

This season's show jumping events pose a great chance to watch and learn, but don't copy the wrong thing!

by Karen Healey

'Tis the season for great show jumping. The revamped Longines World Cup Jumping NAL league and the third year of the Longines Los Angeles Masters bring increasingly accomplished horses and riders to the West Coast. It's great news for the sport and it's a great opportunity to learn by watching, for riders, trainers and fans of any experience level.

Learning by watching was a big part of my background. We grew up with very good horsemen, but not the most sophisticated training methods. I had a feel for horsemanship, though, and observation was a big part how I learned. Not just about riding but about turn-out, including everything from how the braids should look to a horse's proper weight and coat condition. Watching contributed a lot to one of the things I am best known for: preparing a horse to go into the ring.

You want to watch the horses and riders in their actual competition round, but honestly, there's not a lot you can learn from that 80-second trip. It's the culmination of a lifetime of horsemanship and training and there's so much going on at that point that you can't see.

At lower level shows or in young horse classes, you may see pros use a round more for schooling purposes than to win and can learn from that. But when there's big prize money at stake, most of these guys are relying on training methods put in place years ago and honed to the point of push-button control. At least that's the goal.

The warm-up ring is where you can really learn something about preparing a horse, especially if you are willing to get up early and visit the schooling area several hours before the class starts.

That's when the top riders are flatting their horses similar to how they would at home between shows. Warming up, stretching and building their muscles and suppleness and going through exercises to test or reinforce responsiveness to what my student Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum simplifies as the "stop and go, right and left" aids that become more important the higher the fences get.

At the Longines Masters, to be held at the Long Beach Convention Center this year, the warm-up ring will again be in the middle of everything. You can literally grab a nice meal, stake out a spot on the rail and study some of the world's best. Last year, that included Rolex Grand Slam winner and Olympic gold medalist Scott Brash, our own Olympians Bezie Madden and McLain Ward and many others from the East Coast and well beyond. Riders that we don't see out here on a regular basis.

Pay special attention to riders who have a similar build to you. Watching a 6'2" German rider with legs of steel is not going to help your technique a lot if you're 5'2". Of course, it won't hurt to watch those guys but you'll get the most take-aways from the riders whose body types and physical capabilities are similar to yours.

Go early in the week and early each day to see how they hack their horses. Then come back later in the day to see how the same pairs warm up before their prime-time classes.

At the World Cup classes in Sacramento, Del Mar, Thermal and Las Vegas, the schooling rings are easily accessible to all, ticket or no. Stabling for horses competing in FEI competition is tightly restricted but access to the warm-up arenas is not limited.

With the influx of riders from other countries, you'll see different riding styles. Of course, the American Forward Riding System, advocated by my mentor George Morris and others, is 100 percent ingrained in my soul.

It's very well accepted at the high levels of show jumping around world, but you'll still see riders who don't employ it. I admire their success, but I don't admire the riding style: often riding behind the vertical, posting back on the cantle. That makes me crazy!

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If you do see that, by all means, don't copy it! Don't copy the wrong thing. I remember for years in Canada, every single kid rode with those "puppy dog" hands because that's how 1988 Canadian Olympian Laura Tidball-Balisky rode. Her hand position had nothing to do with her talent, her ability or her feel or any of the rest of it; it was just a habit. It didn't make her great. In fact, she was great in spite of that.

What I see way too much of now is a low, sawing hand that comes from a concern for a cosmetic false flexion. I saw this giving a clinic recently in a remote part of the country and I asked the riders where they'd seen this hand position.

"Dressage" was their answer. I asked if they'd seen Edward Gal or Steffen Peters ride like that? No! If they'd seen those riders, they would have seen perfect flexion coming from behind and in a horse that is perfectly balanced. But what the riders had focused on was the head position only and they were using draw reins and other artificial aids to achieve it by force, without gaining the hindquarter engagement and impulsion that makes it occur naturally as part of proper overall balance.

So, make the most of these terrific jumping competitions that fill up our fall and run through early spring. When the World Cup Finals were in Las Vegas last spring, I was at the schooling ring at 6 a.m. checking everybody out. Part of good horsemanship is realizing that there's always more to learn.



Author Karen Healey is one of our sport's most accomplished teachers and coaches. She worked for George Morris in the early 70s and has carried on his teachings ever since, along the way coaching 100-plus-and-counting medal finals winners. NAJYRC medalists and international stars including Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum are among her protégés. Karen shuttered her California training barn at the end of 2015, after 34 years, and continues to work with riders in lessons, clinic and coaching at shows through Karen Healey Training. For more information, visit www.karenhealeytraining.com or e-mail Karen at klhklh919@gmail.com.