



# Teamwork

By Victoria Hamilton



Photo by Liz Tollarzo

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*There is more to any dressage combination than just the horse and rider - a strong team behind the scenes is necessary to enable progression through the levels.*



Photo by Nicole Jolly

A well-known figure behind the video camera at all of Victoria's competitions and major training sessions, including those overseas, her father was an invaluable part of the 'team'. The video feedback enabled her to always see what was happening with her riding and was invaluable in identifying any problems. Although he never rode, her father learnt so much that his help as her 'eyes on the ground' was one of the secrets of her success.

**D**ressage may not generally be considered a team sport but whichever way one looks at it, that is exactly what this discipline is all about. There is a need for 'teams' from the lower introductory levels right up to Grand Prix and along the way these 'teams' involved become larger and more complex.

The most obvious team is the horse/rider combination, however sometimes riders lose sight of this and in their frustration to improve, or even win, they can become very defensive in their riding and training and start to work against the horse rather than with it.

Riders need to remember that it is their responsibility to consider the horse's wellbeing as a priority at all times, be it mental or physical, as the horse didn't ask to do dressage. When a horse is swishing its tail or grinding its teeth it is not the sign of a happy horse, which does not bode well for the most important member of the team.

As riders become more serious about their riding and begin competing, the team may expand from just the horse and rider to include a coach and really, at this point, one could also include anyone who helps the rider maintain the horse at its competition level, such as the farrier, vet, physio/chiropractor, massage person, dentist, saddle fitter and the list goes on. These people are all very important parts of a successful team,

even if they are rarely seen or required to be at actual events.

Other behind the scenes people who must never be taken for granted are the parents and friends or partners who drive and groom and generally make training and competition days as stress free as possible, which allows the rider to concentrate on the actual competition.

From a coaching or training point of view teamwork is extremely important and can work in a number of different ways. With some dressage associations a lot of emphasis is placed on teamwork, not just between the riders who are members of the club but also between riders and their parents or partners. For the coach there is a need to not only coach the riders but also their helpers, as these are the ones who will be assisting a particular horse/rider combination reach its full potential. This may be done in many ways.

On club days riders may be paired so that one will help the other and act as the 'eyes on the ground'. This not only helps the person who is riding but also develops important skills in the helper, such as patience, awareness of what judges see and the importance of repetition, practise and praise. They become more tolerant of their own areas that need work as they

*Parents can often learn enough to help their children in their riding and training but should ensure they just tell the rider what they have seen and refrain from interpreting it.*



realise that everyone, even those who are very successful competitively, are still striving to improve. Everyone can help in some way, even very young helpers. Their roles can be varied from watching the number of tracks in lateral work and the accuracy of school figures to helping with rider position. In most case there is usually one thing being the main point of focus,

such as a wandering hand, stiff elbow, a leg not staying in position or a rider sitting crooked.

Parents often help their children by videoing or taking notes, and many will also learn enough to be of great help as their children progress through the various levels. Friends and partners can also often

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## Teamwork continued...

be bribed into videoing a lesson or test but riders also need to actually get behind the video camera once in a while to see what a big ask this can be on a regular basis, especially for 45 or 60 minutes at a time!

The most important thing for parent helpers to remember is to just say what is seen, not to interpret it and tell the rider what to do about it. Of course this situation refers to riders who have been given the tools through tuition to know what to do about different situations, not about more inexperienced riders. For example, if the horse has too much neck bend in a shoulder-in or quarters leading in a half-pass, the rider most likely knows how to correct this, they just may not be aware that it has occurred.

Disagreements may arise between children and their parents when the parent tries to instruct the child - often, if the parents are honest with themselves, the children ride better than they do and won't respect or accept the parent's instruction. As a coach, it is a good idea to explain this to parents and also to the riders, and talk about how everyone gets frustrated when things don't go right but never to take that frustration out on the horse or on the person helping, as that is all they are trying to do - help!

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Taking notes at lessons is also a fantastic training aid, especially if a video is not available. Summarising the major areas requiring work and also listing whatever exercises are to be the focus until the students' next lesson is very helpful. Small reminders such as "watch the amount of neck bend on the left rein" or "straightness in the right canter" may really make sure progress is made between lessons. The rider can quickly read these notes before practising at home and is more likely to train along the path set by the coach. Better still is for riders to document their own lessons and also some of their colleagues. To read these notes can actually help the coach also, as it enables them to see exactly what the rider has learnt from the lesson and to clarify any areas that may not be crystal clear.

Parents and friends may help by lunging riders so they can concentrate on their position without having to worry about steering and speed control. This is invaluable for riders of all ages and levels, especially people who are stiff or have

*Right: On training days riders may be paired so that one will help the other and act as the 'eyes on the ground'. This not only helps the person who is riding but also develops important skills in the helper, such as patience, awareness of what judges see and the importance of repetition, practise and praise.*

*Below: Everyone can help in some way and on the day of competition an extra pair of hands allows the rider to concentrate on the horse and the test.*



Photo supplied by Victoria Hamilton



Photo by Liz Tollazzo

a balance problem. Some young riders go through amazing growth spurts and it is impossible for them to control their own bodies let alone that of the horse, so lunge lessons can be a really fun way to progress.

Sometimes, no matter how many exercises a rider is given they just can't get their bodies to do something necessary for

riding. In this case assessment of the rider off the horse often shows that even unmounted they can't do a related movement or stretch, and the rider may need to obtain help off the horse before they can expect to be able to do it mounted.

It is not only older riders who need specific exercises and stretches designed for them, as many young riders already show marked crookedness in their bodies. How can riders expect their horses to be symmetrical unless they are constantly striving to be so themselves?

Young riders need not be taught any differently from more mature riders, and with the right instruction and guidance should develop into caring, thinking riders who love their horses and respect their fellow competitors.

All riders should be able to explain what they are doing and why at any moment when riding, be it warming up for a competition or training at home. They need to learn to assess what is happening and adjust accordingly. This ability is something that takes many years to develop and only with constant correct input from as many helpers as possible will it happen.

Riding can be such a lonely, isolated sport but it need not be, and logic has it that the more help in whatever form a rider can muster, the easier the journey will be for them and their horse on their chosen path. 🐾



## About The Author

A qualified veterinarian and full-time dressage instructor, Dr Victoria Hamilton was the 2001 runner-up at the World Final of the World Dressage Challenge in Germany and has won the Aust World Dressage Challenge Final twice - 1998 on Ardito, and in 2000 on Asaachen, and has numerous other state titles and national awards - at all levels up to Grand Prix - to her name.

Victoria has been the WA State YR Dressage coach twice in 1998/1999 and 2004/2005 and is currently chief coach of West Australian Dressage Young Rider Association (WADYRA)  
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