

DR. GERHARD HEUSCHMANN CLINIC – A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In November, 2009, Jennifer Conour hosted a clinic by Gerhard Heuschmann, DVM, at her farm in Sheridan, Indiana.

DR. GERHARD HEUSCHMANN trained as a Bereiter (master rider) in Germany before qualifying for veterinary study at Munich University. There he specialized in equine orthopedics for two years before accepting a post as the head of the breeding department at the German Equestrian Federation, which he eventually left to start his own practice in Warendorf. He has been an active member of the “hyperflexion” (previously referred to as Rollkur) debate, weighing in at the 2005 USDF National Symposium and the 2006 FEI Veterinary and Dressage Committees’ Workshop. His arguments have been featured in many magazines, including Dressage Today and Horse and Hound. Along with Klaus Balkenhol and other prominent figures in the dressage community, Dr. Heuschmann is a founding member of “[Xenophon](#),” an organization dedicated to “fighting hard against serious mistakes in equestrian sport”. [From “Tug of War...”.]

FROM DR. HEUSCHMANN’S WEBSITE,
“Understanding the theory of riding is an essential basic so you can choose the right methods during practice. A rider will need to continue to search for the best methods throughout their whole riding career because of the dimension and complexity of this subject. Therefore, we will never reach the point where we can say: ‘Now I know everything.’

On my search looking for the truth I have met many people that share my experiences, opinions and ambitions, and I’ve met some that have completely different ideas. I would like to advise every horseman never to judge different philosophies before having tried them because we can learn a lot from each other. On the other hand: Never accept training methods, which are based on constraint and subordination of the horse by force!”

Quite surprisingly, as I watched throughout the first day, Dr. Heuschmann, rode every single horse presented. His ride was not to teach the horses ‘tricks’, but to evaluate the horses, determine their suppleness and then he worked each horse towards that goal, getting them supple. Most of his time spent in the saddle was at a walk, focusing on asking the horse to do a shoulder in or a turn on the forehand or to back up. And those movements were performed s-l-o-w-l-y, to encourage the horse to stretch the muscles used and to open the hip joints, before he ever asked the horse to trot. Once the horse was at a trot, Dr. Heuschmann rode in a half-seat or two-point position, never sitting until he felt the horse was supple enough to support his sitting. Constantly, he was asking the horse to stretch their neck, back, and hip

muscles and open their hip joints and shoulders. All keys to creating a supple and relaxed horse.

He also taught every rider to resist the ‘pull’, to resist the temptation to get into a tug-of-war to force our horse on the bit. We learned a new way to ask our horses to stretch up and forward with their necks and eventually to come onto the bit.

I was privileged to be able to ride my horse Rhapsody during the Thursday clinic with Dr. Heuschmann. For the first few minutes of my lesson, he quietly watched as I started to warm up Rhapsody by walking and trotting. Then we were called over to introduce ourselves, tell a little of my past in riding as well as Rhapsody’s level of training. He told the auditors his ‘first’ impression of Rhapsody, “Long of back, but pure of gaits.” For those who don’t know us, I am an adult amateur rider and Rhapsody is my ten year old, home-bred, Oldenburg mare. We are planning to show at First level and are training for Second.



Dr. Heuschmann on Rhapsody

After Dr. Heuschmann rode Rhapsody for approximately twenty-five minutes, I was asked to get back in the saddle. He had me walk Rhapsody in a shoulder in, but then nailed me, telling me to, “Relax your seat! If your seat is not relaxed your horse cannot be relaxed.” Once we successfully performed the shoulder in, with my seat relaxed, he had me ask Rhapsody to back, which we had not done a whole lot of at that time. Finally I was allowed to trot. It was difficult to keep holding the reins up and forward, as instructed in the method that he asked all of the riders to practice. It felt funny to hold the reins opposite from how we have been taught from the first time we ever sat in the saddle, but the technique works. I kept at it, holding my reins in the new style and focusing on relaxing my set, and in time, Dr. Heuschmann stated, “This horse really loves her rider. She’s doing better for her rider than she did for me.”



Deanne Bertram on Rhapsody

Towards the end of our ride, I was finally able to focus on 'feeling' Rhapsody's movements and the sensation I felt was amazing, I had a horse who was fluid and soft in the back and reaching to the bit. I had a back mover and not a leg mover!

On Friday morning, Dr. Gerd Heuschman presented his lecture series at Janssen's Veterinary Clinic. He explained and showed, to those present, the muscle / skeletal structure of horses and how certain ways of demanding a horse carry themselves (hyper-flexion or using draw reins) can be detrimental to their well being. Dr. Heuschmann presented case histories of lameness problems in horses received at his veterinary clinic. We all witnessed the lameness in his films. Then we were shown Dr. Heuschmann in the saddle, only moments later on the same horse, and the lameness disappeared. Quite evident how the rider can influence lameness (rein lame) or create tension in their horse. We came to understand how a horse, tense in the back, can never have pure gaits. Dr. Heuschmann presented to us pictures of 'back movers' versus 'leg movers' using examples from those at the top of our sport. The proof was in the pictures, lines drawn showing the angle of the front leg as compared to the angle of the hind leg.

A lively discussion ensued regarding how this could happen. How are the 'judges', any judge, being fair in rewarding top scores for 'flashy' leg movers versus rewarding those for "correct" back movers?

Friday, late afternoon, we returned to Jennifer's farm, for the "Painted Horse" portion of Dr. Heuschmann's lecture. Three horses (Rumor, Sullivan, and Laramie) were painted to show their neck / shoulder muscles and skeletal bones, Rumor even had his hip joint illustrated.



Dr. Heuschmann lunging Rumor (Jennifer Conour's horse)

Dr. Heuschmann demonstrated how he prefers to see horses lunged and explained why. The horse is lunged using a lunging cavesson, lunge line, and lunge whip. No surcingle, no side reins, no bridle or bit. Dr. Heuschmann started out just trotting each horse around him for maybe five minutes, then, each horse was asked to canter or even gallop for three to five minutes. Then they were brought back to a trot. The horse is asked to flex in and eventually they learn to stretch down. Each horse was worked for one hour, changing directions every 10 minutes or so. Over the course of the next three and a half hours, we watched as each horse learned to stretch forward and down. Each horse reacted differently as they experimented with obtaining their own balance and using their body freely.

Dr. Heuschmann recommended that we alternate our new style of lunging with working the horses under saddle. (In January, when the temperatures were too cold for this mere human being to want to get in the saddle and ride, I was still able to exercise my horse by lunging, Heuschmann style.)

Saturday and Sunday of the Heuschmann clinic, for those lucky enough to ride more than one day, the horses were back under saddle. Those of us not lucky enough to ride, audited. By the final ride on Sunday, we saw each and every horse had changed their way of moving from the first day to the last day. Each horse was more fluid and relaxed in their way of moving.

To his credit, throughout the clinic, each horse and rider was given the time they needed to succeed. Regardless of whether the horse was a three year old or working Grand Prix, each horse was treated as an individual. Dr. Heuschmann graciously worked with nervous adult amateur riders and professionals, giving each rider the same attentiveness and respect. Each rider left the clinic with exercises to help them progress, in the training of their horse.

The time on the clock didn't matter, whether it was during the clinic or the lecture. The lecture was originally scheduled from 9 am to noon with the painted horse demonstration scheduled from 2 pm to 5 pm. The lecture actually lasted from 9 am to 3 pm with no real break, as the discussion was so lively. The painted horse demonstration began at 4 pm and lasted until 7:30 pm. But prior to being able to start the demonstration, the horses had to be painted.



Dr. Heuschmann painting Rumor (Jennifer Conour's horse)

As we continue to lunge our horses, many of them are starting to look like Runway Models demonstrated by the swing and sway of their backs, indicating a supple and relaxed horse.



Dr. Heuschmann on Laramie (Ken Levy's horse)

Ken Levy, who participated as a rider for the entire clinic, analyzed Dr. Heuschmann's method of lunging. After four months of diligent work with his own horses and those of his students, he has seen dramatic changes in the horses' musculature. As a result Ken has come to some rather interesting conclusions:

- Most riders do not work their horses long enough at trot during a training session to really challenge the muscles and cause remodeling to occur
- Most riders, when they ride, artificially create the frame that they want (by pulling) and do not facilitate the proper muscle development

- Having the saddle on the horse, especially saddles that have fitting problems, creates pressure on the horses' muscles. The pressure created prevents the muscles from enlarging as blood flow increases. This restriction limits the muscles ability to develop and grow over time. In fact, muscles will atrophy because of undue pressure being applied (this is commonly seen by the "pockets" on both sides of the horse's withers.
- Muscles that are restricted from proper blood-flow during exercise also build up lactic acid. This lactic acid build can lead to muscle damage or at least muscle soreness one to two days after work.
- Lunging the horse for 30 to 45 minutes with only limited walk breaks builds endurance and promotes proper muscle development. Even after 45 minutes of work it is amazing how most horses do not significantly increase their rate of respiration.
- Once the horse "learns" to stretch down and forward at the trot and canter, they begin to develop correct "top line" musculature. As the neck gets stronger on the top side it begins to help lift the back, tighten the abdominal muscles (key to a strong back) and facilitates proper articulation of the hind quarter joints.
- By following the lunging routine over time, the rider will truly feel an improvement in their horse. Be aware, however, if you stick to Dr. Heuschmann's training recommendations you will see a physical change in your horse and don't be surprised if you need to have your saddle adjusted so that it fits properly.

We continue to work Rhapsody using lessons learned from Dr. Heuschmann. It's been just over four months since the clinic and I am pleased to see the improved muscle development in Rhapsody's neck, shoulders, back, loin, and haunches. We're no longer fighting each other; we have truly come together as a team. Through our new training routine, I know how to get Rhaps in front of my leg, without resorting to spurs.

I eagerly await Dr. Gerd Heuschmann's return to Jennifer Conour's farm, August 19 – 22, 2010.

For more information or to make reservations to attend this upcoming clinic, please contact Jennifer Conour at: Jennifer@indy.rr.com

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| Cost per ride: | \$365 |
| Audit fee (daily): | \$50 |
| Audit 3 riding days: | \$100 |
| Audit lecture: | \$50 |

Auditing limited to 100 participants.

(Photos taken at Gerd Heuschmann clinic are courtesy of Ken Levy.)