

## **Gentle cues of equine ballet Saline Twp. clinic illustrates refined Communication**

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Maji trotted across the long side of the arena, snorting and blowing clouds of steamy breath.

Astride, Julie Arkison frowned slightly as she concentrated hard on getting a smooth, rhythmic trot from Maji, bent just so to the inside.

And in the center of the circle the two drew in a covered sand arena stood one of the rock stars of their chosen equestrian sport - Bereiter Herbert Seiberl of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna.

Seiberl, a new rider with the 434-year-old internationally hailed school of classical dressage, came to the farm in Saline Township to conduct a four-day dressage clinic that started Wednesday.

Often called the "ballet" of the equestrian sports world, "dressage" is French for "training." The discipline has its roots in the cavalry; the purpose is to develop a horse's natural athletic ability and willingness to perform, and fine-tune horse-rider communication with subtle cues and instant consistent responses.

"The Spanish Riding School ... is a living museum of knowledge from the past and enduring to now," said Sue Hughes of Plymouth, Midwest regional director of the 32,000-member U.S. Dressage Federation and a licensed judge and local dressage instructor. She and Gail Anderson, who is in charge of membership for the Midwest Dressage Association, say the sport continues to become more popular, thanks in part to its applicability.

Basic dressage is considered by many equestrians to be a fundamental block on which to build an equine athlete in any discipline. And the best riders exhibit the athleticism and honed communication required to execute sophisticated movements that are awesome enough to draw gasps from a total neophyte.

Seiberl, who grew up in Lower Austria, one of the country's states, horsed around with equines growing up, but said he was not a serious rider with a family history in the school. But he tried dressage and decided the Spanish Riding School was where he wanted to be.

"It is the best," he said simply.

## **Lipizzan gelding responds to imperceptible guidance**

Young Austrian men who wish to ride with the school begin training at 15 or 16, spending months astride on a long line with their teacher before they are even allowed to pick up the reins. Eventually they are given a young stallion to bring along; that horse's success is their own, Seiberl said.

According to clinic hosts Arkison and Jorie Sligh, 85 percent of students do not graduate to become riders. Seiberl joined as an "eleve" in 1994 and won the title of bereiter, or rider, in 2005 with the success of his horse Maestoso Virtuosa.

Even on a frigid January Wednesday, Seiberl's clinic drew some 40 auditors and several local riders who rode for 35 minutes at a time.

Sue Ennis came all the way from Bear Lake, near Traverse City, to watch the clinic. Perched on hay bales under a warm blanket, she said the opportunity to watch such a fine rider in action drew her to come.

"I was just inspired to see more good training," she said.

A highlight was when Seiberl rode Sligh's Lipizzan gelding, Conversano Blanco I. The hushed audience watched as the well-schooled horse sighed and snorted as he trotted along, attentive but ears flopping with the relaxed contentment of a horse ridden by a rider so skilled his cues were imperceptible.

For Arkison it was a chance to continue what she'd learned in a similar clinic with one of Seiberl's colleagues who visited western Michigan last summer.

Such quality instructors are not common in Michigan and much of the country, she said.

Despite the discipline it took to get where he is in the horse world, Seiberl seems like the mellowest of people. He chats easily with riders, asking about and petting their horses.

His training regime is not whip-cracking and yelling, but gentle reprimands not to tug so hard on reins or thump so insistently with the heels.

"It's no problem," he says repeatedly to riders frustrated over small mistakes. "This will be good."

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