

HENK van BERGEN SYMPOSIUM

By Kathy Gubar



One hundred NCDCTA members were treated to a wonderful weekend of great weather May 21 & 22 to participate in the Henk van Bergen Symposium on “Achieving Throughness” held at Lynn and Cliff Leath’s beautiful North Star Training Center farm in Chapel Hill. The auditors could hear everything clearly with the sound system in spite of the 13 year cicadas’ constant mating call in the woods! Auditors were treated to a nice lunch with their admission and the program listed good bios on each demo rider.

Henk made a consistent effort throughout the weekend to target the audience by inviting questions after each horse/rider session. In addition he offered additional thoughts and philosophies before the lunch breaks and at the end of each day.

The first day’s session began with opening remarks from Henk on his approach to the training and his emphasis on transitions to help to improve the strength of the hind legs to develop collection and carrying power. He used the analogy of “building a wall”. The quality of the transition is the “cement between the stones” and is essential; you can have good quality gaits but you need to develop the technical essentials of correct transitions to improve overall.

Henk also discussed throughness and described it as *“the horse using every muscle in his body when he is moving. The energy from the hind leg goes through the topline and into the hands and with the halfhalt going back into the hind leg again. You can have extravagant legs moving without throughness”*. In developing throughness, balance is always in question, and to teach the horse you have to “disrupt a balance” to get a better balance in return. He made a great analogy to pushing for the better balance with the comment *“Training a horse is like walking on ice. You have to carefully move your feet forward on the ice and if things start to crack, you back off and try another way”*. Only a through horse can react to the aids and have the ability to collect.

This approach of challenging the horse to go “to the edge” to improve his balance and develop collection was demonstrated with several horse/rider combinations over the weekend at different levels. A young horse was challenged to improve its’ balance with the leg yield exercise. An upper level horse demonstrated development of better collection in canter work by challenging him in the collected canter until he wanted to trot. By bringing him to that point is when you will improve the horse; “on the edge” is where you make progress. Henk made the comment that *“it is important to challenge the horse and that ‘good’ and ‘wrong’ is much closer than you can imagine in the training!”* Another insightful comment from him was that *“better is the enemy of good”*. Quality in the schooling is more important than accuracy. If the horse does the exercise well move on to another. Don’t keep repeating the exercise to make it “better”.

Balance is of course also very important for the rider and once again Henk had a wonderful analogy to describe the development of balance in the rider. It is similar to the tightrope walker in that a beginner will flail around with their arms to help find the balance and have very large motions to maintain balance on the tightrope. Gradually, with practice, the tightrope walker will find he needs to use his arms less and finally only very small motions within his core will maintain his well-developed balance on the tightrope.

Comments received from attendees were very positive:

- A useful, practical topic
- He was clear and got results, told us what he was doing and why and was able to demonstrate his points with the riders.
- A good balance of problem solving and new skill building
- The horse-centered philosophy was welcome
- He taught to the clinic attendees, using the rider/horse as a teaching tool. In this way, he could talk and show us training and riding concepts – excellent!

Everyone who attended witnessed a marvelous clinician who was very clear in his expectations for horses and riders and effectively communicated his philosophy to the audience. The facility was great and the program was very well run. Many thanks to Lynn and Cliff Leath for donating their arena and for the perfect weather – in spite of the cicadas we all had a great learning experience!

Above photo credit: Karen Allred

Above photo: (L>R) Lynn Leath, Theresa Horne, Henk van Bergen, Bernadine Dembosky on Without a Doubt, Liz Bromberg, Kris Hamilton, Emily Copeland