

World champion & Olympian's Southern California sessions inspire & delight.

by Lehua Custer

This past October, the Southern California Dressage community was lucky enough to have Charlotte Dujardin teach a two-day clinic in the picturesque setting of South Ventura County's Hidden Valley.

Scott Hayes Productions did an excellent job creating this incredible top-notch event at El Campeon Farms in the exclusive Hidden Valley area near Thousand Oaks. Scott and his team truly elevated the standard of clinics in America. Our barn bought a VIP table and we were not disappointed with the high level of service we received.

We arrived at the world class El Campeon Farms and found our seats under a huge tent. We began each day with mimosas and a nice breakfast spread. The tables were so close to the arena that we had to lean back if a horse swung its tail. Scott and his team took care of every detail of the event. There were even fancy portable restrooms! We saw each horse and rider combination only one time, so there were new combinations on Sunday that we hadn't watched on Saturday.

Charlotte began each day with a wonderfully inspiring story of her dressage journey from teaching one of her first horses FEI movements in a field as a young rider to her surreal last ride on Valegro at the 2016 Rio Olympics. Highlights included watching Charlotte ride Amelie Kovac's young horse Saturday and then Rebecca Rigdon's mare on Sunday. It was awe inspiring to see her coaching put into action and watching the horses' potential realized in less than 45 minutes.

Charlotte was clear and blunt, she was to-the-point and didn't accept anything done half way. There was time for questions between lessons and someone asked about show nerves. Charlotte laughed about how she's more scared of Carl than any judges and it's a relief to show.

Scott and Charlotte chose an exciting range of horses from a 4-year-old all the way to Grand Prix. Different types of horses with different strengths and weaknesses. It was very exciting to watch our own Southern California-based riders with very promising horses for the future.

Charlotte stayed consistent with her teaching but it was not a repeat of each lesson. She immediately picked up on what needed work and created a training plan for the lesson. Exercises were familiar but she had perfect timing for each correction and exercise. Every concept was basic and clear cut and it made it relatable to every rider. There were no tricks or shortcuts.

Rideability & Confidence

Charlotte demanded that every rider create a more rideable and confident horse through the lessons.

First, Charlotte focused on reactions to leg. She even asked a few riders to gallop off! Another big focus was contact. Dressage requires a consistent contact and Charlotte even told us one of her biggest secrets - "Short reins win gold medals." It was very clear that contact should never mean curling or leaning against the reins. The horses must be on the vertical and not look cranked in.

She worked with all of the riders to create the energy and reactions from the leg into the contact. Never the other way around. It was thrilling to watch the movement change and develop as she worked with the riders on each horse. It was clear that Charlotte's focus was on correct reactions to the leg to create a "through" horse and not just getting a "toe flick" trot.

Charlotte pointed out that hot horses need to accept leg on and that lazy horses need to accept leg off. This means that a hot horse can't jump out of their skin when they feel an aid and that a lazy horse cannot trick a rider into driving every stride. Charlotte pointed out that horses should listen to the leg aid and riders should not depend on the whip as a main aid. In CDI classes whips aren't permitted so horses should be trained to respond to leg. She didn't let riders carry whips during the sessions. She would allow a whip to be used during specific exercises but she was adamant that horses should not be dependent on whip to work.

Spectators had the pleasure of watching demo riders guide their horses through incredible piaffe and passage work, lofty extended trot and perfectly straight tempi changes but Charlotte truly spent most of each lesson working on the basics. When a horse is reacting properly to the forward aids, consistent in the contact and supple, then the “tricks” are easier. My students were surprised to see that even the very experienced demo riders had riding challenges that were similar to their own.

A big point that Charlotte made during the weekend was that she doesn't punish, instead she tries again. Some of the horses were frightened or overwhelmed at times. Some horses would spook or switch canter leads unexpectedly. Charlotte remained quite patient and helped the horses and riders to work through the tension by repeating an exercise if a horse became tense.

She used leg yields and circles to help supple the horses and regain the focus. She reminded the riders that tension should not be punished. One horse spooked as the rider was exiting the arena and Charlotte hollered at her to come back and leave the arena again after the horse was relaxed. She didn't miss a single thing that happened in the arena all weekend!

One particularly valued exercise was to help teach the flying changes. Charlotte had the riders bring their horses onto a 10-meter figure-eight pattern on the short side of the arena. The first circle will go from the rail to the centerline. At the centerline the rider asks for the flying change and then the rider guides the horse to circle 10 meters the other direction. When the horse reaches centerline again the rider asks for a flying change the other way. The 10-meter circles really help the horse to balance the canter and not take a long step in the flying change stride. It was fun to take that concept and apply it in my training sessions and lessons.

Charlotte was a huge stickler for transitions. She had riders repeat unbalanced transitions over and over. Charlotte would say “That was terrible, again” every time a rider let the horse fall on the forehand in a down transition or brace while jumping into a canter. Some riders had to show 10 canter-to-walk transitions until Charlotte was satisfied. There are no shortcuts or cutting corners in proper training.

Discipline & Correct Schooling

It was incredible for Charlotte to show all of us that the process isn't all about buying the flashiest horse but about how disciplined of a rider and trainer you need to be in order to succeed.

We heard countless times that training can drastically improve a trot and that Charlotte and Carl Hester look for a solid walk and a super canter when searching for a possible FEI horse. The walk should be pure and have clear over stride to be an internationally competitive horse. She warned against too big of a walk because the purity can be a problem when it needs to shorten for collection.

The canter should be uphill and ground covering and she mentioned that the canter is the hardest gait to change. Charlotte showed us through the weekend just how much a trot can change and develop through proper training. We enjoyed watching the younger horses warm-up into loftier trots during the Saturday sessions and it was thrilling to watch Charlotte guide Rebecca's mare into a truly spine-tingling extended trot after working on the reactions to leg and steady contact without tension.

Even though we saw some of the best horses and riders on the West Coast, the concepts were transferable to any level of horse and rider. It was exciting to watch all of my students be able to immediately implement Charlotte's concepts in their schooling sessions at home. Charlotte is the most elite dressage rider in the world but her training principles are straightforward and apply to all levels of dressage rider.

It's clear why Charlotte is the best; she's confident, clear and very kind to the horses. Watching Charlotte transform horses and riders in such a short time span was unforgettable. I learned some great tools for future training but the biggest take-away was that discipline and correct schooling are the keys to success.

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