

Warmblood *Whoas*

By Boyd Martin

Crossing Over

As a higher-level trainer of international event horses, my training methods continuously evolve. Part of this is because I am always trying to improve; another part is that I'm intrigued with training ideas that are a little outside the box.

HUNTING ADVANTAGES

Silva (my wife) and I are lucky to live in a part of the United States, near Unionville, Pennsylvania, where we're surrounded by different horse sports. Unionville was famous first for foxhunting, then the steeplechase and timber racing trainers moved in. Not long after that the eventers started finding the Cheshire Hunt country ideal for their sport, with the similar exercise of galloping horses across the country at high speeds.

To be a really good horse trainer, in any discipline, I think you have to look to experts in other disciplines. Being a member of the Cheshire Hunt, I've made a number of friends and acquaintances who are very involved in producing hunters and racehorses. The conditioning program I use for my event horses has changed after conversations in the hunt field. I very much enjoy squeezing information out of people who have been training horses for decades longer than me. Things like how long to gallop, where to gallop, at what speed and the timing before big events has given me a better understanding of how to get a horse fit and keep him sound at the same time. Foxhunting and racing over fences and eventing all have bits and pieces of techniques we can share with each other.

In the past I've had a number of spooky Warmbloods that I'd try to turn into great eventers. Their dressage and show jumping was exceptional but cross-country was not bred into them. Taking them out with the Cheshire Hunt, back in the second field, got them thinking more like racehorses.

Pancho Villa definitely benefited from this experience: he was unsure and suspicious when I first rode him cross-country but, after hunting all winter last year, I felt like he really started to enjoy himself and become more forward thinking. Watching other horses jump streams and fences also helped him tremendously. He came out in 2015 a to-

tally different horse than the one I'd been dealing with before, and together we helped the U.S. bring home a gold medal from the Pan Am Games in Toronto.

STRIDE FOR STRIDE

In all my years of riding, one thing I've always found a little difficult is jumping fences out of stride on cross country. On a four-star cross-country course, about 65 percent of the jumps are single galloping fences, as opposed to combinations like a water complex or a sunken road. If

you add too many strides or pull on your horse's mouth too much, trying to adjust the stride on the approach, it tires them out and makes it harder to make the time.

Over the last couple years I've befriended Irish timber jockey Mark Beecher, who's a genius at racing at speed over fences. I've always admired his riding and his ability to look like he's doing absolutely nothing as he clears five-foot vertical fences at a full gallop.

He's won the Maryland Hunt Cup twice and is a legend in his sport. It's also worth noting, while we're talking about learning from different sports, that Mark was a champion show jumper before he decided at age 19 that his heart was in timber racing.

I thought Mark could assist me with coming up with a better formula for jumping my event horses cross country, especially over single fences. The combinations at Rolex Kentucky would have nothing to do with Mark's style of riding, but the single fences could have a definite resemblance to timber racing.

After schooling with him a couple times, Mark gave me a couple of tips for rebalancing the horse without taking back on the approach. It's a very subtle move and then you can jump out of stride or even move up to the fence, leaving one or two strides less than I've been accustomed to. It's a wonderful example of how an expert in another sport helped me in my training.

OUT OF THE DRESSAGE BOX

At our farm in Pennsylvania and at our winter base in Aiken, both Silva and I have a number of high-level



Mark Beecher and Professor Maxwell, winners of the 2013 Maryland Hunt Cup.

dressage and event horses, as well as a number of youngsters with promising careers ahead of them. Through the years, I've noticed a lot of dressage trainers basically tack up in the barn, ride to the 60 x 20 arena, work their horses and then ride directly back to the barn, six days a week. While this is the essence of a dressage career, I've seen Silva's training evolve over the years: a lot of her three-, four- and five-year-olds now do trot sets around the cross-country course, jump small show jumps, do cavalletti and hack down the roads with garbage trucks and other scary things rumbling by. All of her young dressage horses also trot through our water jump.

I think Silva is able to produce horses with a much better mental state, thanks to this background. Before, whenever she went to a new venue, all the excitement took its toll on the young horses. Now, when they get to a competition, they've seen a lot more of the 'real world' thanks to her cross training, and it shows in the way they calmly handle new situations.

Don't get me wrong: I definitely benefit in this deal, as Silva is constantly sitting on my top event horses, schooling them on the flat for me. She also puts the flying changes on all my horses to make sure they're correctly started. Her understanding of the art of dressage is far beyond my capabilities and I must admit that over the years I've gotten a bit lazy!

Thanks to Silva's knowledge and abilities, I believe all the event horses and riders that come to our farm have a slightly better feel for dressage because we're surrounded by true dressage riders in their shiny boots, sitting up straight and doing everything correctly. It's a good influence on us scruffy eventers who are striving to produce horses to a high level.

THE WRAP-UP

It's great to specialize and become really good at what you do. But focusing intently on your own sport can prevent you from learning valuable lessons from experts in other fields. There are lots of great ways to expose yourself to equestrian disciplines other than your own: attend a clinic as an auditor, visit a competition as a spectator or go directly to an expert.

In short, don't be afraid to ask questions. It is, quite simply, the best way to learn something new. **WT**

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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