

EQUESTRIAN & ANSWER

Q. My horse used to be a good mover . . . so what happened?!

A. Trainer/rider Clare Long aptly named her Petaluma, California, venture Clarity Dressage. With 30 years' experience, Clare's been awarded her USDF Silver and Bronze Medals, has won through Prix St. Georges, and has gathered her fair share of Horse Of The Year awards. Clare has



Clare Long & Amantiado

brought students from the Pre-Training Level through PSG, and to schooling the Intermediaire I, II and Grand Prix movements. Her students have achieved numerous high points and wins, and her junior riders have excelled in the CDS Junior Championships and in the USDF Junior and Horse Of The Year standings.

"If the rider were a student of mine, this question wouldn't just suddenly occur," Clare begins. "She'd be riding with me on a regular basis and we'd see any change in the horse's movement early on. We'd say, 'He's definitely not moving up to his potential—why?' If a new student brought in a horse and asked that question, I'd watch him in-hand and being ridden. I'd assess the way he moves and try to see where he's uncomfortable.

"To move well, any horse must first be comfortable in his body. Call your vet to do a lameness exam! Check shoeing! Check teeth! Check saddle fit! People don't realize how much the saddle influences how a horse goes. Even if the saddle fit well a year ago, your horse's musculature may have developed to the point that the saddle is hurting him now and he's uncomfortable. Saddles need regular re-fittings.

"Certainly, the rider can influence the horse's movement. It's crucial that the horse move freely from his hindquarters up into the rider's hands. If the rider's hands are fixed or aggressive, she hinders her horse's engagement and ability to move 'uphill.' He feels blocked; he

can't swing freely over his back. He's not properly on the bit.

"If the rider is blocking the horse with her hands, her horse will be on his forehead and hard against the bridle during transitions. So we school transitions. For example, I ask the student to ride the trot-to-halt transition from the hindquarters and through the back . . . closing her leg, then softly closing her hand *last* to finish the halt. The halt must flow from behind into a soft, elastic, connected hand. The results will be instantaneous: she'll feel the horse's throughness and uphill movement.

"Also, the rider must have a soft seat. If the rider is exerting too much pressure with a hard, driving, aggressive seat, the horse will shrink away. He'll become hollow in his back. He can't move freely. I ask this rider for a balanced connection, barely feeling the horse's mouth, in a rising trot. We might just walk-trot-canter the whole first lesson, to let the horse trust that the rider's not going to affect him negatively. The rider will feel an improvement in her horse as soon as she lightens her seat! Gradually the horse relaxes until the rider can sit a few strides of trot. Again, transitions will be paramount to teach a soft use of the seat, to discover throughness and engagement, to develop a connected hand.

"The judges will acknowledge it when your horse is relaxed and happy and moving freely. If the rider is tense and nervous in her first test, she will get 5s and comments such as, 'above the bit,' 'tense,' and 'transitions—abrupt.' When the rider relaxes so that her horse moves freely, she'll get 7s and comments like, 'smooth and supple,' 'accurate,' and 'good precision.'

"A rider who is stiff, aggressive, or tense in her body will make a horse who is stiff, resistant, defensive in his body. But when the rider relaxes, the horse will respond in kind.

"If your horse's movement has suffered because he's defensive, check the physical factors. Then get help from someone who can teach you to ride softly . . . and start over. Try to interfere with your horse's natural way of going as little as possible.

"One more thing . . . don't rush your horse! It's more important to develop the horse properly, than to hurry him up the levels to FEI." ■

A. Connie Curtes Stevens has been doing what she does for 35



Connie Stevens, daughter Hannah, Cassie & Trouble



MaryEllen Funke

years . . . and what she does so well is run Matchmakers, Ltd. Matchmakers is the business in Mettawa, Illinois, where Connie sells horses "from Short Stirrup ponies to hunters and jumpers for all the rated divisions." She is a busy "R" judge. Also a noted teacher, Connie coaches a devoted group of riders which includes: Connie's daughter Hannah, making

her debut in the Junior Hunters on Cotillion in 2006; Colby Hassfurther, riding Large Junior Hunter Baywatch; MaryEllen Funke and Northern Lights in the Childrens; Monterrey Pepper, moving up to the Short Stirrups; Jamie Learner riding Cavalli and Ruby Jet in the Amateur Adults; Kit Schiele in the Adults on Fontaine; Amateur Owner Adria Levin with Sandman; and Kathy Emery starting Just Annie in the Novice Adults.

"A good hunter mover," Connie says thoughtfully, "is one that travels low and long across the ground, in a very eco-

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