

American Dressage Legends: Violet Hopkins

Pioneer of dressage education

The name Violet Hopkins is not well known in modern dressage, and as a rider Hopkins (1909-2002) achieved what might be called only modest success—no Olympic medals or other marquee competitive accomplishments. But the Michigan woman had a towering impact on the sport of dressage in America.

Perhaps it was Hopkins' own lack of early formal riding instruction that led her to become such a crusader for dressage education. A self-taught

initially at a public stable in Grosse Pointe, MI. Six years later, she was offered the position of instructor at the Bloomfield (MI) Open Hunt Club, where she remained for eleven years, doing both dressage and eventing.

When Hopkins learned that Arthur Konyot (patriarch of the famed circus family, and father of Olympian Tina) was coming to the Midwest, she arranged to study with "Pop" for a week. Other mentors included Chuck Grant ("Historical Connection," April), Capt. Vladimir Littauer, and Erich Bubble.

As Hopkins related in her essay "The Great Need" (at right), she believed strongly that the US needed better-trained dressage instructors. With that goal in mind, she established her own dressage school at Tristan Oaks Farm, Union Lake, MI, in 1969. That same year, she helped to found the Midwest Dressage Association; she would go on to serve as one of the founding members of the USDF.

For eleven years, Tristan Oaks was the site of the Violet Hopkins Seminars for Dressage Instructors, which were led by such notables as Col. Aage Sommer and Maj. Anders Lindgren. The Hopkins seminars are the forerunner of the USDF National Dressage Symposium, the USDF FEI-Level Trainers' Conference, and the USDF Instructor Certification Program itself.

For her efforts to develop a strong educational base for instructors and trainers, which did much to promote and enhance the sport of dressage in the US, Violet Hopkins was inducted into the Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame in 1998.

Read on for Hopkins' essay, "The Great Need," followed by a clinic report that illustrates her commitment to "train the trainers" dressage education.

THE GREAT NEED

By Violet Hopkins

It has been my privilege during the past few years to be invited to many areas throughout the United States, to assist people with their riding. These experiences have revealed the sad truth concerning the state of riding in this great country. It is evident that people interested in horses are seeking a better means of riding, known as



FORMIDABLE PAIR: Violet Hopkins and her Grand Prix-level, off-the-track Thoroughbred, Dark Warrior, in an undated photo

equestrian who grew up riding on her family's farm, Hopkins did not receive a formal riding lesson until after college—where, serendipitously, she studied to become a teacher.

Hopkins saved enough money from her teaching paychecks to purchase her first horse, and then she began teaching riding professionally,



CRUSADER: Violet Hopkins in an undated photo

dressage. To pursue their interest they must have a good understanding of what their own development and that of their horse entails.

The only approach to forming this understanding is to seek help from a knowledgeable person. In the majority of cases people have sought help, only to be misled by so-called "instructors

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of dressage.” The disturbing factor is the appalling number of people teaching who have no background to substantiate their position.

The great explosion of horse interest and the sudden birth of dressage competitions has created fertile ground for the need of instructors.

Anyone in this country can claim to be an instructor of dressage, hang out a shingle, and be in business. It is in this area that the danger of inferior information lies. In other countries there are established centers where riding is taught and good standards are presented. Persons aspiring to make a career of teaching and working with horses have the opportunity to attend these centers to obtain knowledge and skill to qualify them for service. In this country, this kind of facility is very limited.

The alternative answer to this need is for the person desiring to pursue a career with horses to apprentice himself or herself to a well-established trainer and instructor. One who has the correct concept of laying a good basic foundation in training both horse and rider. The apprentice must be willing to spend not months, but several years learning the basic skills of good horsemanship. Qualities to be developed in this learning period are many. There must be the desire to convey to the beginning rider the necessary knowledge needed to master the skill of balance and application of aids for communication with the horse.

It is necessary that the instructor constantly improve his own skills through riding and training many horses so the depth of knowledge is constantly growing. It is [at] the grass roots levels that all substantial building must take place. Quality instruction, at this level, is what confirms the progress of horse and rider for advanced work. The majority of riders are in the grass roots category; thus they need instructors well versed in the basic procedures. For persons willing to follow this path, the opportunities are unlimited.

GUNNAR ANDERSEN CLINIC FOR PROFESSIONALS AT TRISTAN OAKS

By Violet Hopkins

When word came out that Gunnar Andersen would be in the US visiting friends, the Midwest area decided to jump at the chance to seize the knowledge of this very fine, experienced dressage teacher and trainer.



VIP VISITOR: *Gunnar Andersen in an undated photo*

After much planning and arranging, a Clinic for Pros Only was organized and held at Tristan Oaks, the stable of Miss Violet Hopkins, on October 10th and 11th, 1973. Seven pros in the area responded to this opportunity and a schedule of private lessons for the two days was set up accordingly. Unfortunately, one professional could not attend due to illness, but the time slot was filled by a group of four junior riders who were lucky enough to be able to work with the master.

Observation of this clinic was not, as was the participation, limited to professionals, and the spectators were numerous on both days. From their point of view, the clinic was a revealing lesson in suppling exercises and the development of rhythm in the horses performing. According to those questioned, the appearance of

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the horses as the lessons progressed was not only interesting, but obviously improved along the guidelines of suppleness and rhythm.

It was prearranged that each professional would come prepared to present a horse with which he or she was having a particular problem. This request was very honestly answered by the area's teachers and trainers participating in the lessons, and problems ranged from difficulties with flying changes, to acceptance of the bit, to elementary bending and purity of the basic paces. Corrections varied with the problem, but Mr. Andersen's favorite suppling exercise was noted to be the shoulder-in on the circle, and suppleness or the lack thereof seemed to be at the bottom of most training difficulties.

It was the general consensus of opinion that Gunnar Andersen was a most helpful and sincere instructor. Improvement was obvious in all the horses over the two-day clinic. In talking with individual participants, the master was described and his teaching characterized as simple and most straightforward. He dealt not with great detail, but more with the major problem. This in turn seemed to help all the small details of the difficulty in a big way. With the junior riders, who rode in a group lesson, Mr. Andersen stressed correct position of the rider and the fundamental suppling goals for their horses, which would in turn lead to natural collection. This theme of suppleness to natural collection was carried out through the adult sessions as well. For instance, he pointed out that if a horse has a bad canter, a trainer really can't correct that. But suppling the horse to a high degree will make the canter come through better.

As some of our readers may know, Mr. Andersen was Jessica Newberry Ranshousen's coach for the Rome Olympics in 1960 (she and Forstrat placed 12th), but he had been training and teaching for many years before then. That was one of the most frequently repeated comments heard

from participants in the clinic: that Mr. Andersen had had so much experience. Having worked with horses for over 40 years, all he has to do when he sees the problem with a horse is to think back over the years and remember what he did with a horse he worked with the same problem.

The enjoyment and satisfaction gained in the lessons were enhanced by two beautiful October days and the participants in the clinic regretted having only such a short time to work with Mr. Andersen. The management of Tristan Oaks commented that such a clinic, for professionals only, was a necessary and valuable experience; for it goes without saying that professional dressage teachers must gain knowledge and judgment of good performance before this can be passed on to students. The area's professionals considered the opportunity a valuable one and consider themselves fortunate to have been able to take advantage of it while Mr. Andersen was in this country for a short time. It was a most worthwhile endeavor and perhaps the Midwest area can continue with this sound, educational trend aimed at improving the quality of American dressage instruction. ▲

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