

The Pony Club Post

Special Edition



The Secret of Good Riding Christoph Hess offers wisdom for all riders

"What can we do better?"

It's a question we should ask ourselves again and again when we are riding, according to Christoph Hess. The FEI "I" Judge, both in Dressage and Eventing, and German National Federation Professional Riding Instructor, lead a two-day Symposium May 9 and 10 at the Ancaster Fairgrounds. Hosted by Topline Events, 23 riders from grassroots to Grand Prix had the opportunity to learn from the internationally renowned instructor, while hundreds of enthusiastic auditors took in his words of wisdom.

For Hess, there is no substitute for a thorough understanding and application of basic riding skills, and there is always room for riders to examine their own riding, and find ways to make training more "horse friendly," at every level.



Photo by: Mane Media

Over a number of sessions, Hess was adamant about rider's positions and their application of aids. He was particularly interested in riders using their hands less, and their bodies more.

"Ride with your body language, not with your reins," he said.

That is, because the reins have a much more important job.

"The hands listen to the mouth," he said. "That's the secret of good riding."

To help highlight the purpose of rider's hands, Hess asked many riders to put their reins in their outside hand, and steer around the 20x60. Some were asked to do transitions, and encourage a good shape in their horse through the corners with their inside leg.

"We humans are hand orientated," he said. "When we have a problem we use our hands."

Working away from this reaction, though, is critical for riders to improve not only their riding, but to improve the welfare of their horse.

"Bad riding is cruel for the horse," he said. "When you're a bad golf player, no problem. You don't hurt anyone. When you do bad riding, it's cruel for the horse."

Hess said the exercise of riding with the reins in one hand is tremendous in helping a rider stabilize their position without their hands, and also allows the horse more freedom to move through his body. He encouraged riders to use a looser contact when possible, too.

"Long rein is my piece of sugar," he said.



Photo by: Mane Media

Another exercise Hess likes to use for riders of all levels is a very simple one. From a halt, Hess challenges riders to put their leg on, without raising their heel or using the spur, to produce a straight transition to walk, without the hands influencing the position or direction of the horse.

“There has to be a reaction,” said. Without a consent, relaxed response, it is impossible to have the horse “ahead of the driving aids” at the other gaits. And without a horse ahead of the driving aids, a rider doesn’t have much, Hess said. Driving aids include the seat and leg.

Although not complicated, Hess said taking the time to focus on fundamentals is of incredible value to riders of all levels, and something coaches and trainers need to spend time focusing on with their students. “We have to make the basics exciting,” he said. “When you explain how important it is to do the basics, this to me is the most important part.”

While it may not be as thrilling as running fast and jumping high, it is certainly what sets good riding apart from the rest.

“If you are not the pilot in the saddle, you are the passenger,” he said.



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