

***Clinic Report***  
***by Karen Blackwood, June 2006***  
***Colorado***

I wanted to say thank you again for all of the help and insight that you shared with me & Ranger at the Larkspur Clinic.

It's 10 days later, and I wanted to tell you what's transpired since then. I didn't want to be one of those clinic-goers who doesn't make any changes after the clinic, so I've been working hard on being aware of my breathing and my center as much as possible. I've noticed that, when I'm aware of my breathing, I'm more relaxed. When I'm aware of my center, my posture is better and I move better, which results in less back pain for me. Isn't it amazing that we can go through life so unaware of something so minor that makes such a major difference? Particularly something that, if we were aware of it, would help us live a little better every day?

On the horse front, Ranger and I have been working hard on standing still when asked. He's made HUGE strides with that—he's down to asking once or twice per ride if he can wander off, and I'm consistently saying "no, sorry, need you to stand here for a little while," and he's complying. Mostly, though, when we stop, he sighs and relaxes, and stands quietly. I was even able to have a discussion with my dressage instructor during my lesson today, while Ranger stood quietly!

Standing under saddle seems to be also translating over to the tie ring. He's standing tied much better, and is even standing relaxed more often.

I've been working very, very hard on thinking in rhythm rather than words, and breathing into our transitions. He's LOVING that! My dressage trainer commented on how nice his transitions are; I told her about what you taught us and she said that she's going to try it with her horse. She also commented that my head & chin are up much more, and that I'm much more balanced in the saddle, particularly at the trot. I've been able to sit Ranger's trot a lot more often than not, and it gets better with every ride. Ranger appreciates that very, very much. His trot is becoming floatier (or maybe I'm just more relaxed), but I've been trying to think "lighter" and it seems to be working. This is an amazing new world and new direction and we're having a blast exploring it!

He's also seeking contact with the bit, staying relaxed and flexed at the poll, and getting under himself much better. I really like that Rockin S bit! He's always been soft and responsive, and he's even more so in that bit. He likes being ridden with intent, too. Going to the clinic was wonderful for both of us.

Now, here's the really exciting other news:

You didn't meet my older horse, Beau. Beau was a breeding stallion until the age of 15, and he'd never been broke to ride. He was sold, gelded, yanked around in a Tom Thumb until his mouth was bloody (not as bad as Mouse's, but he'd go over backwards if you tried to put a bit in his mouth when I got him), then given to me. We've worked hard for the last two years, and he's become a good riding horse—he loves dressage, but has a lot of trouble with the contact required. He's not as soft as Ranger, but he tries so very, very hard. Things come harder to him, but when he learns something, he's very proud of it. Two of the hardest things for him have been bracing against the bit, and cantering with a rider. I almost brought him to the clinic instead of Ranger, because he needed help, but I hoped that whatever I learned on Ranger, I could translate to Beau as well.

I put him in the Rockin S, and at first he didn't like it at all. I'd been riding with a noseband, and wondered if that was interfering with the bit, so I took it off. He quieted down almost immediately. Within about 30 minutes, he was moving into contact and holding it—normally, Mark, he grits his teeth and braces as hard as he can against any mouth contact, particularly when being asked to “whoa.” He'd gotten pretty good at accepting contact at the walk, and was OK but a little tenser at the trot, but was terrified at the canter.

His canter has always been terribly stressful for him, and frustrating for me. When asked for a canter, he'd throw up his head, hollow his back, grit his teeth, hold his breath and pound out a jack-hammer trot, going faster and faster until he finally broke into a scrabbly gallopy canter. I knew that he had a nice canter, because he can do it at liberty, but never with a rider. We'd been putting him on the lunge line because he was better there, but still wasn't getting a relaxed departure from behind. It was as though he was trying to scabble into a canter with his front legs, and his back end couldn't keep up. When asked to slow down, he would trot, but again it would be jack-hammer hollow-backed and head-high, breathing like the Kentucky Mountain mare, and trying to surge back into a canter. It would take many, many laps of small circles with a lot of contact to get him to calm down and come back to me. It was as though he was shouting “Just get it over with! Just get it over with!” After every ride, he was drenched, with rivulets of sweat pouring down his chest and legs—when he's nervous, he sweats from his gaskins and from his shoulders and chest, and he'd look as though I'd just doused him with a hose in those spots. I always felt so bad for him, because he was clearly so scared and tense. He acted this way with everyone who rode him, including all 3 of my riding instructors and two professional trainers over the past two years. No-one has been able to help him.

So, I tried the new bit, and about an hour into our walk-trot ride, tried breathing him into a canter. I got about 6 or 8 of the harder trot strides, then he put his head down on his own, moved into the bit, and followed my breathing into a canter! It was AMAZING! He gave me the nice, easy, rhythmic canter that I see him do at liberty. We went up and down from a canter to a trot, without any of the typical stress and fear, and by the time I called it a good day, he was moving into the canter with only 1 or 2 trot steps! When asked to come down to the trot, he moved into a nice, collected, soft trot and didn't get “chargy” or try to surge back to a canter.

I had ridden him for about 1 ½ hours, so figured it would take an hour to cool him out. I jumped off and went to loosen his girth, and realized that he was DRY in all of his usual stressful sweaty spots! He was only sweaty under the girth, at the flank and under the saddle. Mark, that is the most amazing thing to me, because that is proof that my horse was, for the first time ever, relaxed during a ride!

I rode him again the next day and saw very similar results, with even better canter departures—he was departing with confidence, and for the first time since I've owned him, seemed to be enjoying himself! He was also able to canter in a straight line—usually he dives into a little circle no matter how much leg or rein I use to keep him upright and going straight. He stayed straight, was a little scared in the corners, then leveled out and stayed with my rhythm until I asked for a stop. Again, he was minimally sweaty after our ride.

His stops have also improved dramatically—he's not bracing at all. He has always gaped his mouth and steeled his jaw if there was any backwards pressure, no matter how I asked—one rein or two--and I generally don't pull back on the reins for a stop—I stop my seat, then stop my hands. There's an old dressage rider named Henry Wynmalen who wrote a book on the art of riding, and he said that a horse won't bump himself on purpose. If your hands are properly following the horses' mouth, by simply stopping your hands after stopping your seat, instead of pulling back, the horse will stop without bumping the bit. It works beautifully with Beau.

He also was in the habit of bracing and gaping, then pulling me around to whatever direction he wanted to go when he thought that he should be done—I haven't seen any hint of that in the last 3 rides!

I don't know how much of this is the bit, the breathing, the rhythmic counting (instead of "walk" "trot" "canter"), but whatever it is, it's working! I'm so THRILLED that I've found something that helps Beau relax and enjoy being ridden at a pace faster than a walk.

So, Mark, the clinic was a total success for me and my horses! I can't thank you enough, and I can't wait until we can ride with you again! I just wanted to be sure you knew how much of a difference you made for us. Thank you!