



Linda Bertschinger with her gelding Pico Nightrider (TLA Halynov x Pico Nightime). "Pico is special to me," says Bertschinger. "Not only is he a special horse, but he is the reason that I met endurance great Valerie Kanavy, for whom I now school horses."

Dressage Therapy

BY GENIE STEWART-SPEARS

WHETHER A HORSE IS DESTINED for local, national, or international competition or a lifetime as a pleasure trail horse, Virginian Linda Bertschinger can improve its performance with classical dressage "therapy."

In a perfect world, riders would have almost telepathic communication with their well-balanced and supple horses. But, as we know, that doesn't just happen; communication is something we strive for with lessons, clinics, reading books, and watching DVDs. Interestingly, training for any discipline is based on the ancient yet fundamental study of classical dressage. Classical dressage is a means of developing a horse to carry itself balanced and on the bit and, as a result, light and responsive and performing to the best of its physical ability.

With reassuring hands and soothing voice, Linda Bertschinger, who apprenticed with French classical dressage master Dominique Barbier, guides the horses in her care to become better athletes physically as well as mentally and, she says, spiritually.

"The inherent nature of classical dressage is to improve the horse. Classical dressage has been tried and tested and proven to work for centuries," she says.

In his book *Dressage Questions Answered*, author and dressage master Charles de Knuffly said, "Classical horsemanship is based on a love for the horse; it is not practiced for the glorification of the rider." He wrote about harsh training methods: "Not only physically induced pain — the pain induced by a rider's hands! — but the mental anguish created by speedy 'riding technology' can produce an unhappy horse. The horse that is happy is a giver! If you cannot tell stories about what your horse is doing for you, there is not much in the way of happiness to talk about."

Linda Bertschinger's clientele typically consists of dressage, show jumper, and reining horse owners, but 11 years ago two-time World Endurance Champion Valerie Kanavy discovered Bertschinger's Midas touch with horses. Since then, notable endurance competitor John Crandell III, who earned The Chronicle of the Horse's Horseman of the Year Award,



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An air of serenity is palpable at Classicus Farm. Classical music wafts through the large indoor arena, stables, and attached home of Linda Bertschinger. There's no rush or commotion. A number of rescue cats, saved from starvation or illness, lounge in the flower gardens and throughout the barn. Horses are pastured in pairs, groups, or singly, depending on their personalities and herd status. A few horses relax in stalls before or after a training session. There is an obvious lack of clutter, physical or mental. It is like a spa for horses. It is a place for horses as well as humans to relax, refresh themselves, and learn without pressure. **Top inset:** Linda Bertschinger and Pico Nightrider doing a shoulder in, and in-hand-work, below.



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A MOMENT IN LIGHTNESS

THE HEADS DROP AND THE EYES SOFTEN
THE JAW YIELDS AND THE SHOULDER MOVES EFFORTLESSLY AWAY
HIS STEP BECOMES YOURS AND YOUR STEP HIS
AND SO THE DANCE BEGINS ...

AS THE HORSE FOLLOWS YOUR LEAD WITH LITTLE OR NO CONTACT OF THE REINS HE REMAINS ROUND, SOFT, COLLECTED
GLIDING AS IF HE IS ON ICE ... A MOMENT IN LIGHTNESS

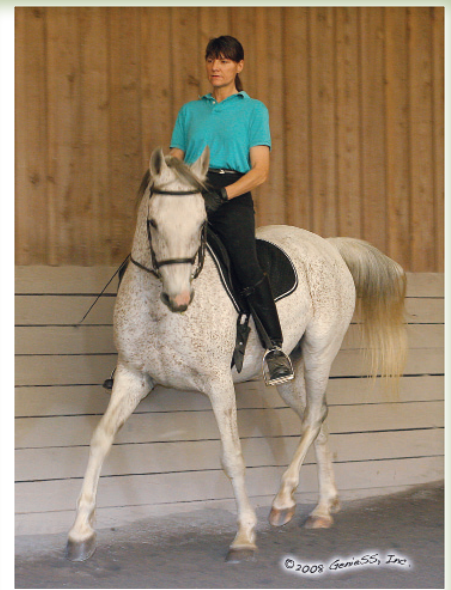
— LINDA BERTSCHINGER



Linda Bertschinger and Silver Ash, aka Smokey (Silver Yathamaar x Nizzet), owned by John Proudman: "Classical dressage is a means to teach the horse to be light in hand and collected, which results in refined control in all situations. You have a lot more control when the horse is listening to you and responding to your aids. This is very important to endurance riders because it makes the horse safer when training and racing. It also gives the horses the ability to use their bodies in a more balanced way to negotiate technical and challenging courses such as through rocks and around trees."

Portuguese riding master Nuno Oliveira defined lightness. "True lightness is simultaneous activity of the hind legs and suppleness of the back, both of which permit the horse to have, from the start of his training, a certain degree of collection, without making him give in by the direct intervention of the rider's hand. This true lightness is the one which assures instant obedience of the horse at the slightest solicitation on the rider's part."

Linda Bertschinger added, "Of course there are varying degrees of lightness depending on the nature of the horse, his conformation, and his level of training. Nevertheless, lightness should serve as a beacon in our endeavor to reach the ultimate in horsemanship."



and upcoming competitor Lisa Green, who won her first FEI 100-mile endurance ride this year, have been added as clients.

Kanavy said, "Originally I sent her troubled horses, but now I send her my young horses. If a horse can learn from the beginning the correct way to use his body, then it reduces my training time."

Kanavy heard about Linda, who lived just over the mountain from the Kanavys' Fort Valley home, from a farrier. At the time (1997), Kanavy had a promising athlete, Pico Nightrider (TLA Halynov by *Halycon x Pico Nightime), but the 16-hand gelding had some behavioral problems. They were so bad that Kanavy was considering euthanasia because she wouldn't sell a dangerous horse. Her last resort to save Pico, as the gelding was called, was to see if what she'd heard about Linda Bertschinger was correct.

"Generally, any problem with Arabians I've encountered,"

said Kanavy, "is that they just don't get enough exercise or consistent work. I always thought an unruly horse could be cured with time and wet saddle pads. But Pico had some real mental issues. While I was able to make some difference in his life, I could never predict when he was going to blow up, and often it would be over nothing. One day I'd think progress had been made and the next day he'd flip out and we'd be back to square one. Pico was a challenge, and he wasn't safe to ride."

Bertschinger started working with Pico at the Kanavys' Gold Medal Farm. Kanavy said, "It was the first time I'd seen intensive groundwork. But I understand what she was doing, and I could tell her sense of timing had a big, positive impact on the horse. She was teaching the horse to be focused, to drive from behind, to be flexible, to be giving, and to work with the handler. It effectively was teaching him the proper way to use his body and focus at the same time."

“Groundwork, or work-in-hand,” as Bertschinger calls it, “is very good mental exercise. The horse’s left and right brain have to communicate to do this, which helps to balance them physically. In other words, it opens brain pathways. It has a relaxing effect on them and it helps them to focus mentally.”

Kanavy said, “Eventually, Pico progressed to where we took him to some races. But, despite Linda’s work, Pico wasn’t cut out to be an endurance horse. Yes, we could ride him and be safe, but he just wasn’t what I wanted. Linda ended up buying the horse and she still has him today.”

“Pico is my buddy,” said Bertschinger with obvious affection for the big horse. “I’ve done a lot of dressage work with him and occasionally trail ride him, but he generally just hangs out and enjoys life and I enjoy having him around.”

“After that experience with Linda’s abilities,” said Kanavy, “I began involving her in the training of our other horses. I now send her my young, green horses, after I get them used to a saddle and bridle and a rider on their back. She does the groundwork and then rides them before I bring them home for the next stage of training. The horses come home very light in the front and in your hands.”

What is it about Linda’s technique that make her special? Kanavy said, “Linda’s timing is incredible and that helps get the job done quicker and without a lot of fuss. She gets good results in a very short time because she has the skills and great timing with her skills. Knowing your job is one thing, but having that instinctual timing to apply in the right moment gets faster and better results.”

John Crandell III, who has made a name for himself in the sport over the years and won the 2006 AERC National Lightweight Championship (and overall race) and the Western States Tevis Cup, and who continues to astound the endurance world with wins and best condition awards, recently discovered what Linda Bertschinger could do to help his horses.

“Good, basic movement education should be a part of every horse’s early development, like sending your child to dance or martial arts lessons,” said Crandell. “Linda teaches basic elements in light, resistance-free response, while helping the horses develop fine motor skills,” continued Crandell. “I would love to develop my own skills in this area and do more of this part personally, but I can’t do everything. It is more efficient to integrate training specialists like Linda into a horse’s development program.

“When classical schooling is applied well, it is something that every horse can benefit from,” said Crandell.



Linda Bertschinger and Silver Ash “Smokey” doing in-hand work. “The groundwork is like doing yoga; it’s a mind-body thing. I work on balance to the left and to the right. I want the horses using both sides equally. These exercises make the horse more athletic and less prone to injury because they become supple and limber.” says Linda.

Dominique Barbier, of Healdsburg, California, is proud of his former student, who takes refresher courses annually. “With classical dressage,” he said, “she is able to help horses tremendously. We use very little hands and very little legs; the physical part of riding is minimum but the mental approach is maximum.

“Linda is exceptionally good with Arabians and difficult horses because of her sensitivity to their needs. She is passionate about horses and training and she is a hardworking person. The mixture of hard work, passion, and sensitivity to the needs of the horses makes her wonderful for the job she does. And, her abilities aren’t restricted to just endurance horses,” emphasized Barbier, “she is an exceptional dressage rider and can take horses to higher levels of dressage.”



In addition to two world championships, Valerie Kanavy, pictured here on Saagre (Flaming Tigre x Samboreesa) during the 2007 FEI/AREC 100-mile competition in Florida, has competed in every region of the United States (in 35 states) and Canada, and in over 20 countries. She has over 17,000 career miles, including seven top ten completions in the race of champions. She has trained and competed with more than 25 horses in 100-mile events, 20 of which were 100-mile winners.

“Dressage is a form of gymnastics,” Kanavy says. “There are no stronger people than wrestlers and gymnasts. You are asking the horse to bend and flex and use his body in a way that not only teaches him to be responsive to the rider, but to strengthen the whole body. It can be cross training for all disciplines. It is teaching the horse to respond to your communications and to use his body in the right way that will build better, stronger muscles than just the training for the discipline of your choice.

“Dressage should be the base of all riding. In this day and age, dressage is often looked at as some kind of prissy, elitist riding confined to an arena. In other parts of the world, you have to earn your way up through levels of riding. You have to have lessons, you can’t just go buy a horse and ride off. Here in America, if you can face forward and not fall off, you can ride. That does work, but if you want to build your horse to a better level, make your horse a better athlete, whether it is for trail riding, reining, endurance, show jumping, or one of the many equestrian sports, classical dressage is the most worthwhile schooling you can do for your horse and yourself.”

Kanavy agreed, “Of course it would help any horse, no matter what discipline it is destined to perform. One of the things, especially with Arabians, that people have to deal with is spooking and shying. If the horse is on the bit and responsive to your legs, the horse is focused on the rider. I’m not going to say it won’t shy, but it is less likely to shy. Part of the work is to bring the horse into you even if it does shy. This classical dressage training teaches them to trust you and follow your direction.

“Most equestrians have a job, other horses, a family, and so they don’t have the time. And they often don’t have the skills or the impeccable timing. Linda is going to do the job in half or even a tenth of the time and she is going to do it much better. Time is money. Even though she charges for what she does, she is fairly reasonable. You and your horse’s safety — what is it worth?” asked Kanavy.

Bertschinger explained her work with horses. “The touchstone to what I do is lightness. I don’t do anything that can’t be done in lightness and that is extremely important to me.

“When I get a horse in training the goal is always the same — to make the horse comfortable both mentally, physically, and spiritually.”

She explained spiritually comfortable: “It is when a horse is in a state of peacefulness. The horse is peaceful and willing. It is when horse and rider can truly connect, can become one. This can be achieved through training with the right attitude and the right intentions. One must let go of the ego to achieve such a state of being. Letting go of your ego is having no expectations but rather allowing or accepting the horse as he is. This is very difficult, especially when competition is involved. This is when you get the best out of your horse.

“The biggest problem I get with endurance horses is they’re never ‘round and on the bit.’ Round and on the bit,” she explained, “is having communication totally open. Like the telephone line is working and there is no static.

“There is a physical attribute to it and there’s a mental attribute to being round and on the bit. ‘On the bit’ is like having a willing dance partner. The rider is the leader of the dance and asks or directs the horse to follow his or her lead and the horse will dance with you.

“Physically the horse is in the round frame,” she described. “If you drop a line down in front of their face it’s straight; their nose is not sticking out. And the hind end is coming up under its rump giving them impulsion. The horse is using its hind end as well as being light in the front. The horse is light during self-carriage,” she continued.

“They are collected and working off their hind end where the motor is, rather than stumbling forward on the forehead,” said

Bertschinger. "They're lighter on their feet and they're more agile and athletic."

Lisa Green put LR Amana Tabi (Bold Soldier x Brown-R Missy) and Dreamm Seeker (Sam Tiki x CR Dream) in training with Linda. "Amana was traveling with her nose out and not engaging her hind end well. Seeker was not engaging his hind end at all," Green said.

In March, Amana carried Green to a first-place finish in the Fun in the Sun FEI/AERC 100-mile competition (Florida). "Linda has made a major difference in Amana and me! She has helped with my seat and hands and how to work the horse in the proper frame both on the ground and in the saddle."

Bertschinger elaborated on her training methods. "On the most basic level, I am dealing with energy. The natural pathway for energy to flow in humans and horses as well is through the spine. Therefore, it is most important that the spine is free of any blockages or resistances. If the spine has blockages, then the horse will not get the most available energy, which affects the whole body negatively. The longing and work-in-hand is designed to flex and supple the spine. As you know the spine supplies the nerve flow to all of the body. For example, blood flow could be minimized, which could create problems such as a sore back or even a sore hock or hip. Aside from the physical aspect of the training, also very important is the mental and spiritual aspect because health is made up of all three: mental, physical, and spiritual.

"Having said that," she continued, "the attitude in which you train will greatly affect the horse. For example, if you use a forceful method, the horse will not be comfortable and likewise you will not get total cooperation. The horse will know your intentions as they read energy very well. They are more in tune beings than we often give them credit for.

"I use longing and work-in-hand until the horse can move laterally, be round, on the bit, and going forward. Then I sit on them and begin shoulder-in work. That may take a month to three months. Of course there are many variables that affect the progress. Again, you cannot use force, but must wait until the horse is comfortable and accepting. For an endurance horse, I like to at least get them to a comfortable shoulder-in trot, because they are going to be much better athletes and prone to less injuries. Their gaits will all be improved, they will be a more comfortable ride, and you will have much better communication with them."

Lisa Green follows closely behind her mentor John Crandell III in a 100-mile ride. Lisa, Crandell's neighbor, won the 100-mile FEI/AERC ride that she had ridden with Crandell as her mentor the previous year. She credits Crandell and Bertschinger for their inspiration and training of her and her horse LR Amana Tabi (Bold Soldier x Brown-R Missy), whom she purchased from the Crandell family.

Crandell, of Star Tannery, Virginia, is approaching 5,000 career endurance miles that include winning the Old Dominion, Western States, and AERC National championships. He grew up in a family of endurance riders and has proven his remarkable abilities to train and compete at national and international levels.

