

Clinic with Olympian Laura Graves is a coup for San Francisco Peninsula CDS chapter and all involved.

by Nan Meek

There's that once in a lifetime horse who takes you beyond your wildest dreams, as the now legendary success of Laura Graves and Verdades (Diddy) demonstrated last year at the Olympics in Rio, where their 80.664% personal best helped secure the US dressage team's bronze medal and their 85.196% freestyle personal best took them to individual fourth. This year at the World Cup Finals in Omaha, their 79.8% in the Grand Prix and new personal best of 85.307% in the Freestyle earned them the silver, second only to perennial dressage powerhouse Isabell Werth.



Then there's that once in a lifetime opportunity, as more than one rider described the experience of riding in the Laura Graves clinic held by the San Francisco Peninsula Chapter of the California Dressage Society at the Horse Park at Woodside on June 10-11.

From juniors on ponies to accomplished trainers on upper level horses, clinic riders had stars in their eyes going into the clinic and nothing but praise for Laura's teaching afterward.

Juniors and Their Dressage Idol

As 13-year-old Lucie Bacon said, "Since I started riding dressage, she has been a very inspiring idol, so to have the chance to learn from her is truly a once in a lifetime opportunity."

Lucie was the 2015 USDF Region 7 Junior/Young Rider Training Level Champion, and in 2016

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placed third in the USEF Dressage Seat Medal Finals 13 and under. Partnered with her 8-year-old German Riding Pony Bonnaroo since January, they successfully competed at First Level, are preparing for Second, and aiming for the FEI Pony Division next year.

Lucie noted, "Going into the clinic, I really wanted to work on creating a more effective warm-up, with the hope of reducing the time it takes to make it effective. Laura helped me understand how to ride a very clear warm-up, and the importance of taking the time to truly address an issue or challenge as soon as it comes up."

Twelve-year-old Miki Yang soaked up the learning opportunities. "The highlight of the weekend was learning to be able to ride with Laura, and watching and learning from many other riders. It was an amazing opportunity to be able to listen to how Laura taught me and others, and how that slightly changed for each rider and horse."

Riding since she was 6, and vaulting since she was 5, Miki now shows her 10-year-old New Forest Pony, Garden's Sam, at Training Level. Her international vaulting experience includes being a member of the 2014 Team USA vaulting squad at Aachen's Equestrian Festival and the World Equestrian Games in Normandy, as well as the 2015 Bronze Medal US team at the FEI Junior World Vaulting Championships in Ermelo, Holland.

Even with that experience, Miki recalled, "On the first day, I was very nervous to be riding in front of so many people. I was not used to that, because at shows there are much less. I soon realized that when I started riding, I forgot that the people were there and focused on my riding.

"Laura helped me with many movements, such as haunches in, shoulder in, single loops, and a half pass. Those were exercises that I did not know very well," Miki said. "Laura really built up my confidence and pushed me to try exercises that were out of my comfort zone. She really helped me understand an easier way of doing something, for example, when doing a half pass, she told me to think about going on centerline onto a diagonal, doing haunches in. That is how I learned my first half pass!"

Professional Perspectives

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Coaching the Stanford Equestrian Team and competing at 4* FEI shows, professional Rachel Williamson knows the highs and lows that can occur at clinics. “Sometimes your worst days are your most educational, and while we may not have been at our best on day one, I learned a lot about what to do when we are not having a great day,” Rachel remarked.

Rachel rode Annette Siegel’s 9-year-old Oldenburg mare, Fleur Rubin, who Rachel has shown at Third Level with scores over 70%, while her owner showed “Ruby” at Third and Fourth. Rachel is aiming for Prix St. Georges this summer, and appreciated Laura’s keen eye for the basics that are essential for moving up the levels.

“Laura reminded us all of the importance of straightness, and improved each horse’s connection. Ruby was extremely tight the first day, because she doesn’t like being in a trailer, and Laura was able to recognize her difficulties and create a situation of success, while working on straightness.”

Northern California professional trainer Kristen Aggers holds USDF Bronze, Silver and Gold rider medals as well as numerous year-end and high point awards, while her 7-year-old mare Donnabella brought home CDS and USDF Horse of the Year ribbons last year.

“I went to the clinic wanting to work on relaxation in Bella’s gaits as well as flying changes. She gets quite tense away from home, so it was a good opportunity to get help in a situation where I knew Bella would have some tension.

“Laura helped me in raising my expectations of Bella and being honest in her reaction to my aids. She is a bit of an anomaly in that she can be tight and hot, but also slow in her reaction to my leg and a little balky in transitions. Laura helped me sharpen everything,” Kristen said of their rides.

“My favorite part of the clinic was watching Laura transform the riders and horses, bringing out the best in all the partnerships. I have so much appreciation for her teaching style. Laura is incredibly articulate and patient; the lessons all had a similar message about rider expectations and being consistent.”

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In 2006, Anja Pflanz moved to the U.S. from Germany, where she had been a participant in the German Olympic Equestrian Committee's developing rider program, and competed up to I-2 and in the Bundeschampionate. She rode Susan McConnell's 11-year-old Oldenburg gelding Digby, with whom she won the USDF Region 7 Open Third Level Championship in 2015, and currently competes at Prix St. Georges.

"I came into the clinic wanting to work on positive engagement," Anja recalled, "which is exactly what Laura worked on with me. We worked some from the ground with her in-hand whip to help activate the hind quarters.

We did some half steps and started to develop a passage. The highlight of the clinic for me was to be able to ride with an Olympic rider like Laura with extraordinary talent."

Petaluma's Jaclyn Pepper, whose successful Junior/Young Rider career with Taboo is familiar to many California dressage fans and who is beginning her professional career working under her trainer Allison Mathy, rode her own 7-year-old Hanoverian gelding Cooper QLF.

Tracey Hill, who earned her USDF Bronze, Silver and Gold rider medals on horses that she trained through the levels herself, trains from the East Bay's Wyvern Farm in Martinez. She rode Celina, owned by Vicki Von Arx. Tracey has trained the mare for the last five years and was the 2015 CDS Horse of the Year Prix St. Georges Champion.

SFP Chapter Treasurer and amateur competitor Jennifer Shearer rode her own Arento, a Dutch gelding she imported in 2011 with the help of Shannon Peters. Jennifer successfully showed Rennie through Intermediaire I and is working on the difficult leap to I-2.

It Takes a Chapter

Rachel Williamson expressed the sentiments of riders and auditors alike when she said her highlight was: "Seeing tons of friends, making new friends, learning so much from someone so talented, and having so much fun being a part of the SFP CDS community! We are so lucky to have an amazing Chapter that organized a once in a lifetime opportunity for everyone who participated in any way. Seeing our community put on an event like this, and being able to personally participate in it, was something I will never forget."

Putting on a clinic like this took more than hard work – it took persistence as well. Clinic organizer Gigi Cunliffe Noerr is no stranger to managing shows and clinics, but this one required more patience than most. It seemed that every time a tentative date was set, Laura got picked for another team. The early planning stages stretched over several years, but Gigi persevered.

SFP board members jumped into preparations, especially Vice Chair Michele De Luna and Treasurer Jennifer Shearer, along with a great group of volunteers. In addition to helping organize the clinic, Jennifer rode her Dutch gelding Arento, who she has successfully shown through Intermediaire I.

“Laura made a great comment,” Jennifer noted. “She said that if you can only do something with a bend in the horse, that means the horse is crooked, not bent. Her correction was very small but had an enormous effect. The most difficult part of the clinic was trying to get to the level of straightness that Laura was looking for – it was only an inch or so different, but that inch was a lot harder for Rennie than I could have imagined.”

Sponsors whose generous support helped immensely included Auburn Laboratories, Kingsland Equestrian, Samshield, Sattlerei Dresch, VitaFloor, Akiko Yamazaki, Eileen Morgenthaler, and The Horse Park at Woodside.

Author Nan Meek is a dressage rider and partner in Dark Horse Media. The San Francisco Peninsula Chapter of the California Dressage Society can be found at www.sfpcds.org and on Facebook at SFP-CDS. One of the original founding chapters of the California Dressage Society in 1967, SFP has a long history of promoting interest in dressage through education, competition, and social activities among its members.