

Warmblood **WhoAs**

By Boyd Martin

Why Commas Matter

I've been in this horse training and competition racket for most of my life now. To me, one of the most awesome aspects of equestrian sport is the continuous opportunity to learn more, no matter how successful you are. In my opinion, American riders do a great job of getting regularly "tuned up" by professional trainers.

Last October, I took a clinic with show jumping legend Joe Fargis. I was in a group of five riders for the lesson and it was two hours of reminders about the importance of correctness in our riding. Sometimes in my day-to-day training routine, things get to a point where I'm just trying to get through the day and finish riding all the horses on my list. As a busy professional, it's easy to forget about focusing on the small details that set you apart from your competitors. In other words, it's easy to get caught in a rut.

Joe went back to basics with me, picking on things like my lower leg position, upper body position and balance. Every small question I asked, Joe immediately had the perfect answer. I left the clinic feeling completely reinvigorated with my riding.

Since the main focus of the clinic was jumping, Joe gradually built up a big, challenging grid. My mount was a good young event horse named Ray Price and Joe built the grid bigger and bigger. Each time we managed to jump it successfully.

Next he had us jump three bounces off turns, canter through the grid again, then canter a couple of other exercises and finally canter through the grid again. This was a challenging exercise to do perfectly—and believe me, Joe wanted it perfect!

After the clinic was over I asked Joe why he frequently wanted the horses to come back to a trot between the jumps. "Boyd, when you're rushing a sentence, lots of commas in the sentence help pause the conversation," he responded simply.

His analogy made perfect sense. He wants the horse to be able to jump an exercise, regroup and rebalance, then

jump another exercise and regroup and rebalance again. In his experience, the more they jump, the more wild and unrideable many horses get. So his focus is to have the horses in a place where they're rebalancing and thinking in the middle of their jumping course, not getting more wound up. That rebalancing moment is the "comma" in the course.

His advice that day really got me thinking about some of the horses I have in training. I raced home and set up the same course of exercises in my jumping ring and went to work.

Long Island T is a new horse for me this year. While he is a fabulous jumper, he gets very keen and excited out on course. The further we get into a course, the more wild and out of control he becomes. At the last couple events, we've had rails down late in the course, not because the horse is careless but because he becomes so strong and out of balance.

The lesson that Joe gave me was exactly what I needed to regroup and work on Long Island T's balance. I'm eager to take him to a show to see if this technique will carry through at our next competition.

What my two-hour lesson with Joe did for me was remind me to focus on the finer details of my riding and the importance of rideability on course. Fresh eyes from the ground are invaluable! Just because I'm riding a lot doesn't mean I won't get a little sloppy or caught in a rut. When you can, take a break from training at home and ride in or audit a clinic given by the best in your sport. Those commas in the sentences of your riding and training may be just the punctuation you need to move you and your horse to the next level. Thanks, Joe.



Courtesy Boyd Martin

Boyd and Joe Fargis discuss aspects of the jumping clinic that Boyd participated in last year.

Four-star event rider **Boyd Martin** represented the United States at the 2010 World Equestrian Games and the 2012 Olympics. He and his wife Silva, a G.P. dressage rider, own and operate Windurra USA in Cochranville, PA. Learn more about them at www.boydandsilvamartin.com.



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