

Lesson with Grand Prix rider Michelle Reilly and Umeko illuminates common ground between jumping and dressage.

by Sydney Callaway

I have spent the past 11 years in an english saddle. I took a few western horsemanship lessons as a young child, and even some beginner vaulting classes, but the majority of my horse education has been through the classic hunt seat training.



At 10, I had my first encounter watching high-level dressage at the Del Mar National Horse Show. I was amazed by the elasticity of the horses, how their strides seemed to swallow the arena and captivated the audience. My interest in dressage only grew from there. When I purchased my first jumper, NZ Socialite, I truly began to understand the importance and applicability of dressage for show jumping.

Many of the top show jumpers can attest to the importance of flatwork. It is where everyone begins as a rider, as flatwork includes everything from passages and half passes to walk circles and the posting trot. All horses and riders begin their education with some form of flat training, or dressage. And whatever discipline you may participate in, dressage has roots within all equestrian sports.

My reasoning behind this claim comes from the objectives of dressage: to create harmony through horse and rider via suppleness, balance and rideability, while teaching the importance of patience and a partnership. This should be the goal of any horseman, to improve the quality of movement within your horse as he simultaneously trusts and allows you to guide him. Over time, repeated rides with these qualities create a partnership between you and your horse, which will only lead to more success in the arena and fulfillment in your rides together.

Patience is the most important lesson dressage teaches. Dressage can be paralleled to the art of ballet. It appears effortless and elegant but requires many years of dedication and precision for even the most basic movements. For both horse and rider, dressage is a challenging endeavor but I cannot stress enough its importance.

In my own riding I have always placed much more importance on the execution and training of proper flatwork over jumping. After all, show jumping is really just flatwork with a few obstacles in the way. As my knowledge of this sport has grown, I have become more and more curious about dressage. I saw such great results from working with my own horse's flexibility, balance and responsiveness to the aids, yet I still yearned to expand my knowledge. I wished to add more tools to my toolbox, so to speak.

Going Further

With this goal in mind, I began searching for someone who could give me a dressage lesson and allow me to test the waters. I was connected to Grand Prix rider Michelle Reilly and we organized a lesson time. At the time, my horse had just finished a long week of showing, so Michelle allowed me the wonderful opportunity of riding her own horse, Umeekeo.

When I arrived at Dove Hollow Dressage Center in San Diego County's Encinitas, where Michelle trains, I was filled with excitement and a twinge of apprehension, as I did not know what to expect from a horse that was solely trained for dressage. And when I learned that Umeekeo was Michelle's top Grand Prix mount, my stomach churned just slightly!

However these fears were soon quelled as we began our lesson at the walk. Umeekeo's cute little gray face held an uncanny resemblance to my own jumper, VDL Viper H. In fact, I found it hard not to comment on their similarities on several occasions throughout the lesson. But we quickly got to work on my beginner dressage lesson and my attention was taken up attempting to properly execute the beginning elements of dressage.



The first challenge for me was the seat and stirrup length that dressage riders use. I raised the stirrups considerably in order to feel more comfortable and consistently had to remind myself to stay supple in my body while simultaneously using my seat as a direct aid in all the gaits.

I found the use of the seat in dressage to make an amazing impact in application. I spent much of my junior year being coerced into the half seat, as I was naturally inclined to sink into the saddle while riding a jumping course. However, even the deep seat I am accustomed to in show jumping is nothing compared to the depth of the dressage seat.

The muscles used to keep me in the dressage saddle involved much more hamstring contraction and a stable, yet supple, lower back. It was an awkward position at first, but as the lesson progressed and I began to relax into this new seat, I felt the subsequent relaxation of Umeeko.

Umeeko was an obvious professional and highly sensitive to any movement that I made. Because of this, I initially struggled to control the length of his trot step while simultaneously using enough leg to engage his hind end and keep the weight in my hand. It was a lot to remember, but with Michelle's guidance and wonderful translation of dressage jargon into show jumping jargon, it slowly began to make more and more sense to me.

I was soon able to collect and lengthen with only my seat, using my hands to finesse the details of Umeeko's movement and direction. I saw the extreme importance of responsiveness in dressage and the need for a very willing and trusting horse as well.

To conclude the lesson, Michelle taught me the basics of passage and this was when I truly began to grasp the power that one's seat has over the horse's movement. With Umeekeo's advanced training, he responded immediately to my seat and aids, when used correctly. It was an amazing sensation to feel his powerful movements beneath me, and to know that was a direct correlation to my own movements. It truly felt like dancing with a partner.

Common Ground

Throughout our lesson, Michelle and I spoke about many of the objectives of dressage, as well as the parallels and differences between show jumping and dressage. We touched a lot on the partnership of horse and rider, one of the largest arching themes from show jumping to dressage.

One idea that really resonated with me was the idea of the horse, how there are many different modalities of performing with a horse yet only a few tried and true methods of training a horse. I say this because, despite the many horse disciplines in the world, it always comes down to a man and his horse. And a horse's response to different triggers, threats and rewards holds similar reactions from horse to horse. This is why there are fundamentals in horse training, almost like the general education within a bachelor's degree. And the more you understand your horse and its quirks and talents, the more you can apply that knowledge to your training.

What also stood out to me was the great relationship between Michelle and her horses. Her horsemanship and patience allowed for a wonderful trust between herself and Umeekeo. As he trotted along with a stranger on his back, he turned his eyes towards her for assurance. His supple mouth and fluid movement showed an extreme attention to detail within in his training, I could sense that he approached his work with pleasure and enthusiasm, resulting in a delightful feeling.

Dismounting Umeekeo, I felt a great inspiration to incorporate these lessons into my own riding and to grow the partnership with my animals the way Umeekeo and Michelle have achieved theirs.

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