

IMPROVING YOUR SEAT

A Lesson With Michelle Gibson

*Photo On The
Facing Page:*

*Michelle &
Peron in the
show arena.
Michelle ex-
plains, "If you
have problems
that occur only
in the show
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that don't give."*

*Photograph by
Cheryl Bender.*

*"C*hallenge yourself to develop a better seat," urges Michelle Gibson. Michelle is famous for riding the charismatic horse Peron to a Bronze Team Medal as well as a fifth place individually at the 1996 Olympic Games. The first American in history to receive a special award from the German dressage community honoring her multiple Grand Prix triumphs in Europe, she continues to live and train in Germany. Michelle's post-Olympic plans include a series of clinics in the United States. If you are fortunate enough to attend a Michelle Gibson clinic, you're likely to hear a lot about learning to ride forward, to give with your hands and to develop a relaxed seat.

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Michelle & Peron show off the style & gaits that made them the darlings of Europe & riveted the crowds at the 1996 Olympics. Photograph by Cheryl Bender.



Michelle Gibson,

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Ride From Your Seat

Michelle begins, "I'd like to see riders at all levels riding more forward from the seat. So many riders need to sit heavier in the saddle—they need to put more weight in the seat. What they're doing instead is perching forward and holding on with their upper thighs. You can't ride your horse forward very well that way! Riders should *not* be taught to hang on with their legs. It is much better to teach riders to relax their legs. Relaxing the legs immediately puts more weight in the seat. Perching forward is a *bad* habit—it reveals that the rider has an insecure seat. It also hints that the horse could be too strong in the rider's hands.

"Don't think that the habit of perching is limited to riders in the lower levels—it's not! But you can see it starting then, right at the beginning. Riders should be taught right from the start that *an insecure seat makes it difficult to give the horse the aids that he needs*. A perched rider will find it difficult to do *so* many basic things: to give a half halt, or to shift weight to the inside in half pass.

"The first step to correcting a perched seat, or any other position problem, is having someone watch you. A mirror can help too. Then, say at the walk, take your legs off the saddle and relax them down. This will immediately pull you back down into the seat of the saddle. Do this several times during every ride.

"Lots of riders are aware that they perch forward. They try not to, but it happens anyway, especially in tense situations. In the show arena, or when the horse is resisting, the rider tries harder, applies more pressure on the saddle with the knees, and starts to squeeze with the upper thighs . . . and all of this makes the rider perch that much more!

"Lower level riders in particular should challenge themselves to develop a better seat. I like to see them practice relaxing their legs down. I also like to see them riding without stirrups. Another good exercise is to learn sitting trot by going to the

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Michelle practices what she preaches: "I believe in bending the horse through the jowl instead of over-bending at the base of the neck." Photograph by Cheryl Bender.

Michelle confides that, when monitoring her own position in the saddle, she has to work on not leaning back too far or letting her reins get too long. Photograph by Cheryl Bender.



sitting trot from walk—don't go through posting trot. This is an easy start to sitting properly at the sitting trot. It helps the rider keep a correct seat.

"Working without reins and stirrups on the lunge line is great for establishing a good seat, but I'd like to stress something very important *before* anybody goes on the lunge line: the instructor must be knowledgeable about this kind of work! The instructor must know the safety rules. Working without reins and stirrups can be kind of scary; the rider is relying on a knowledgeable instructor to conduct a good lesson on the lunge line. When it's done correctly, the rider learns to trust the horse. It's wonderful for building confidence. It's excellent for teaching mobility (how to move the right leg and the left arm independently, and so on), and the result is a better rider with a more secure seat.

"First- to Second-Level riders," Michelle continues, "can have a wide variety of position problems. You'll see everything from perching forward to leaning too far back to people that don't know how to use a half halt.

"The most important thing to learn at this level is the beginning of collection in all three gaits. A basic exercise would be to collect for about seven steps on the half circle. You see a lot of horses that are strung out, and I urge riders not to wait too long to work on collection. Collection won't just *happen* one day. You have to work on it! Some simple shoulder-in work can prepare any horse for more serious collection later. You don't have to wait until your horse is five years old to start shoulder-in. A four-year-old that has been ridden for six months can start working on the beginnings of steering and collection with shoulder-in. But—and this is important—the horse must have a rider who is clear in his aids.

"I prefer to see a Second Level rider mounted on a horse that goes Third or Fourth Level. This is a very good situation. You can work on so many things, like transitions between collection and

lengthening, or using the seat for half halts. You can practice really riding into the corners and using the whole arena. Lateral movements are great exercises. At this level, with this horse, you should be able to feel when the horse is strung out and know how to use a half halt in the corner or a shoulder-in to get the horse back together."

The Half Halt

"The half halt is a necessity," Michelle says. "Most riders are *trying* to do it right. But 99 percent of them don't have a true understanding of what a half halt *is*. They hear their instructors say 'half halt,' but they don't grasp it! Well, by the Second Level you *need* to grasp this! Once you have a steady, confident seat and some mobility in the saddle, the first thing to learn is how to make half halts.

"The half halt can be used to bring the horse back to slower gait or to balance him within a gait, but either way,

you don't want him lagging out behind your leg. You don't want him running through your hands. You want to use your seat slightly against the movement of the horse, close your leg, and half halt with a quiet hand. Don't expect the half halt to last six strides, but it should hold for two or three strides.

"We started out talking about how riders need to relax in their saddles in order to ride forward more effectively. Then we discussed learning to make a correct half halt. You might think that a half halt is the opposite of forwardness, but it's not! It's extremely important to understand how half halt and forwardness are related.

"'Forwardness' does *not* mean going faster. You can use the word 'forward' to mean an extended trot or canter, but the idea in those gaits is extension, not speed.

"'Half halt' does *not* mean getting the horse to stop. It especially does not

COMMENTS ON

German-American RELATIONS

Michelle Gibson is one of a small, elite group of American riders who can say they're as comfortable in the German dressage community as they are in the American riding scene. Michelle has lived, trained and competed extensively—and with extraordinary success—in both Germany and America. The relationship between the United States and Germany is complex, based on mutual respect and some pretty intense competitiveness. It's further complicated by the fact that the Germans are traditionally heralded as the finest dressage riders in the world; their reputation is intimidating.

"The first thing you notice in Germany is how competitive they are. German riders are *extremely* competitive," Michelle says. "I'm acquainted with many of the riders in Germany, and I feel they've accepted me. Two years ago, when I came out at the Grand Prix Level, I actually felt that the Germans accepted me faster than the Americans did! I think I know why. I was riding in Germany then. The Germans *saw* me and my horse scoring 75 percent. It's always easier to believe scores when you're there to see them. Maybe riders in the U.S. said to themselves, 'Judges must be scoring high over there.' But my point is, it's absolutely not impossible for an American rider to become part of the German community! The members of the United States Equestrian Team have also been very supportive. They made me feel very accepted.

"I'm very focussed when I'm competing. All of the top riders are—we *have* to be. Often people misunderstand and take it personally. It's important to understand this intensity of competitiveness. I think it's also important for Americans to have good will towards the other competitors. Part of this is to have fun and enjoy the riding, the horses, and the people with whom we have a lot in common."

mean making the horse tighten up or stiffen against your hands! These warning signs definitely tell you that your horse is resisting the half halt. You want him to half halt with a relaxed back and an engaged hind leg. When the half halt encourages the horse to relax his back and engage his hind legs underneath him, *it enables him to go forward better*. If you can balance him slightly with a half halt and then bring a relaxed back and engaged hind leg through to your next movement, you have performed a good half halt."

Half Halt For Advanced Riders

"I often see advanced riders with reins that are too long. Also, holding the horse's mouth too long during the half halt is a common mistake. And many riders become complacent with their leg aids, and you see horses that aren't trained to be sensitive to the rider's legs. To advanced riders, I say: remember to give the horse the freedom he needs. Use the half halts to engage and balance him, then give again! Too many riders forget to give afterwards.

"Try this exercise. Trot on a circle. Collect the trot with a half halt, *then give with your hands and try to keep the horse collected by using only your seat* for two or three strides. If the horse immediately lunges forward, that means you have been riding him with way too much pressure in front. If the horse immediately loses his bend, then he's been using your hand too much. You can correct this by suppling and bending the horse around your inside leg. I believe in bending the horse through the jowl instead of over-bending at the base of the neck.

"Practice riding forward from the seat, keeping the impulsion forward, then give with your hands again. You have to be able to give with your hand, or all you and the horse have is a pulling contest. So whenever he relaxes and goes forward, you should reward him by giving!"

In The Show Arena

"I have the opposite problem from perching forward; I lean back too far. I lean my upper body behind my hips and

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Michelle Gibson,

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then my reins get too long. I don't know where I came up with this habit. (Maybe it is compensation for trying not to get too far forward.) In general, you see a lot of riders with their reins too long—not just at home, but in the show arena as well! Long reins make lots of things more difficult—your steering ability is less, you may have a hard time riding corners accurately, and it's more difficult to get a correct half pass or to keep a straight line. Even a simple circle is harder if your reins are too long! Shorten your reins and try again. When I let my reins get long, I have problems keeping my horse balanced through the neck. I can't get the horse more together in front until I shorten my reins. I try to be aware of this problem so I can fix it!

"If you have problems that occur only in the show arena, check to see if they go back to a tense seat or hands that don't give. Engagement of the hind leg affects *everything* you do in your test, and your horse can't engage if he's stiff against your hand, and you're perched up on your thighs. Soften your seat and

give with your hands to encourage your horse to be more on the aids. Getting him on the aids will improve everything in your test! Ride deep into the corners and use that time to prepare for the next movement. Be aware of any stiffening because resistance takes away your accuracy. If your half halt isn't coming through the way you want it to, you will not be able to make the transition where you wanted it to be.

"Advanced riders are used to dealing with pressure in the show arena. They learn to keep their nerves from translating into rigid hands. If you have a tendency to go rigid when you show, the first step is to be aware of when it's happening. Maybe your horse has been doing very nice half halts at home. Then you go to a show . . . and all of a sudden your horse does things in the middle of the test that he would never do at home. He's very resistant, or he's way too strong in your hand. You're probably holding on to him too much. He wishes you'd give a little, but you are afraid to let go!

"Try to work on this in the warm up. Know that you're nervous and make a

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Michelle stresses to riders of all levels, "The best training methods are based very much on trust and respect." Photograph by Cheryl Bender.

conscious effort to give with your hands. As soon as your horse stiffens or won't bend, ask for a half halt and then ask for the bend again. Do not be afraid to give with your hand and let the horse go forward.

"I do not mean riders should throw the horse away just because I said to give. It's different for every horse and rider. Upper level riders might want to give one inch. Or three inches. The reins don't have to go slack; the horse just has to have the freedom to go forward."

Advice For New Riders

Michelle has an important message for newcomers to the sport of dressage. "You'll want to buy a horse once you get past the point of riding school horses. *Get a horse that is more advanced than you are.* It's much, *much* easier to learn on a horse that knows the movements. A green rider who is trying to ride a green horse usually has big problems with position and resistance.

"Also, find a good instructor! You can't read a book, watch a video, and then go train your horse to Grand Prix. It does not work that way! Get an instructor. An instructor can improve your riding more quickly, and can teach you more, and can help you understand what your horse needs. A beginner on a Third Level horse can learn the basic movements from the horse and eventually go on to teach the horse even more.

"People who are serious about riding take at least two lessons per week. Put your horse in training (or at least have your instructor tune him). Clinics are good if you select one or two clinicians who have similar approaches to your own, but clinics are *not* a replacement for weekly lessons with your instructor. Don't take every clinic that comes down the line; pick and choose a few people based on what works for *you*. It takes a very advanced rider to go to lots of different clinics, taught by people with opposite techniques, and sort out all that conflicting information. I don't think beginners should try it."



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Steffen Peters

1996 Olympic Bronze Medalist

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Building Horse/Rider Rapport

"You and the horse must respect each other. If the horse can bully you to get his own way, he's going to! You must be able to stand your ground if you want his respect. If you're fair so he can trust you, and firm so he can respect you, you have made a good start on building a rapport. The best training methods are based very much on trust *and* respect.

"A rider who trusts and respects the horse can relax in the saddle and believe that the right things will happen

when she asks him to do something. The rider who does not believe in her horse has a difficult time riding a relaxed and confident test. If you ask for a passage-piaffe transition, but you don't believe your horse will actually *do* it, he probably *won't* do it! A rider who believes is thinking, 'I know he's going to do it. He feels a little lazy, but we can correct that, and our transition will happen.'

"The relaxed, confident ride is softer. It gives the horse the freedom to perform

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Michelle Gibson,

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the movement. You don't want to have the horse 100 percent under control—he needs *some* freedom!

“Often I think people are too strict with their horses. The horse might give a little feel-good buck. As long as it's not nasty, let him do it! He might shake his head when he's really fresh. Let him do it. The horse might kick out as you're working on something difficult and you touch him with the spur or whip. Most riders would respond with an immediate, harsh reprimand. But when I'm teaching a horse to piaffe and he kicks out, I think it's no big deal. He's releasing tension. I wait, and I try again. If he kicks out the second time, I get after him. (I use the spur or whip to get after him, not my hands.) Then I go back to the aids like before. Always deal with problems in a positive manner and then go back to riding forward. This gives the horse confidence to try again. It's fine to punish a naughty horse, but you have to know how to take the punishment just far enough. A horse has to get pretty nasty before I *really* get after him.

“Every rider has to learn the borderline between being too strict and letting the horse run all over you. Remember, if you're too strict the horse won't have the freedom he needs to perform.”

One of Michelle's competitive advantages is her gift for building a strong rapport with her mounts. She explains, “Part of building a good rapport is working with your horse on a daily basis. I muck, I groom—I'm around my horses every day. When I say riders should work with their horses daily, I do not mean they should baby their horses all day long. Part of respect is understanding that all animals, especially horses, need their own space. Your horse needs some time alone.

“I have a great respect for my horses. The horse is not a toy. He is much more than a toy! If you can develop a confident, trusting, mutually respectful relationship, you'll be halfway to accomplishing whatever you want to do with the horse.” ■