

# THE GIBSON METHOD:

**I**f the name of Michelle Gibson isn't instantly recognizable to you, you *really* haven't been paying attention.

Even if dressage isn't your game, Michelle Gibson's performance, as part of the bronze-medal-winning American team at the Atlanta Games in 1996, was a highlight you could hardly have helped celebrate . . . and the fact that Michelle was the hometown favorite (hailing from the nearby Roswell, Georgia) certainly didn't hurt her popularity. Her unprecedented achievements include posting the highest scores ever for an American individual in dressage (75.20 percent in the Grand Prix, 74.28 percent in the Grand Prix Special, and 73.35 percent in the Freestyle), and becoming the only American rider ever to have received Germany's Reiterabzeichen, or "Golden Rider Award," from the president of the German Equestrian Federation. She earned the award by racking up 10 Grand Prix victories in Germany in a single year.

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Michelle Gibson may be most famous for her partnership with Trakehner stallion Peron. Michelle and the famous stallion show off the form that earned a piece of the U.S.'s Team Bronze at the '96 Olympics in this Cheryl Bender photo.



Michelle now teaches popular clinics, in addition to training up-

and-coming Grand Prix dressage horses. Here, she explains suppleness to a rider at a clinic held in Ohio last summer.

Photograph by Karen Briggs.

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Petite and slender, with blue-gray eyes, light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, and a set of braces that make her seem even younger, Michelle out of her shadbelly looks like a million other young women who frequent stalls and tack rooms . . . but her riding skills have been honed by over six years in Warendorf, Germany, training with the legendary Willi Shultheis (13-time national dressage champion), and his disciple and successor, Rudolf Zeilinger. Now Michelle has launched the next stage of her career by relocating to her native Georgia and Applewood Farm, Laura and Brad Thatcher's small facility near Atlanta. The Thatchers, friends as well as business partners to Michelle, are sponsoring her and providing her with assistance in the purchase of young dressage prospects.

The decision to come back to the U.S. was a difficult one for Michelle. "The idea (of staying in Germany) was appealing," she says. "I have a great personal life there, and the business was going fine. But I wanted to be involved with dressage in the States."

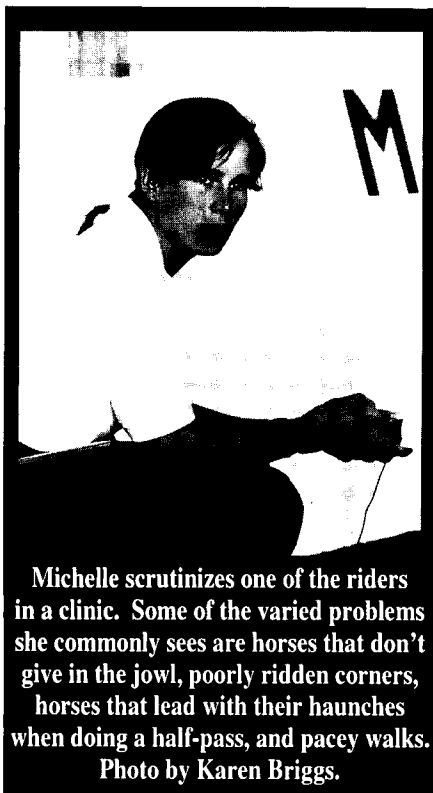
In the spirit of giving back to the sport she loves, Michelle has been active ever since the Olympics in teaching clinics across the U.S. Her perspective on training horses for upper levels is proving an eye-opener for a great many riders who aspire to Grand Prix competition. Here, she shares some tips on schooling and techniques for developing specific movements.

## Supple And Through

While every dressage coach has her own way of describing the process of making a horse 'supple,' Michelle Gibson's way is based on asking the horse to give through his jowl and flex at the poll. "When I want a rider to supple her horse," Michelle says, "I want her to position the horse's head—through the poll and through the jowl. I'm not interested in seeing the rider bending the neck right and left, because anyone can do that. The interesting part is when (the horse) gives through the jowl, be-

cause that's where horses hold against (the rider).

"So when I ask a rider to supple her horse, I just want her to take a little bit of pressure on the inside rein, with a driving aid . . . maybe even a tiny little bit of movement on the rein . . . and then relax it. I don't believe in jiggling or vibrating the rein; normally, just the movement of taking the rein back by one or two centimeters is enough. And not a give and take," she explains, "but just taking the pressure, holding it for a few seconds, and then relaxing it."



Michelle scrutinizes one of the riders in a clinic. Some of the varied problems she commonly sees are horses that don't give in the jowl, poorly ridden corners, horses that lead with their haunches when doing a half-pass, and pacey walks. Photo by Karen Briggs.

"If you've got a horse who's holding against you, you have to drive with your seat as you do this. Or, if you've got a horse who is running through the hand, then you must really half-halt, position the horse's head (with your inside rein) to try and get him to relax in the poll and the jowl, and drive (with the seat) at the same time. Then, when you feel the horse give even a little bit, you can relax the pressure. Normally, the horse will relax and yield then. It may be only for one to two strides to begin with, but you can ask again and again."

Establishing this first step is crucial if horse and rider are to establish a useful communication. Horses that get

'tight' through the neck can sometimes short-circuit this contact, by elevating their heads and necks and coming forward of the vertical in their head carriage. Even at Grand Prix level, where the carriage of the forehand is expected to be markedly 'uphill,' a horse whose neck is too high is one who is working with tension.

If a horse is not 'through the neck' or 'through the poll,' Michelle says, he's "coming up in the neck and a little forward of the vertical—and I use the word vertical because that's a term most people can relate to, and can picture in their minds." When this is happening, "the horse is not really soft in the neck or giving in the jowl. The rider needs to supple a little, soften the horse through the jowl (as above), and ask him to come a little rounder in the neck, and therefore come more through the poll." She adds, "A little more motivation from the hind leg also helps." The result is a neck which drops its profile a couple of centimeters—and more relaxation over the topline.

## Trouble-Shooting: Riding Corners

From basic concepts right through to the development of specific upper-level movements, it's important to pay attention to the details.

One of the basic problems Michelle says she sees again and again is difficulty in riding a correct corner. "I'm not sure why," she says, "but American riders ride poor corners. What seems to be a phenomenon here is riding a horse straight through the corners—and the result is that the horse is not truly balanced and not truly going onto the outside rein . . . which are basic tenets of dressage.

"It's not so easy to ride a corner correctly—it's work to do it properly—but it's so important. If your corner is correct, your horse will be collected, carrying himself, and prepared for whatever you're going to ask him to do next."

So how do you ride a correct corner? With bend, rhythm, and impulsion that is conserved, or even increased, as the horse travels the corner. The corrections you make will depend on your horse's

habits and weaknesses. "If you have a horse who likes to throw his haunches in," explains Michelle, "then you're going to half-halt before the corner and ride a slight shoulder-fore through the corner. As you come out of the corner, you drive the horse forward, so the impulsion is there. In every single corner."

For horses who like to drop the inside shoulder and counter-bend through the corners, Gibson has this suggestion. "With this type of horse, you really have to prepare. If you can first work on a circle, getting the horse to relax over the neck, bending to the inside, and moving away from the inside leg into the outside rein, then riding corners is just a matter of keeping him bent to the inside. You might even want to indulge in a little over-bending (for schooling purposes)."

### Half Pass

Half-pass, though one of the more advanced maneuvers a dressage horse learns, is a movement that Michelle says can be introduced quite early. "When my (young) horses are able to do a shoulder-in, and I feel as if they are listening to me and I can get results from my half-halts, then I start the half-pass," she explains. "Usually I start off in trot, but it depends on the horse. With some, they just can't handle it at first in trot, so I may ask in canter if they're really balanced at the canter and listen well. The best way to introduce it is from the second track (the quarter-line of the arena), with just a little bit of positioning (to the inside). I just ask as far as the center-line of the ring. Not too much—just enough, so I can feel my horse is moving away from the outside leg with a little bit of bending. Usually at the beginning, in canter, the horse really wants to gain speed, and that's not so tragic. You just go back on a circle, get him back together, and try it again, until the horse feels comfortable."

With young horses, Michelle says, the amount of bend you achieve in the half-pass is less important than the positioning, and that you are able to bring the haunches 'with you' and move them over along with the forehand. "In a 60-meter arena, if you are able to start at the beginning of the long side and get a half-pass to the center-line, that's good.

From there, you can gradually ask for more, and then you can add more bending. But the shoulder-in is the building block—you need to establish that first."

One flaw Michelle says she witnesses a lot is horses whose haunches are leading in half-pass. "Half-pass should always begin with the shoulder-in," she emphasizes. "If you are half-passing to the left, for example, and the horse keeps falling in with his shoulders or haunches, you can correct him by riding half-pass to shoulder-in, to half-pass, to shoulder-in. That helps to develop the bending and the carriage that you need for correct half-pass. In the shoulder-in, the rider is able to get the shoulders (or haunches) back where they need to be."



Known for her top Grand Prix placings in Germany, Michelle is aware that European competitions hold a powerful mystique for American riders. She says, "Just like they're not all great riders in America, they're not all great riders in Germany. The difference is that there is a larger population of riders in Germany, in a much smaller area." Photo by Cheryl Bender.

Riding zigzags in half-pass can provide opportunity for a horse's haunches to drift. "When you are changing the bend often, what happens is that the haunches begin to lead. So if you half-pass to the left, try straightening for a stride or two before you change direction, then ride a shoulder-in right before you go into right half-pass. Doing this naturally gives you the bend and the angle that you need." You may even be able to sneak a couple of steps of shoulder-in like this in a competition

situation, Michelle says, to help ensure the correct amount of bend.

### Canter Pirouettes

Maintaining the rhythm of the gait is one of the big issues when schooling canter pirouettes, according to Michelle. She often sees horses who are learning to perform pirouettes "lose the canter rhythm, and get this big huge canter, so that they are just leaping around the movement. They're not sitting down and carrying the weight, and the pirouette ends up being only about four strides, when it's supposed to be six, ideally. Sometimes, the horse just takes over, and the rider is no longer in control—it happens a lot!"

When schooling pirouettes, it's important to maintain the canter rhythm and not let it get too slow. "You have to have the same canter as in your collected canter. It will be really collected, yes, but not to where there's a definite change, because then the horse is not really sitting down and carrying the weight—it's an evasion. Collecting the canter," she notes, "is not necessarily slowing the canter. If your horse has a tendency to get too slow, you can use shoulder-in or haunches-in in canter, spiraling in (gradually reducing the size of a circle), and tapping him with your whip to remind him to keep the hind legs active, so that he sits down."

### Notes On Pacey Walks, Flying Changes, And Americans In General

A relatively common fault is a 'pacey' walk (one which shows signs of a two-beat, lateral rhythm rather than a four-beat single rhythm). Because the walk is so fundamental to dressage training, flaws in the natural walk rhythm are often severely penalized in competition, but Michelle says there may be a limit to what you can do to correct the flaw. "With some horses, it's natural; with others, it is a sign of nerves. It is not necessarily a sign that their training has been rushed—some horses just have it, and that's the way it is." Michelle adds, "Ideally, those horses are not the ones you want to buy!"

But if you have a horse with a pacey  
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walk already in your barn, she suggests that you deal with it by riding the horse only rarely in walk—and when you do walk, ride a lot of shoulder-in or shoulder-fore. Either of these movements, says Michelle, will help emphasize the four-beat quality of the walk. “Particularly if you have a horse whose pacey walk is the result of tension, the shoulder-in or shoulder-fore will help him to relax. He may improve if you use a lot of that, and try not to put a lot of pressure on him.”

What about flying changes? “A lot of times, you do not see the riders doing the correct preparation,” Michelle says. “They just go hauling it across the arena and ask for the change. The canter’s quality is what regulates the quality of the change—that’s the bottom line.

“Some horses naturally have a great canter, and just—boom!—do a flying change. Some horses have a bad canter but great balance, and they can do the changes. It just depends. But it’s important that the hind leg in the canter is active, and that the horse is really sitting down and preparing himself.” Too much or too little speed can make it virtually impossible for a horse to perform a clean flying change, because his hindquarters aren’t correctly engaged.

Michelle notes that learning the correct timing to ask for flying changes is difficult for many riders. She suggests that riders avoid asking for changes on long, straight lines, choosing instead to school them on short turns across the arena. The reduced time may keep some riders from anticipating the change.

Michelle has some encouraging words for American dressage riders. She says, “Just like they’re not all great riders in America, they’re not all great riders in Germany. The difference is that there is a larger population of riders in Germany, in a much smaller area than here. Our biggest problem is the distance from coast to coast here.” This obstacle can be overcome, she believes, through a systematic and consistent approach to training . . . and an awareness that there are no shortcuts. ■