

Rider's Seat and Correct Basics Stressed By U.S. Olympian Lisa Wilcox at Clinic

By Cynthia Johnson

Olympian Lisa Wilcox came to Providence Farm in Palmyra, Nebraska, for an early October clinic and brought with her a simple message: "I teach the seat. If I get the rider's seat correct, the horse will be beautiful."

She then spent the weekend with nine horse-rider pairs, working primarily on three central aspects of effective riding: 1) use of the legs, 2) use of the weight, and 3) use of the reins.

Use of the legs

The rider's thighs must be "open" and loose, not gripping, Wilcox said repeatedly. And if the horse does not respond to a light leg aid, she asks the rider to take her thigh and calf off the horse for a moment and "box" the horse with a flat calf.

Wilcox said she uses the verb "box" for lack of a better word. It is essentially an audible "thump" or "smack" with one or both legs, repeated as often as necessary to effect a result.

In using the aid, you must "turn your toes in" and box him with the inside (not the back) of your calf," she explained. The leg position she describes is obtained by rotating the whole leg inward from the hip joint. "You've got to turn your toes in and learn what a flat calf is." The spur is *not* used in conjunction with the aid.

The "boxing" technique can be used unilaterally, as well as with both legs at once. The inside leg causes the horse to bend in the ribcage; the outside leg drives the horse forward.

If the rider uses this approach when the horse has become unresponsive, he learns to be more sensitive to the leg, Wilcox said.

Use of the weight

Using an analogy in which she described the stirrups as similar to a board resting on a moveable object that acts as a fulcrum, Wilcox said the rider should have approximately 2/3 of her weight on the inside stirrup (and seat-bone), and 1/3 on the outside when riding on a circle. In the board/fulcrum analogy, a person standing on the board who places more weight on one side will push the fulcrum away from the weighted side. Substitute the horse for the fulcrum and you can visualize the effect of the weight aid in causing the horse to yield and bend in the ribcage. (It is important that the rider not exaggerate this aid by leaning the upper body to the inside or collapsing a hip.)

Use of the reins

Finally, Wilcox emphasized the overriding importance of staying off the inside rein when turning or bending the horse. "At the very least, the rider must have a 50-50 contact on



Clinic organizer, Jami Kment and her 16-year-old Holsteiner gelding, Contingent Fee, listen to an explanation by Lisa Wilcox (above). Heidi Basler on her 14-year-old Danish Warmblood mare, Mon Cheri (below).



Photos by Ly-Lee Funk
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the inside and outside reins," she said, adding that the goal is to have more contact on the outside rein than on the inside.

"Your inside rein cannot make the bend. Cannot," Wilcox said. "That's not what it's there for."

To the delight of riders and about 30 auditors gathered for the clinic, Wilcox rode most of the horses, demonstrating the effectiveness of the methodology she uses.

She did not spend a great deal of time working on specific movements. Rather, she emphasized correct basics, saying at one point, "I'm not going to have you do a canter pirouette if you don't have a connection."

Advising many of the riders to switch to gentler snaffle bits—even those riding in double bridles—she eschewed the use of gimmicks and focused on patience and correctness. "It will take weeks and weeks" of riding correct trot circles, alternating between slight counter flexion and true flexion, "to soften this horse," she told one rider. "This is your bread and butter—not a stronger bit."

At the rider's dinner Saturday evening, Wilcox was warm and forthcoming in answering questions and describing the course that took her from the United States (she grew up on a cattle ranch in Colorado) to Germany, where she spent 12 years as a barn manager, trainer, and a student.

She described the often grueling work that ultimately paid off in international success: an individual Silver Medal in the European Championships, a U.S. team Bronze Medal in the 2004 Olympics, a U.S. team Silver Medal in the 2002 World Equestrian Games in Jerez, Spain, and "top-ten" placings—a first for a non-European—in the FEI/BCM Dressage Rider Rankings.



Lisa Wilcox aboard Cadeaux, an eight-year-old Holsteiner gelding.