



# Clinic Report: Lester Buckley's East Coast Open Horsemanship Clinic 2014

By Nancy David Dillon

At a grand old Virginia horse farm in late April, a diverse group of riders met for a horsemanship clinic with Lester Buckley, who blends the principles of Ray Hunt/Tom Dorrance with classical dressage and jumping from Europe. A typical take-away message was, "my horse and I are partners and I owe her 'payment' or 'thanks' for her efforts so that my riding becomes less a series of demands and corrections than of requests and payments," as one rider put it. The group embraced Lester's style of training that makes both horse and human "feel like winners," encourages harmony and minimizes conflict.

This was Lester's third clinic in Virginia since 2011 and there were many eager returning riders along with the newcomers. Private and semi-private lessons throughout the three days included English and Western riders, an upper-level dressage horse, a fox hunter, a just-started three-year-old event prospect, a ranch sorter, an experienced event horse and two rescue horses along with trail horses and show horses. Lester presented a mounted demonstration each day on Wendy Murdoch's multi-talented horse Al, showing warm-up, schooling and cool-down while narrating his ride.

The "training scale" as used by the German Federation provides touchstones for Lester's work. The first three elements of the scale are: rhythm, suppleness (or relaxation) and contact. Most riders were working at this level. The concept is to establish and to maintain rhythm in each gait with physical and mental suppleness and then to request a nice contact from the horse. Should the rhythm falter or the suppleness wane then re-establish both before proceeding. This is a standard approach, but it speaks more to the "what" than to the "how" of training a horse.

For Lester, the Hunt/Dorrance principles including "offer a feel" and "set it up and wait" provide the way forward. A first-time participant learned that "you must reward even the slightest move in the right direction and that the timing of the reward is so crucial. [Lester] said that it is better to be too early than to be slow in rewarding because you want to reward the horse for beginning to think about doing what you want and not let [the horse] think that she didn't get it right because your reward came too late."

Lester explained how the footfall in each gait defines the rhythm and that it should not vary as the horse moves through exercises such as serpentines, circles, and shallow leg-yields



Lester Buckley and Star. Photo by Mary Buckley.

along the fence and more. Riders practiced the exercises at the walk and trot, allowing both them and their horses plenty of time to feel the correct alignment and transitions into and out of the movements. Physical and mental suppleness of both horse and rider were encouraged by "asking the horse a question, getting an answer and saying 'thank you'" before seeking more. Many horses stretched into a soft contact once the first two elements were achieved and their riders smiled a lot!

Some attendees were new to these ideas and Lester's mounted demonstrations showed how they flow together once established. Each day, Lester warmed up by guiding Al on easy bending lines and changes of direction mainly using his "intention" as manifested through his body, with minimal use of the hands. Al responded by lengthening his stride, stretching his top line and reaching with his hind legs so that a light contact was achieved. Then they worked towards the upper levels of the training scale: impulsion, straightness and collection. Lester and Al first met just a few days before, so clinic attendees were treated to a very "real" view of a skillful rider getting to know

a new (and very nice) horse. So soon after a very long Virginia winter, Al was not ready to offer true collection, but did show nice impulsion with straightness.

"There are few people to whom I would entrust my horse, Al, to use for demonstration purposes without being present. Lester is one of those people," remarked Wendy. "After introducing Al and Lester to each other I got on a plane bound for Portland, Oregon, entrusting my horse to his hands and seat. It was obvious after spending only a few hours with him that Lester's philosophy and intent is to treat all those he comes in contact with (both horses and humans) with kind respect. He truly cares that the horse enjoys him as much as he enjoys each horse while still asking them to work for a living."

Several attendees especially enjoyed watching Lester work with the athletic three-year-old event prospect, on the ground the first day and with a rider the second. The groundwork was directed mainly at gaining the filly's attention, rhythm and relaxation in a strange place with lots of distractions. Lester asked for simple responses such as looking at him and moving her quarters away. When she looked off or played, he brought her attention back as quietly as possible; for example, by wiggling the rope, then "paid her" with a little release.

"One of the most interesting things I noticed when he was working [the young] horse was his body 'aura', what most people might call body language, but it was more than that. It was just a calm, quiet confidence. Something we would all do well to mimic as much as possible," said one observer. "His methods were safe for the human and gave the horse a positive experience," said another.

On the second day, after Lester repeated some of the groundwork, the owner mounted the filly "with him still holding the rope. At first he was still controlling her while I just sat there, but he gradually had me take over more control. Lots of shifting my eyes, turning my chest to steer. When she stopped, he had me 'rub' her side with just one (inside) leg. He said not to tap or kick, and not to use the other leg at all. When I used my reins, he had me hold them very wide," she recalled. "I now have some new tools to use to establish respect, and forward, without confrontation."

## The Missing Link

### By Marjorie Chema (clinic participant)

If you've never met Lester Buckley, original Texan cowboy now expanded to Hawaii and classical dressage, you're in for a genuine treat. What's the saying? He's 'the real deal'...horseman extraordinaire who is knowledgeable in so many of the horse disciplines including reining, cutting, cow horse, bridle-less riding, classical dressage and sport jumping. I myself had no idea what the clinic I attended would bring. Let me just say it was an eye-opening experience.

This man in three short days explained, demonstrated and instructed on the tie from 'natural' horsemanship to classical dressage that I have been seeking forever. All those years of modern dressage lessons that sometimes left a bitter taste in my mouth, and sadly sometimes in my horse's mouth, now have a new meaning and purpose. My twenty plus year quest

of "natural" horsemanship has a new partnership with classical dressage. Mr. Buckley, humble servant of the horse, authenticated the link that clearly exists between what man brings to the horse and what serves the horse best. My best discovery, delivered by Lester, was that I no longer had to throw away my reins but could use them in the best way for the horse, and sometimes that means as little as possible. He guided me in the discovery of the link between elusive horsemanship and fabled classical dressage. And guess what...it's amazingly simple!

### Biographical notes for Nancy David Dillon

I've been riding since I was less than two years old. My mother was a riding instructor when I was a child and she had a knack for choosing ponies and horses for me that would teach me what I needed to learn at every turn! Another major influence came from the US Cavalry officers who still taught horsemanship in our area in those days. I was briefly in Pony Club and while in high school began eventing and fox hunting in Virginia.

I started a homebred Connemara cross with Lendon Gray at her facility in New York and eventually reached 4th level with him. More recently, I have been breeding, training, showing and fox hunting purebred Connemaras here in Virginia. In 2006, I did a colt-starting clinic at Gang Ranch in British Columbia with Ray Hunt, there met Tom and Trina Curtin and have attended most of Tom's Virginia clinics ever since. That's where I met Marjorie.

As Marjorie stated so well, once I understood what Ray was offering, I could no longer be satisfied with (especially) the dressage riding I was doing. That's when I heard Lester on The Horse Show and thought perhaps he had the answers that I was seeking. My interactions with Lester have been immensely rewarding, both as a rider and as a clinic organizer. The people I respect most in my horse world (like Marjorie) have all had the same strong positive reaction to Lester. I am proud to bring Lester to Virginia for everyone who wants to share in his knowledge.

The classical riding pyramid is a list of elements of training which culminate in the requirement of riding a horse calm, forward and straight. I would fiercely argue that there is not a horse discipline that doesn't rely on these three requirements. I love sayings that demonstrate the principle, like, "a crooked



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horse is unsure and an unsure horse is crooked," or "you can't train a horse that won't move its feet", or just open your eyes and watch an excited out-of-control horse...definitely no calmness there. Mr. Buckley applies the classical training elements to his instruction so ingeniously. His instructions deviated a little for each horse and rider, but he always followed the classical principles of training, dovetailed with a liberal dose of horsemanship. This suited the horse perfectly and consequently the rider had every advantage of a harmonious ride. The participants in the clinic came from all walks. At one point I was intrigued to watch a lovely TB mare that was very anxious. Lester had the rider use all the aids but minimized hand involvement. The mare got softer with the bending and suppling of the classical approach but still had a desire to leave. Lester simply instructed the rider to allow the mare the freedom to move off, and then in the new location "get busy." In no time flat in the immortal words of Tom Dorrance, "that mare only wanted to be wherever the rider was."

Lester talked a great deal about sharing your intent with the horse. I thought I knew about that from my days of cross country jumping, you know look for your next jump so the horse knows where you're going. It never occurred to me that like a school of fish the horse relies on the energy of your intent. The intent tells the horse what your plan is, what preparation is necessary and ultimately the execution of the plan. Just imagine gracefully curving at a floating trot around the end of the arena.

Lester had wonderful, deceptively simple exercises which involved all the aids, but minimized the hands. He encourages gentle application of the aids; remember that a horse can feel a fly. The result was beautiful riding with a horse that was forward, straight and calm.

Lester revealed some of his philosophy, talking about his own life experiences and bridle-less riding - a practice, I must admit, the value of which has previously left me a bit perplexed. Lester said that the bridle-less riding allowed him to develop and rely exclusively on the other aids, and of course find out how little the hands needed to be involved in riding, and ultimately how that paid off for the horse. I was intrigued. I asked him specifically where the use of hands came in the hierarchy of aid use. He unequivocally said...LAST. He demonstrated this principle by power of looking out over the horse's ear while turning a corner, without use of your hands. Like magic it worked every time. He also told some humorous stories of his time in Germany while learning their classical approach to riding and training. Apparently he didn't always play by their rules since he introduced much of his own horsemanship skills.

Lester Buckley is a gifted and kind instructor. His use of the classical riding exercises was peppered with acknowledgment of the horse's try. He was always calling out to "pay" the horse, in the most meaningful way of all, with quiet riding. Gradually I watched the development of the engagement of the horse's hind-



Photo by Mary Buckley

quarters without the drama associated with heavy hand use that confusingly stops the horse's action in the front while spurring the hind end. The horses under Lester's tutelage advanced in a linear fashion with minimal fuss and lots of praise.

It seems to me that Lester's intention in his clinics is to offer the horse the best deal possible, rewarding the horse's many efforts by using the principles of classical training all the while skillfully weaving in natural horsemanship resulting in what each rider desires: a calm, straight and forward horse, a willing partner happy to be with that rider.

### *Biographical notes for Marjorie Chema*

Grew up in Puerto Rico with horses since 7 years old. No formal lesson until I was thirty.. Started twenty-five years of dressage lesson with Beth Adams, Karen Monks Reilly and Captain Andy. Myriad of jumping instructors including Lucinda Green, Jimmy Wofford and Diane Albine. Learned driving at the hands of Larry Pollin and Doug Darlington. Moved to California in 1988 and worked four horses with Tom Dorrance, a cow phobic appendix QH, a driving QH mare, a neighbor's exuberant and spoiled Trekhane gelding, and started an Arabian colt for a semester at the Merced College under the tutelage of Tom Dorrance and Bob Barrett. Returned to New England in 1990 and spent the next twelve years trying out different natural horsemanship proponents. Fox Hunted in various capacities with Wentworth Hunt of New England from 1980 until 2004, and Whipped In for Colonial Hunt in Virginia from 2004 until 2010. In 2004 began to consistently participate in Tom Curtin Horsemanship clinics and spend two weeks annually at winter camp at Tom's ranch in North Florida. Started two colts with Tom that are now 12 and 4 years old.

During the 90's until mid-2004 competed in Eventing thru prelim one of four representing Area 1 on the Area 1 Adult Amateur team riding a talented Connemara/ TB. Mid-90's successfully competed a driving pair up thru Intermediate in combined driving. In 2011, selected to compete in America's Favorite Trail Horse, filmed in Blanco, Texas. Placed top ten, won \$10,000 dollars and quit competing. Now ride and learn for the joy of it.