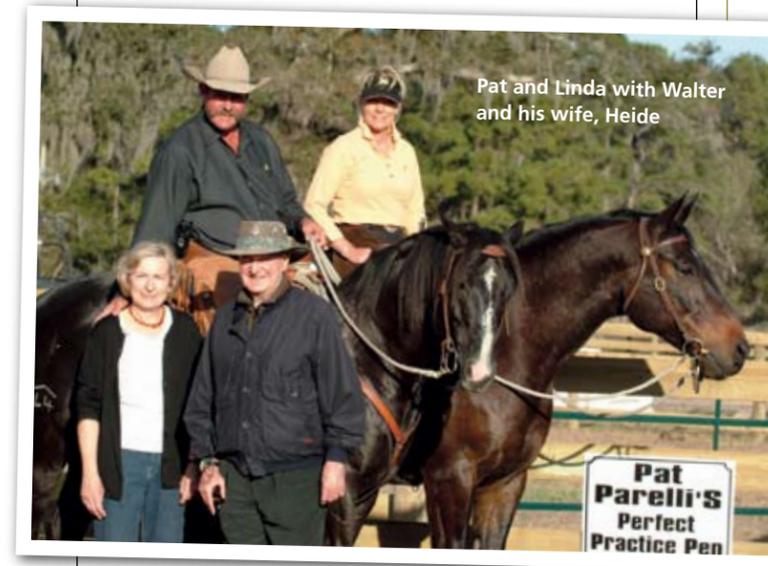


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about their horses. Many times they buy very expensive horses and get on them and get very successful. Then the horse starts to resist and gets depressed, and they just sell him and get another horse. They don't work enough on the important foundations."

"That's what the Parellis are doing: teaching people first about the horse, about how the horse thinks and why he acts the way he does. This really should be for all of us, no matter what discipline we participate in. One should play with their horse!"

"The most important message is that we don't lose respect and love for our horses. Our training should not cause undo stress and anxiety, but rather be fun and playful up to the highest level. Our horse should be eager to see us, enthusiastic about the progression, comfortable and relaxed along the way. It should be a partnership that is as fun for the horse as it is for the rider." 🐾



Pat and Linda with Walter and his wife, Heide

photo courtesy of Coco