

BRING BACK THE JOY!

a Clinic with Craig Stevens

by *P. Ann Turner.*

Ever notice that a lot of riders – especially at shows – aren't having much fun anymore? The tail wringing horse, with its ears pinned, spurs jabbing its sides with bits that look more like some form of torture? Whew! And then along comes Craig Stevens – a portly and outspoken American who has ridden with several Classical dressage riders like the son of the famous Nuno Oliveira from Portugal.



In a recent clinic, I was the first Canadian woman to perform “horsedancing” with Craig!! I was thrilled! It was an experience like none other. The Baroque Period music is relaxing to listen to and has a calming rhythm for the horse. The handler sways the bit and reins in time to the music from the ground, at this stage you are only a passenger and are told to “completely relax”. Soon the horse is following the cues from the human on the ground in time with the music – half pass, shoulder – in, rein back, step forward – all become like the moves to a dance. As the horse moves underneath you the rhythm dissolves the resistances and the stiffness melts away. My horse Peter is a Percheron/Arab cross who is 20 now, and spent 8 years of his life carrying disabled people at PRDA in Langley. Pete is a shy

guy who knows how to pull a carriage, but this dancing stuff – he wasn't too sure about it at the beginning – kind of like “real men don't do this stuff” attitude. Well, after a few awkward moments, Pete heaved a huge sigh and relaxed and started to get right into it. I was on Cloud 9 and started to cry, as did several members of the audience – as the experience of total harmony with your horse is indeed an emotional one.

This is where the joy comes back to riding.

Craig is an extremely well educated man who has dedicated a lot of time to studying how riding was done in times gone by. Attending his Friday night lectures, you are amazed to discover that most of modern riding is based on military tactics and force. The true Classical Equitation derived from the French Nobility, indeed nobility in all the European countries, as they were the only ones who didn't have to work for a living and had the time to dedicate to the art of riding. And it was seen as an art form, along with music, languages and dancing.

The light touch, relaxation and flow that happen in Craig's clinics are brought about by his gift of explanation, and the way he totally puts you at ease, by saying things like “the equitation police won't arrest you if you do that”. There is lots of laughter, no one is made to feel stupid, overweight, or under horsed. There is every breed of horse, and size and shape of rider. It does not matter how advanced you are – in Craig clinics no one comes out of walk until the horse is balancing himself and the rider understands how to get the horse's attention. Of course rider

relaxation is paramount too, as tension blocks the movement of the horse, and you cannot feel.

From a rider's perspective, the learning happens because the horse's movements underneath you free the horse of tension and resistance. The person on the ground is directing the horse, you are simply a passenger for the beginning, but as the horse moves, you feel the horse open up. There is a lot more movement than you would think, and this in turn – straightens the rider's position. As Craig says "first the position, then the movement".



you see green riders perform half pass at the walk, shoulder in and perfect square halts. The rider awareness that is created and the simplification of the aids by focusing on one thing at a time is what make this possible. I encourage all – from any discipline – who want this kind of non-violent connection with their horse – to attend one of his clinics. You will be free from devices, harsh bits and spurs, the results will amaze you. Once you learn how to correct the horse's posture and balance in a natural way, the need for such tools becomes obsolete. The horses are happier and riding becomes a whole lot easier – who could ask for more?

Please visit Craig's website for more info: www.classical-equitation.com and contact me, Ann Turner through the internet at www.witsendfarms.com, or directly at 604-504-5909 for more information on Craig's clinics.

Thank you Craig for letting me be the first Canadian to horsedance with you! It was an experience of a lifetime.

It's like learning correct posture for lifting weights, or a good swim stroke, the position allows the movement to happen, as it clarifies your aids and makes things a lot less confusing for the horse. The rider then begins to participate actively in the dance, counting steps and getting the rhythm, your posture becomes more correct and you and the horse learn together. It's more of a creation of balance between the two of you, born of the exercises, and the whole thing evolves naturally. No matter what your discipline, both horse and rider can benefit hugely from this kind of work, as it lessens tension and resistance in both the horse and the rider simultaneously.

What happens with horses and riders in these clinics is nothing short of amazing –

