

my view

By Victoria Hamilton

Victoria Hamilton is one of Australia's top dressage riders. Victoria has trained and competed throughout Australia and overseas. She has won numerous State and National Championships, two Australian World Challenge Finals (with Ardito in 1998 and Asaachen in 2000), two Australian Dressage Leaderboard Titles (with Asaachen in 1998 and Kaduso in 2002) and was the runner-up in the World Final of the PSI/FEI World Dressage Challenge in Germany in 2001. Victoria always states this as being her competition career highlight. She regularly tours the country conducting clinics and is experienced coaching riders of all ages, abilities and ambitions. Victoria was the W.A. State Young Rider Dressage Coach in 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2005 and in 2006 founded WADYRA (WA Dressage Young Rider Association) where she is currently the chief coach.



“ I see so many beautiful child riders' positions affected by the incredible drive to have their ponies “on the bit”



Stephanie Munro has grown into one of WA's leading dressage riders. Photo by Wandiera Park Dressage.

Dressage is for everyone – at least, it should be

HI EVERYONE, When I was first asked if I would write a regular column for *Perth Rider* magazine I began asking people what they would like to read about and what issues concerned them.

Their answers basically fell into three different groups. The most common answer was a “how do I...” or “what do I do when...” answer proving just how keen most people are to acquire more knowledge. Other people asked if I could mention what I am doing with my own horses as they grow and develop and I prepare them for their future careers. The last group felt it would be fantastic if my column could start people thinking and discussing topical issues and uniting to improve the sport that we all love so much.

So overall my column will have a variety of topics ranging from training tips, to discussions on dressage and updates on my horses. To start it off, this month I will write a little for everyone!

Anyone following the local equestrian scene on Facebook last month would be aware that my beautiful Warmblood mare Asastar died a day after she gave birth to a gorgeous, healthy colt now named Dante. I cannot thank our local horse community enough for all their help and support that resulted in the most wonderful mare owned by Felicity and Andrew Smit successfully fostering Dante.

It was touching to see that something positive came out of two separate tragedies and it was so generous of the Smits to allow Kaisha to be a foster mare when they had just had the heartache of losing their lovely colt Ted. She

is a super mother and is instilling good manners into him, something that could have been quite difficult had he been hand reared!

My work horses had a quieter time during October but continued to train on the basics. This is always so important and should never be over-looked. Not only does it keep them supple but it prepares them for any more difficult questions that may be asked of them in the future.

The most common problems riders wanted me to address in this column were related to incorrect flying changes and difficulty in picking up correct canter leads. **My best advice for any training problem is to work away from the problem.** Work out what basics are involved in the question you are asking of your horse and re-establish those. This is a much better system than continually working on the actual movement that is creating an issue. This is the way that I will tackle any problem as you will see in future articles.

With regards to dressage related issues, many people from riders to judges have voiced their concern at how difficult it is for non-purpose bred horses to be even moderately successful in competition. Of course there will always be exceptions but it is very unlikely that a horse bred for racing or cutting will be as competitive as an imported Warmblood bred for dressage in a dressage competition. Before Thoroughbred or Quarter Horse owners get upset about this, think about it the other way around. A dressage bred Warmblood would be laughable on the racetrack!

The current dressage system of having competitor and participant classes helps to a certain extent but not enough in many people's opinions as the standard in Participant classes is also often very high. Also one major down side of this system is that at the moment the Participant classes only go up to Novice, forcing anyone wishing to compete in Elementary or above into competitor classes.

Riders on horses with non-ideal conformation and/or gaits for dressage have three options:

- Continue and be happy with developing their communication with their horse and the knowledge that their training is gymnasticising their horse and helping it to develop to the best of its ability and to stay sound for as long as possible. Compete to have an independent assessment of their progress by a well trained, qualified judge.
- Same as above but chose not to compete.

- Change disciplines to something more suited to their horse.

This seems such a shame and not ideal for any sport to actually have a system which in many cases can discourage people to continue.

I see a somewhat related problem with the current competition grades being offered but more from a rider development point of view. **I see so many beautiful child riders' positions affected by the incredible drive to have their ponies “on the bit” before their bodies are strong enough to do this correctly and their minds developed to have the understanding of how and why to do what.** Please don't think that I don't want any of my children to ride their horses on the bit. This is not the case at all but I do think it is sad that we produce so many round shouldered, over-active handed and unstable legged riders. This scenario also happens with adults beginning to ride at a later stage in life.

So are we truly doing the right thing by our young riders in dressage? Strange question you say when we have some lovely riders coming through the grades! I believe we are not doing a bad job but do wonder if we could do it better.

Everyone knows that it is much harder to correct a rider position than it is to develop the correct one in the first place. **What about a new class which is judged on accuracy, rider position, invisibility and effectiveness of the aids and above all harmony and empathy?** Yes, still consider the rhythm and perhaps the flexion but not the continual emphasis on outline that is currently so apparent.

These would not be the same as rider hack classes as they would still be run individually in a dressage arena with the same school figures as in preliminary and novice. They could be judged by NCAS coaches rather than judges to reduce any drain on our judges. These tests could be run at any dressage day and riders could earn points for entering. Then there could be a final at the States or some other big competition and the top points earners invited. If the main aim of this class of competition is to increase participation in our sport and to instil good basics in our riders, then it makes sense that the more times people enter, the more they will learn from their experience.

One bonus of this system is that it would allow older horses or horses with some arthritis making them stiff to continue to stay in work and compete on what are mostly good surfaces. Like-wise for ex-pacers and also some ex-riding school horses that have learnt to brace their necks out of self defence. Some of these horses are never going to work “on the bit” and may struggle to track up correctly yet have an enormous amount to offer new riders. Why shouldn't these horses have a new job in life?

Yes – I realise that this is not how it is done in the countries that lead the way in dressage on the internationals scale but we have to accept the fact that we do not have the supply and depth of well trained dressage ponies to enable our youngest riders to develop correct position and therefore feel.

I love the quote “if we always do what we have always done, we will always get what we have always got”. So why not lead the way or at least try it for a while and follow the progress.

There will always be the odd few who will become beautiful riders anyway. This will not impede their progress at all but hopefully it would lift the standard of the majority and certainly make many horses' and ponies' lives happier.

Change for many people is scary at the best of times but perhaps this may be necessary to enable and encourage more riders to participate in dressage.



Stephanie Munro learnt the basics of riding properly as a child (left) before developing into a successful dressage competitor. Above photo by Redfoto.

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