

School your dressage horse like an Olympic rider

“LEARNING AND THE DESIRE TO IMPROVE IS VITAL.”

By New York Horse staff

The commands come steadily, supportive but insistent.

“Sit heavy. Sit heavy, sit.”

“Not too much with the hands, more with the body.”

“Shorten the rein.”

“Sit in the middle of the saddle.”

“Use more of your back. Assert the rhythm with your back. ... Keep the rhythm.”

The horse and rider work circles around Juan Manuel Munoz Diaz, moving from a collected canter, to more forward, and back to collected. “Use less of your hand, more of your body, your leg,” he tells the rider, true to his reputation as being direct



Juan Manuel Munoz Diaz, pictured here with Fuego in the 2012 Olympics, says balance and talent makes a great dressage horse.

and objective, a clinician who can easily spot the problems and potential of each horse and rider.

And then the praise: “Very good position. Relax. Good, good.”

Canterbury Stables brought the Spanish Olympian to Cazenovia for a weekend of dressage clinics. Competing at the London 2012 Olympics – his second games – Munoz and his gray stallion Fuego rode into the Top 10 dressage pairs in the world.

To get to that level, Munoz said in an interview with Eurodressage, he had to ride every day with “perseverance (and) dedication and push myself to be a part of the big game.” That ethic was reflected in the clinic style he brought to Canterbury.

“Learning and the desire to improve is vital to the sport,” he has said, and no matter the level of the horse and rider, the cornerstone of each lesson was core principles:

- Bend around the inside leg.
- Shorten the rein.
- Maintain impulsion.
- Keep contact.
- Sit heavy – deep and relaxed into the saddle.

Munoz transformed those values into motion when he took the reins of Fiti, a 10-year-old stallion who – like Fuego – is a PRE (Pura Raza Espanola/Spanish Purebred). He believes in work, dedication and discipline and his demonstration ride offered a glimpse of how an Olympic rider translates those values into training, beginning with a warmup and transitioning into ever more difficult requests of the horse.

Munoz started Fiti at a walk on the rail and then moved him forward into a trot. At this beginning point, he works to find the sweet spot where the horse is comfortable – but connected and true, usually with a long neck.

Transitioning into the canter, he uses the long side of the arena to work on keeping the horse straight, stretching him but also working to get Fiti “more active behind.” Next Munoz lengthens the canter, working shoulder forward – “a very good canter for warming up” – still

stretching the horse but encouraging him to reach forward into contact on the bit.

Now Munoz follows a piece of the exercise he has done at every gait with each of the students in the clinic: Repeated transitions from collection to moving forward. Munoz, it’s explained, likes to do a lot of transitions in the gaits, which allows him to work on lengthening, flexing and collecting the horse. One of his key goals in this exercise is to keep the horse responsive to the aids.

movement where the horse executes a collected trot in place, or nearly in place. Fiti is still learning this move and when he is done being schooled, Munoz lets the stallion stretch and move forward.

The pirouette is next. No easy task, Fiti needs to keep the same canter in the pirouette as in the collected canter. Again, when the response is correct, there is a reward. “After the pirouette, the horse tends to get a little tense,” so Munoz lightens his hands and lets the horse go forward.

“The union with the horse is like a marriage.”

— Juan Manuel Munoz Diaz, to Eurodressage

And this, too: When he lengthens the canter, his purpose often is to make the horse cover more ground so he becomes more true in the back. Asking for more collection in the canter, he looks to create more activity behind.

Moving back into the trot, he allows the horse to stretch a little bit and relax. It’s time to ask more of Fiti, keeping the rider’s contact in the hand “always supple and light.” And remember to do as Munoz does when the horse’s answer to the request is correct: As soon as Fiti does a few steps of what he’s asking, he rewards him.

Munoz asks for the piaffe, the dressage

But even the best student misbehaves, and Fiti proves he’s only human – well, equine – when he doesn’t respond when Munoz asks for the half-halt. So here is the final teachable moment for the demonstration: Munoz stops and backs him up to get him to listen to the aid, rather than run through it.

Interested in learning more? Check out the official website for Munoz at juanmanuelmunozdiaz.com/ingles for photo galleries and videos of some of his top competitions including the freestyle performance at the 2010 World Equestrian Games in Lexington, Kentucky, that earned Fuego the nickname “King of Hearts.”

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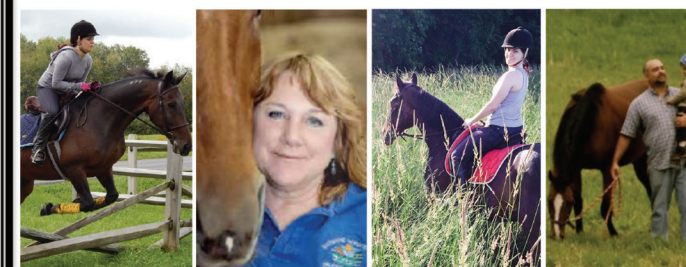
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