

Elke Potucek-Puscha brings classical dressage principles to Northern California with Oct. 16-22 clinic.

by Patti Schofler

As if the history of classical riding travels with her, Elke Potucek-Puscha comes to Northern California with the profound knowledge passed on to her from two renowned masters of classical riding.

Starting at age 12 and for 20 years she learned to care for and ride horses at the famed Von Neindorff Institute in Karlsruhe, Germany. From there she trained horses and riders, and created the performances held at the Lipica Stud Farm and Riding School in Slovenia under the direction Arthur Kottas-Heldenberg, former first chief rider of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna.

From October 16-22, Potucek-Puscha will teach and lecture at Traditions Farm in Sebastopol, sharing the principles that she carries with her from von Neindorff and Kottas-Heldenberg.

For over 50 years German dressage teacher Egon von Neindorff dedicated his life to upholding the principles, traditions and art of classical horsemanship as he taught students on horses trained up through the high school movements and presented to the public performances showing the various stages and levels of the horses' education. The highlights included work on the long reins, work in hand, the kur or freestyle, airs above the ground and quadrilles.

Potucek-Puscha recalled, "After we went to our office jobs, we worked from 5 in the afternoon to midnight, riding and training the school's 100 horses, under von Neindorff's watchful eye,

preparing them for our exhibitions before the public and dignitaries including Sheiks from Saudi Arabia, members of the French Riding Academy and the director of the Spanish Riding School.”

Himself taught by the greats of classical dressage, including Richard Watjen, Otto Lorke, Felix Burkner and Alos Podhajsky, von Neindorff showed riders that only through the correct seat with aids that did not disturb the horse, through the engagement of the hindquarters and the suppleness of the back could you create a beautiful and athletic horse.



A master of work in hand, Potucek-Puscha said, “he could get a cow to piaffe. I learned from him to ride airs above the ground, but also true classical riding with sensitivity and correct timing. He taught us to control our bodies so we could feel the horses as he believed the best teacher is the horse.”

Potucek-Puscha became quite skilled at riding side-saddle. She could even ride a levade in a side saddle. This and other talents led to her hiring on as the main trainer at the Lipica Riding School and Stud by Kottas-Heldenberg of the Spanish Riding School.

Today Elke travels from her home base in the German Black Forest to teach in Austria, Hungary Portugal, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, Switzerland and now the U.S. Among her many dressage and eventing students are the wife and children of Gyorgy von Hapsburg-Lithringen, heirs to the Austrian empire.

Preserving & Promoting Training Traditions

Potucek-Puscha’s classic treasure chest is what motivated Tressa Boulden to bring Potucek-Puscha to Northern California as she sought to fill a tremendous hole made in her career and life with the loss to cancer of her mentor and teacher for 20 years, Melissa Simms.

For 19 years, Simms, an American woman in the land of German men, was the Director of Classical Performance at the Von Neindorff Reinstitut. Further, she became equestrian heir to von Neindorff, assembling his unfinished book, *The Art of Classical Horsemanship*, and translating it into English, a unique culmination for a woman who would move to Germany not speaking a word of German. With von Neindorff's death in 2004, Simms took over the school until its eventual closing. She continued to present exhibitions and train students in classical horsemanship in the U.S., Germany and Austria.



Potucek-Puscha was taught mostly by von Neindorff, but she trained with Simms for the performances at the school. “From Melissa I learned how to do choreography, which I would use at Lipica. I learned to think in pictures, to be a visual thinker. I also learned to step back. She would say you have stress in your life, but you have to step back because the horses are a mirror of the rider. The horses feel it.”

Potucek-Puscha was a great admirer of Melissa's riding. “When you watched her, you could never see anything. She did such small aids, millimeter changes in her body that made big changes in the horses.

She would become more beautiful as she rode.”

“We are so lucky to have Elke come here to teach. Here is this woman who has trained extensively with two iconic masters of dressage,” says Tressa. “I personally am looking for a source to the original teaching and exercises of riding. I also like that she is connected with the European competition world, always using solid classical schooling to compete. I also like that she has such vast knowledge of in-hand concepts based on traditional methods. It's very hard to find that.

Key Principles

Among the key classical principles that Elke espouses are:

To communicate with the horse, the rider must use the seat in a balanced manner so that the rider can feel what the horse will do and react knowing how the horse will react. Then the rider makes changes in the horse without force. The result is in the horse's mind and body.

The horse should stay at the level he is until he is ready to move ahead. The horse tells you how long it will take. When horse and rider are prepared, the education of horse becomes faster because he understands and can follow immediately. He can build up strength faster because he's not blocked in his body. Then the high level work comes easily.

Correct movement results from activation of the hind legs, the horse working over the back into contact, not by going backwards in the contact. You don't collect the horse by pulling on the reins.

Lightness does not mean riding with no rein contact. The reins are the passive aid most of the time, but this does not mean there is not contact.

People ride aggressively forward and the horse loses balance. When you "hunt" the horse, the horse gets stressed. You need to feel the speed in which the horse relaxes and works over its back, moving from the hind leg into the hand.

The Elke Potucek-Puscha clinic has a few riding positions open. Auditors are welcome to the clinic and to the Wednesday night lecture at Traditions Farm, Sebastopol. For information, contact Tressa at 707-829-0491.

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