

A classical advocate joins Arroyo Del Mar.

by Kim F. Miller

Nick Onoda is the newest sport scientist to join what has become a dressage laboratory at Steffen and Shannon Peters' Arroyo Del Mar training facility in Del Mar. Nick brings his emphasis on classical dressage as it applies to training that's tailored to each horse's nature and physiology.



The California native has been in San Diego since returning in 2015 from two years in Germany, where he rode and worked for classical expert and advocate Stefan Wolff. When an opening arose at the Peters' facility, Nick was thrilled to join the eight other dressage professionals there, including his girlfriend Shayna Simon. "It's really healthy for professionals to be around other top riders," says Nick, who moved his seven-horse program to Arroyo Del Mar in December. "There is a sense of community there and a feeling that we are all colleagues."

There's ample opportunity for informal coaching, insights and brainstorming. He was happy at his previous stable, but there were drawbacks to the relatively small dressage community there. "When we are left to our own devices, there's a tendency to overemphasize some things and forget about others. Being around other professionals, especially a four-time Olympian like Steffen, helps us not get stuck."

His own horse, the 8 year old Hanoverian, Demoiselle, is schooling Prix St. Georges. Nick

started the mare by Dancier and has enjoyed campaigning her up the levels, along with horses owned by his clients. He is looking forward to an exciting show season, especially with the new West Coast Dressage Festival debuting this January.

“One thing I love about this sport is how dressage competitions are affected by classical dressage theory. A lot of people don’t realize that in every single movement of every test, judges are giving a score based on the training scale,” he says, referring to the training progression model of rhythm, suppleness, contact, impulsion, straightness and collection. “It’s not a stagnant theory. It’s something that can be used at every level of training and judging.”

Nick became engrossed in the German school of classical dressage while working for Stefan Wolff, a Pferdewirtschaftsmeister (German masters degree in classical riding), at the Brookside Equestrian Center in Southern California’s Walnut. The owners, the Waltons, bred and raised Lusitano horses, and Nick worked with those and Warmbloods under Stefan, the head trainer. He came with several years of dressage experience and embraced Stefan’s classical emphasis quickly. “Stefan helped me to understand how horse’s natural biomechanics function and how a rider’s aids can enhance them to make a stronger, sounder, happier horse.”

Classical riding isn’t the quickest path to show ring success, but riders of all abilities are typically sold on the concept with their first taste of its results. It’s about working with the horse, not against it, and “gradually changing the way the horse uses its body.” One example is explaining to a student how to accommodate their horse’s asymmetries, often riding the same movement a little differently for each side of the horse. “Often you see a light bulb go off for them when they learn to account for their horse’s crookedness within a movement, where previously they had been riding the same in both directions.” The rider’s physical tendencies and asymmetries must be taken into account, too. “The horse’s performance can only be as good as the aids he’s receiving, and the aids can only be as good as the rider’s position,” Nick explains. Rider and horse crookedness affect that chain of reactions.

“That’s the battle for every rider.”

Mind Over Muscle

Nick grew up in Michigan and Northern California and rode western for his first several years.

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He may have unknowingly been doing western dressage before it was a thing when a dressage professional saw Nick ride and asked him to work for her in the Bay Area. Nick's mind-over-muscle riding style was already evident and he figures that's what may have caught the trainer's notice. "The whole time I rode western, I used a snaffle bit and was just trying to figure out some of the things that I later understood to be dressage basics. The first time I saw a horse do a canter pirouette, I realized I was trying to re-invent the wheel. That's the exact moment that I became fully committed to dressage."

What he has since achieved with horses is a result of clear communications, not force. "I've learned not to use my strength," he observes. "In fact, I like learning from women because they don't rely on their strength as much as men do. They develop techniques that are based on communication."

Since that epiphany, Nick has accumulated an impressive education and resume of experience. Prior to Brookside, he worked for W Farms in Chino Hills, where he was a sales representative, technical consultant and trained and competed horses up to the FEI levels. He worked with Stefan Wolff at Brookside from 2008 to 2012. He followed Stefan to Germany when Stefan served as acting Director of the Westfälische Reit- und Fahrschule, the major hub of classical knowledge and education in Germany.

Unique opportunities and intense learning experiences dominated Nick's two years in Germany. He was a demonstration rider for advanced judging seminars and classical riding presentations. He also rode in the televised Alte Meister Symposium, a showcase of classical techniques in young horse training with coaching from two-time German Olympic gold medalist Heike Kemmer. Along with training several horses to various accomplishments, Nick gave presentations in Norway on the training scale and sports psychology.

Classical riding is more achievable than some might think, he says. His current clientele includes beginners making progress on non-traditional dressage breeds, like Friesians and a Quarter Horse, to riders competing in CDIs at Grand Prix level. Classical riding is not defined by a "razor thin line," he explains. "It's a pretty wide road. I think as long as you are working with the horse's body and mind, and you have a certain goal in mind, that's classical dressage." Supported by like minds at Arroyo Del Mar, he's ready to guide more horses and riders down that road to its gratifying and ever-evolving destination.

For a more detailed explanation of classical riding and horse/rider biomechanics, [click here](#) to see Nick's article online article.