

Keeping it *classical*

NADINE FRANÇOIS TEACHES DRESSAGE FROM A CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVE AND HAS BUILT UP A LOYAL FOLLOWING IN NEW ZEALAND. AND WHILE THERE MAY BE SOME CONFUSION WHEN IT COMES TO DEFINING 'CLASSICAL' DRESSAGE, NADINE'S WAY OF TRAINING COULDN'T BE SIMPLER: IT'S ABOUT PRODUCING A SOFT AND HAPPY HORSE, WHILE THE RIDER SITS IN PERFECT BALANCE. HELEN FIRTH REPORTS. PHOTOS BY TRISH DUNELL

For most people, the words 'classical dressage' probably conjure up images of the Spanish Riding School's famous white Lipizzaners. Certainly, the Viennese school is the only one to have been preserved since its inception in the 16th century, and its art and breeding ideals have survived intact.

But just what is classical dressage, where is its place in the modern world and how is it different from the German or Dutch ways of training? Those are hard questions to answer and a source of great debate around the world. However, whether classical or German, all dressage training has similar ultimate goals. Most modern trainers promote good communication, compassionate methods and working in harmony with the horse – these are traditional or 'classical' ideals that have stood the test of time.

Some of the riders on Nadine François' clinic say there is a lot of confusion surrounding classical dressage, but that it's really just a way of riding that allows the horse to find his balance and remain happy in the work. One participant said she felt the main difference is that the rider gets

frustrated that they can't do the work right, rather than getting frustrated at the horse!

"I think all dressage should be classical," says Nadine. "You must achieve the right balance and lightness, from the very beginning of your training, until the end."

Dressage judge, rider and instructor Joan Matheson recommends Nadine to her own pupils, and has also had lessons herself. She says it's a softer and slower way of riding, which may not look so competitive to the casual observer. "However, it's much better to put expression into a soft horse than to try and force expression into a tense horse," she says. Like the other riders on the clinic, Joan expresses appreciation for a training system that makes the advanced work possible, regardless of the rider's strength or age. "I prefer the thought of a horse that's happy and willing to work for you – especially when you're old and you can't set up a fight and win!"

Similarly, judge and trainer Errol O'Brien has been enjoying his own lessons with Nadine. "She's excellent when it comes to the influence of the rider's seat, which I believe we're lacking in the country," he

feels. "Nadine has helped my horse without doubt – she's excellent for a horse that is a little bit fiery, as mine is."

Nadine's students work quietly and she is careful not to create resistances or problems. However, soft and slow does not mean that the horses don't progress. In fact, Nadine feels her way of training is often faster, because the horses are not placed under too much physical pressure, and so they enjoy their work. Certainly, a six-year-old mare in her recent Cambridge clinic was happily performing counter-canter, half-pass and beginning piaffe in-hand, all without the slightest hint of anxiety or stress.

Joanne McNicoll, who loves her lessons with Nadine so much she has actually travelled to Portugal twice to train with her, says this is a gentle way of riding, yet still gets to the advanced work.

"In the past I'd watched a few people get to Grand Prix and it was all whips and spurs and cinched nosebands, which made me think I wasn't brave enough to do it. But when I met Nadine and saw her horses, I realised it was possible to get there without all that," she says. "It's not about body build-



Nadine François

Belgian dressage trainer Nadine François has been teaching for more than 30 years. She trained for a decade under the late Portuguese maestro Nuno Oliveira, regarded by many as the best dressage rider of the 20th century. Nadine's approach can best be described as classical, and closely mirrors Oliveira's methods, including the in-hand work.

Nadine has her own stable in Portugal, where she rides and teaches, and she also gives clinics in New Zealand, Australia and the United States. She has been visiting New Zealand for 10 years and her students include professional riders, top national judges and keen amateurs, who say she is 'the real deal'. All the riders on her recent clinic were enthusiastic about Nadine's soft and calm training approach.



Introducing the lateral work in-hand increases the horse's acceptance once it is started under saddle. Here, Nadine is working on shoulder-in

Nadine's training tips

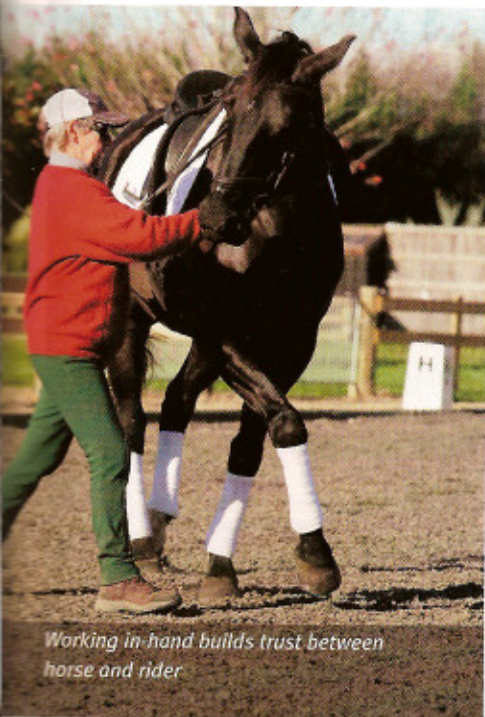
- Don't create more with your leg than you can balance with your hand. "If you push too much, you have to take too much in your hands."
- Adjust yourself to the mood of the horse. "This doesn't mean that you allow the horse to do whatever he wants. But if you feel your horse is in a bad mood, ask less, so you don't enter into a fight with him. The day after you can ask a little more again."
- Shoulder-in is probably the most important training exercise, because in it you have control over the horse's entire body.
- Always stay quiet with your hands to encourage the horse's neck to be stable.

ing as a rider; it's an elegant way of riding. The rider does less, so the horse can do more. You're not shutting the horses down, but letting them dance for you, by sitting in a balance and putting them in the right place."

The in-hand work

In-hand work has largely fallen into neglect since the days of the great masters of bygone centuries, with Spanish and Portuguese trainers proving the exception. They still integrate it into all of the horse's education, and usually start the lateral work in-hand.

The advantages of working in-hand are numerous: the handler can closely observe the horse and see how he moves; the horse learns to accept the whip as an aid; it prepares the horse for the ridden work; it

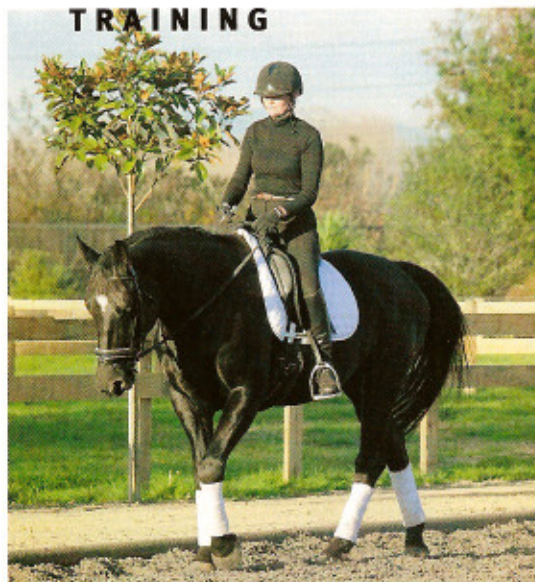


Working in-hand builds trust between horse and rider



Joanne McNicoll and Anja begin half-pass in trot

TRAINING



Sue Abram and her seven-year-old mare Alla-Donner (Anamour-Whitsun, by Weltmeyer) warm up in walk



The rider's seat and weight is influential when asking for the downward transition. Joanne McNicoll and her six-year-old mare Anja (Anamour-Whitsun, by Weltmeyer)



Joanne and Anja in counter-canter

allows the handler to keep a check on the horse's balance and builds trust between horse and rider.

Nadine learned the in-hand work under Nuno Oliveira. "It helps most horses a lot, because you are not on the horse's back, causing him to lose his balance, and you can correct him a little more easily from the ground," she explains. "Before I ride my young horses for the first time, I

usually do a little shoulder-in with them in-hand. If you prepare the work before upsetting them with the weight of a rider, you get much less resistance later on." Nadine also teaches baby steps of piaffe in-hand before starting flying changes under saddle, saying it helps to bring the horse rounder and improves the balance when cantering. She progresses little by little, allowing the horses to build up muscle and

consistency. As when riding, she has fingertip light control, asking the horses to slow down with her body more than the reins.

"Working in-hand or lungeing is the same as riding – if you use too much hand, it shortens the horse's neck and they go behind the vertical. You must stay quiet with your hands and encourage the neck of the horse to stabilise. You can't touch with the whip and pull at the same time. It's the

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Alternating rising trot and sitting trot on the circle helps the horse come into a better balance and is also a good preparation for canter transitions

same as riding – when you push, you always have to open the door.”

Nadine teaches her students how to do the in-hand work themselves, saying like anything else it's simply a matter of practice. “The timing is the most important thing. It is better to do the wrong thing in the right moment, than to do the right thing in the wrong moment.”

The classical seat

All the great masters, past and present, agree that a firm, quiet and central seat helps the horse come into perfect balance.

Unsurprisingly, Nadine places great emphasis on the rider's seat. She can think of one Kiwi student who had such a terrible position their horse was basically out of control as a result. When Nadine rode the horse herself, it was fine, so she prescribed

a course of lunge lessons for the rider to improve their way of sitting.

“Because your position does 80% of the work,” she explains. “Even on a 20-metre circle, if you are sitting the wrong way you will have to do too much with your hands and your legs, when just bringing your position in the right direction will put the horse on the right track.”

In the downward transitions, the rider should also use their position and weight more than their hands, Nadine explains. She will often use the words, ‘And your body is walking’ when telling a rider to execute a trot to walk transition.

“If you let your seat keep trotting with the horse, you are actually asking him to trot,” she says. “The first thing you have to do when you want the horse to walk is to think about the walk and put your position as if you were walking. So you have to be a little stronger in the lower part of your back, and that should stop the horse, so you are not obliged to take too much rein.” At the same time, while Nadine constantly reminds riders to soften their fingers, she warns that it's not about giving the reins

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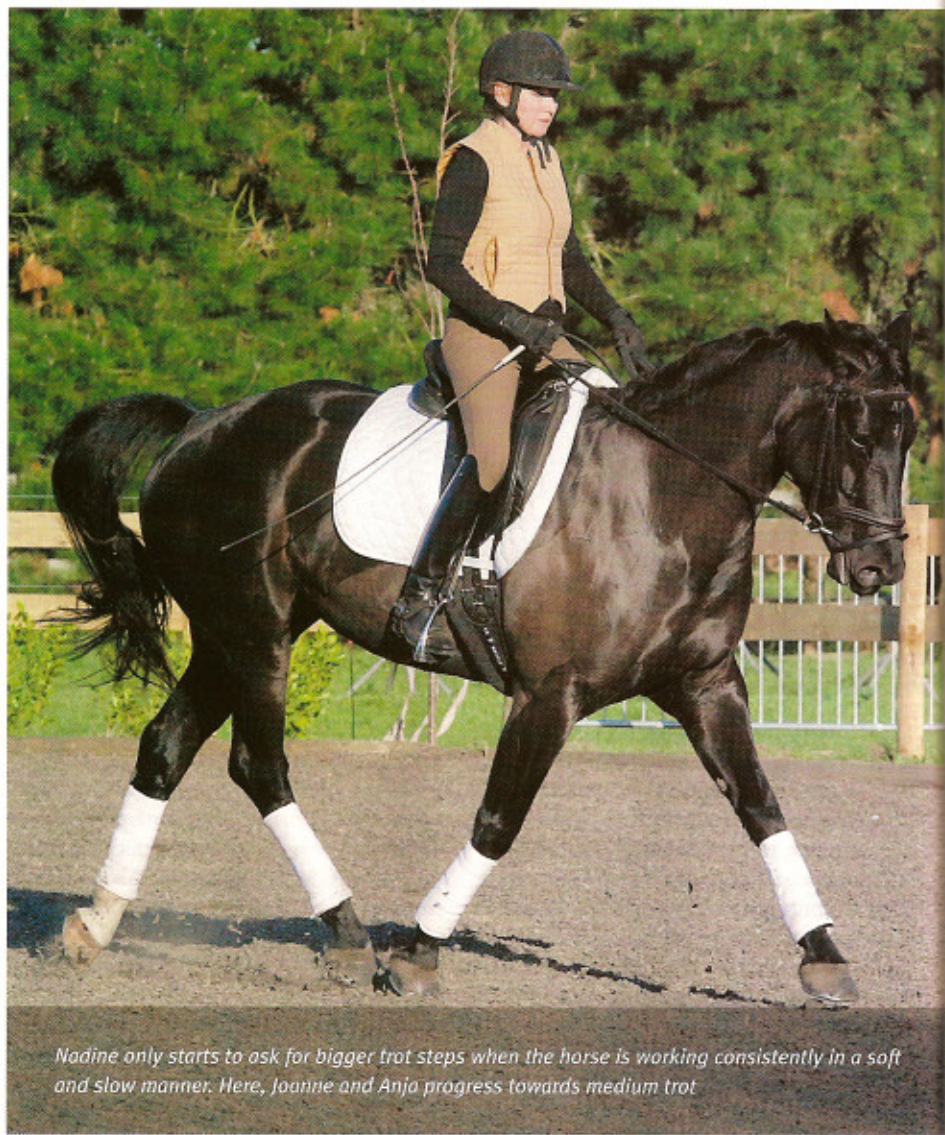


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Nadine only starts to ask for bigger trot steps when the horse is working consistently in a soft and slow manner. Here, Joanne and Anjo progress towards medium trot

away too much, and dropping the horse in front altogether. She tells riders not to advance their elbows, instead wanting them to keep their elbows close to their body, which encourages the hands to remain quiet. It's okay to sponge or vibrate the reins by playing with the fingers, but it's not okay to pull back or lean on the reins, she says.

"Perhaps if the horse is really leaning, you might have to do a little half-stop, by which I mean a difference of contact in your hand – it's a give, take and give again very quickly. Sometimes you have to be a little harder, but never do a long action, with either the legs or the reins, because the horse can lean on your legs, too."

Softly, slowly

Probably the most striking difference when watching Nadine's lessons is that the horses are kept slower than you often see in this country. However, this slowness is more about cadence and calmness than lack of forward momentum. It's a way of training perfectly suited to Nadine's Lusitano horses which, like their Spanish cousins and our own thoroughbred types, have the gift of natural energy.

From day one, Nadine teaches the horses to be in balance; obviously the horse cannot be in balance if he's running and leaning on

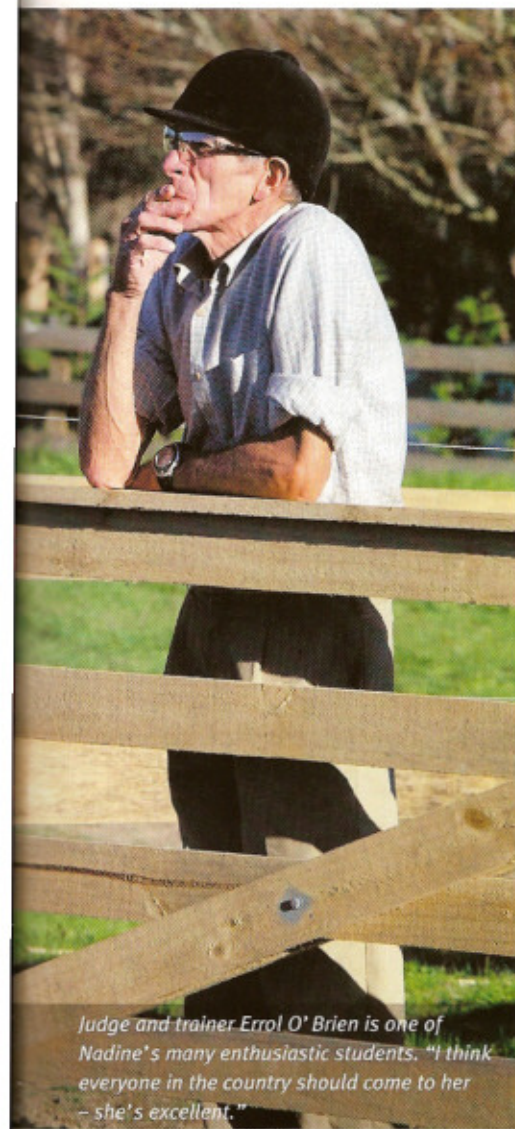
the reins. She wants riders to gently close their horses from behind and carry, rather than throwing them on to the shoulder by going too fast. "Don't go too fast – slow!" is something she repeats often during a lesson. If horses are ridden too fast, says Nadine, their shoulder becomes stilted and one day they will become unsound, because they are running and there is too much impact on the joints.

"You start by being slower and softer, and once you get the consistency you can start to go in bigger steps. The problem with trying to get the big trot before you have consistency is that you hollow the back of the horse and you do not build topline.

"The length of the stride also depends on the horse's physique – some horses can handle bigger steps, and some cannot. All horses have their own rhythm and you must first find a trot where the horse is comfortable to work."

Working in this soft, slow manner clearly preserves the horse's joints. Nadine has a Lusitano horse in her stable who was trained by Mr Oliveira himself. At 28, he is still able to do a few flying changes. Nadine says when trained this way most horses can be schooled to Grand Prix level.

"One of my students has an Arab, who is really built like an Arab, but he can do



Judge and trainer Errol O'Brien is one of Nadine's many enthusiastic students. "I think everyone in the country should come to her - she's excellent."

everything and he enjoys it - changes every stride, very nice pirouettes in canter, piaffe and passage."

Transitions

Another feature of Nadine's lesson is the amount of transitions she crams into a single session - literally hundreds. Every time the rider does a transition, she explains, it helps put the horse a little more between their hands and legs. "Transitions improve the balance and collection, without the rider having to push or pull too much."

Another great exercise for improving the horse's balance is to alternate sitting and rising trot on the circle. The horse should keep the same trot cadence, rein contact and neck position throughout. "The horse comes a little more round and collected, simply because you are doing a little change of balance on his back by rising and sitting," explains Nadine.

If a transition doesn't quite work - say if the horse rushes or hollows - Nadine's correction is usually simply to repeat. While the rider is often tempted to use the aids more harshly, or to pull the horse's head down when this happens, Nadine says just continuing to repeat the transition is much better.

"However, usually the rider thinks about

the transition too much, and ends up walking for too long and trotting for too long. You must repeat the transitions quite quickly, to encourage the horse to balance himself. And the horse should come into your position - you should not go into the position of the horse."

Nadine's student Joanne McNicoll explains the philosophy very well: "If the horse hollows in a transition, of course all you want to do is grab at it, but if you just let go and repeat, and tell the horse to balance itself and use the hind leg, then it will stop the breaking up of the transition. It's simply a matter of time, strength, putting the horse in the right balance and having it in front of your leg," she says. "For years, I never understood why you would hold and push at the same time. This way, you drive and give, and you trust that your horse will stay round because it's in the right balance."

A consistent neck

Consistency of the horse's neck and quietness of the rider's hands are two key components of Nadine's teaching. She hates to see horses behind the vertical, and is not fond of the current trend of working horses very deep and round.

"I don't like that too much, because the horses lose consistency. Some of the horses that are ridden that way look very nice when they are working, but they can be naughty and spooky outside the arena. And to me that is losing a little the meaning of dressage, because when you have a trained horse, he must be obedient - that is the first thing you must have.

"When people get on my horses at home, they only have to do five minutes in walk to warm the horses from being in the stable. After that they can ask directly for piaffe, passage, flying changes, and pirouettes. And I never work my horses for more than 40 or 45 minutes, because I don't need to." Nadine does use stretching, but mainly as a reward, never as an exercise. She says stretching is also a good check that your work is correct - if the horse is happy to stretch when the rider gives the rein and goes in rising trot, then the body of the horse is working correctly. If he doesn't stretch forward and down, it's because the body is hollowing.

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