

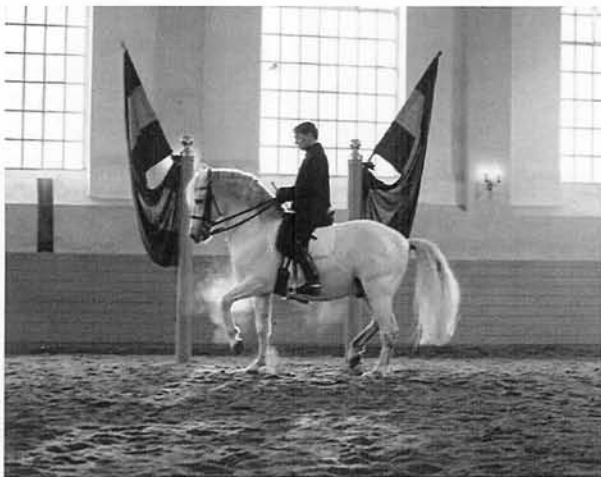
By Mary Wanless

Erica lives south of San Francisco, and keeps her horse at Sandy Howard's barn, which was the venue for the second series of video tapes.

I must have first taught her there in the early Nineties, and she has been a regular participant on my clinics.

She is a pupil of Sandy's too, and I hope she would not object to me saying that she has struggled both with a difficult horse and with the patterns in her own body, as well as with the demands of learning itself.

In 1996 when her horse was off work, she went to Germany for a month, and took lunge lessons twice a day with Melissa Simms at the Reitinstitut in Karlsruhe.



The von Neindorff Riding Academy where they say that the first 10 years of riding are spent perfecting the seat, the next ten spent on schooled horses learning the movements under skilled supervision, and then you may become a horse trainer!

This riding academy was run by the legendary Egon Von Neindorff who died in May 2004, however his work is still carried on and riding lessons and seminars are regularly held.

Its reputation was based on Neindorff's immaculate riding, and his classical approach to teaching and training. The school was also known for having Lipizzaner horses as well as warmbloods.

[Dan Aharoni, who I worked for in the two years before I gave up riding, had ridden extensively with Neindorff, and whilst there he became best friends with Eric Herbermann, who is known for his book 'The Dressage Formula'.

The Academy really expounds Neindorff's principles, and given that this place and philosophy most represents my roots, I went there myself for two weeks in 2000. Since Melissa was on a visit to her native America, I rode with Neindorff himself. I did not understand a word he said; but the horses were good teachers, and I just attempted to collect 'Yavoll Frau Mary's!]

The only lunge exercise that Erica did the whole time she was there was to circle the arms, taking them forward, up, back and down, and she was repeatedly told the conventional sayings like 'grow tall, push your heels down' etc. However, she felt that her riding still improved a lot, especially as she had some of the understandings from my work to bring to those lessons.

When she returned to America and went to watch well known trainers giving clinics, she found herself even more appalled than she had previously been at the lack of basic skills in the riders.

Then one of the trainers told a rider in public that she really needed lunge lessons. In that moment Erica decided to offer her services as a lunging coach, and a clinic was duly arranged at the woman's barn.

She turned out to a very intelligent person who no trainer had been able to change; but of course, Erica could.

That clinic ran for a very long time before it faded, but by then Erica's reputation was well and truly made.

Most of her clinics have been set up by one enthusiastic (or perhaps desperate) person who then gathered a group together.



Erica herself, riding "Perky"

Trainers who would not normally allow another coach to work in their barn have not been threatened by Erica's lunge lessons; on the contrary they have appreciated the improvements in their pupils, and their increased 'teachability'. Some trainers have also asked to be coached by Erica themselves.

So Erica's approach has enabled her to 'fly under the radar', and to work with some very good professionals as well as their pupils.

One big breakthrough was beginning to teach Tammy Hoag, whose best selling book 'The Dark Horse' is a mystery centred around dressage. Tammy competes at the upper levels; she knows and is known by many people, and she has been very vocal about the help she has received from Erica.

Her improvement has been noted by several well known trainers who also coach her. (Erica's lessons eventually develop into work off the lunge as well, and I am pleased to report that Tammy

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rode her best tempo changes ever whilst using 'The Rider's Belt!')

Last year Erica also benefited from setting up a website, which is [www.gotseat.com](http://www.gotseat.com).

Apparently she has at least one new pupil who found her whilst searching the Internet to buy breeches!



There is another strand to Erica's work. Many years ago she took up Tai Kwan Do, which she now considers to be the Americanised version of traditional Karate, with too much emphasis on getting kids through the levels of the different belts, and not enough attention to detail.

Six years ago she changed to Karate, which she feels is more like classical dressage. Most of the people who do Tai Kwan Do quit when they get their black belt; in traditional karate this is regarded as the basic level, after which you really start learning.

The dojo, says Erica, is a place of serenity rather than of ambition and goals. But it is also a very testing place – more so because if you decide you want to leave and go to another Sense (or teacher) no other school of the same style will take you.

Erica tells the story of a pre-test for her black belt, in which she was so stressed that she 'left her body' and went through the motions of the exercises.

When her Sense told her that 'That was the worst performance of martial arts I have seen in 30 years' she felt upset, angry and betrayed. She stopped going to class, and none of her friends called her for three weeks.

Then a friend rang and counselled her, saying 'You know, it's not about you.' When she went back to class her teacher did not correct her for another month.

Eventually she realised that the most appropriate attitude was to feel grateful whenever a teacher bothered to notice and correct her.

Soon after this she entered a dressage competition and came last in each of her classes. Before the pre-test she would have had a 'shame attack' and felt devastated. But now, she could take the results as feedback.

She feels that her martial arts training has made her a better pupil, and also a better teacher, although she is not so strict as her Sense, whose baseline is 'If I tell you X and you don't do it, that's insulting to me.'

Her pupils value the compassion and patience as well as the rigour that she brings to her work on their technique.

At the teacher training course in California in February 2006, Erica gave a demonstration of some of the lunge exercises she has developed. She works a lot with

rising trot mechanism, as well as with the mechanics of sitting. When riders bump because their hip joint is not moving, she has had great success with getting them to rhythmically pat the horse on one side just behind the saddle; as the arm and hand move it seems that the hip does too.

When riders flap their elbows, she puts their gloves between them and the torso, and it only takes one or two lost gloves to get improvement. She is very aware of safety issues, and uses the lunge equipment carefully.

I find myself impressed by the reputation she has carved for herself, by her honesty, and also by the hard work she has done on herself and her riding over the years.

She has even been asked to write an article on the seat for a leading US magazine – who could have asked a hot-shot rider with great skills but no verbal knowledge to pass on.

I hope this is a sign of the times, as well as being a great accolade for someone who has become a good teacher precisely because of her personal struggle with learning to ride.

