

# Clinic on Clinics

*Should you sign up for that dressage clinic? Expert guidance—plus how to get the most out of the experience, whether you ride or audit.*

By Natalie DeFee Mendik

**T**he big-name trainer everyone's been raving about is coming to town next month to give a clinic. Whether the prospect of riding fills you with excitement or with dread, deciding when to clinic and when to pass is something most riders

know if a clinician is right for you and your horse?

"There are a couple of different factors that go into how I decide about clinics," says Reese Koffler-Stanfield, of Georgetown, KY, a USDF gold medalist and USDF-certified instructor

I have to like the way they ride and the way their horses go. Ask friends, and consult with your own instructor. Last, a clinician that comes to your area once a month is likely a better bet than one who comes just once. Continuity is important."

Gwen Ka'awaloa, of Elizabeth, CO, a USDF gold medalist and Fourth Level certified instructor, USEF 'r' judge, and the Rocky Mountain Dressage Society president, agrees. "My question to my students who want to ride in a clinic is, 'Why have you chosen this clinician, and what do you hope to learn?' If they're unsure, the easy answer is to audit. The best clinicians to go to are ones that have a similar philosophy to your trainer so you know you're on the same thought process through a different set of eyes. For myself, I choose someone whom I admire and have heard good things about. I do ask my trainers and friends about a clinician before I sign up to ride with them."

Signing up for a clinic is great, but not if it financially undermines your regular training. "Some clinics are really expensive; you could have three lessons or more with your instructor for the same cost," says Ka'awaloa. "You don't want to cut your regular lessons for a clinic."

Don't assume that bigger is always better. "I recommend looking closely into the clinician's reputation and considering your needs as a rider. Some 'big time' trainers may be too ambitious for many riders," says USDF gold medalist, Fourth Level certified instructor, and L program graduate Beth Sproule-Hansen, of Warwick, NY. "You don't want to find yourself pushing your horse so hard that you end up feeling bad at the end of the ride, or can't come anywhere close to recreating the results after the clinic. Yes, you should be taken past your comfort zone, but not so far out that your head is left spinning. Training should make sense for both horse and rider."

The clinician needs to be the right fit for horse and rider, says Christopher Hickey, of Edgemoor, SC, and



**LEARNING ANNEX:** Clinics and symposia can be valuable adjuncts to your regular training. Melissa Jackson rides Marcie Biondolillo's Domani with clinician Johann Hinnemann at the 2016 Adequan/USDF FEI-Level Trainers Conference East.

face from time to time. From auditing to etiquette, here's what you need to know to navigate the clinic world.

## The Right Fit

Clinic experiences can run the gamut from enlightening "aha moments," to so-so sessions, to train-wreck rides that set both your horse's training and your self-esteem back. So how do you

through Fourth Level. "First, you have to consider your budget; clinics can be expensive. Next, look for trainers with a similar philosophy and system to your own. You want someone with a training approach and teaching style that works for you—someone who will enhance your everyday training. Research the clinician. It's easy to do with the Internet. For me personally,

Wellington, FL, who co-chairs the USDF Instructor/Trainer Committee and who is himself a popular clinician, with double gold medals from the 2007 Pan American Games among his accomplishments.

"You should feel like the clinician can give the rider the information that person needs at that time," Hickey says. "I encourage my students to clinic, but I'm not shy about saying 'this trainer' over 'that trainer.' I always look at a clinician's success rate in the horses and students they have developed; know what's really on the trainer's resume. I don't recommend riding in a clinic with someone you have never seen teach."

### Auditing: A Great First Step

Even if you decide not to ride in a clinic, consider auditing (spectating) if the clinician seems worthwhile.

"I love auditing," says Koffler-Stanfield. "I try learn as much as I can, and I encourage everyone to do the same." Like Hickey, she recommends auditing a clinic with the trainer you're interested in before signing up to ride. You'll get an idea of the person's training and teaching styles, and whether they will work for you and your horse.

Be aware that there is a difference between a clinic and a symposium. A clinic is basically a series of private lessons that may (or may not) welcome an audience, either paying or at no charge; a symposium is an educational event, often larger in scope, put on for the benefit of a paying audience and utilizing demonstration horses and riders.

"Auditors need to realize that although they are paying an auditing fee, they are not the one having the lesson [in a clinic]. A good auditor listens and learns," says Hickey. In a clinic setting, he explains, the instructor does not take audience questions during a ride, although at some events the clinician will mingle with auditors between rides or during the lunch break. "A regular clinic with auditors is not a symposium; the purpose of a symposium is for the auditors. Clinics are for the rider paying for the training session."

"Essentially, attending a clinic is watching lessons, most often with a very competent instructor and usually without a theme, but the attention is on teaching the rider. You may learn quite a bit just by watching, but benefit most by riding," explains FEI steward and USEF "R" dressage technical delegate Sally Davenport, of Scituate, MA. Davenport, who regularly organizes the New England Dressage Association's (NEDA) educational events, was named the 2013

USDF Volunteer of the Year.

In contrast, says Davenport, "Symposium education is directed to the audience, often with a theme, employing demonstration riders to illustrate the instructor's theme and training techniques. Questions are encouraged from the audience. Both riders and auditors benefit from this type of instruction. Within NEDA, we try to differentiate between the two, offering one or two yearly symposia, as we believe that there are many high-level clinics

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## Look the Part

**B**e very professional about the way you dress and present your horse,” says dressage judge and USDF-certified instructor Gwen Ka’awaloa. Clinic turnout is “like going to a show without wearing show clothes.”

Start with clean tack, polished boots, and a well-groomed horse. Braiding is never incorrect, but it’s generally required only for larger affairs, such as symposia. Ask the clinic organizer.

You’ll look tidy and workmanlike in nice breeches (they don’t have to be white), a tucked-in collared shirt, and gloves. Contain long hair neatly, and of course don your helmet. You’ll see the ubiquitous white polo wraps at many dressage clinics, but whatever leg protection your horse needs is appropriate.



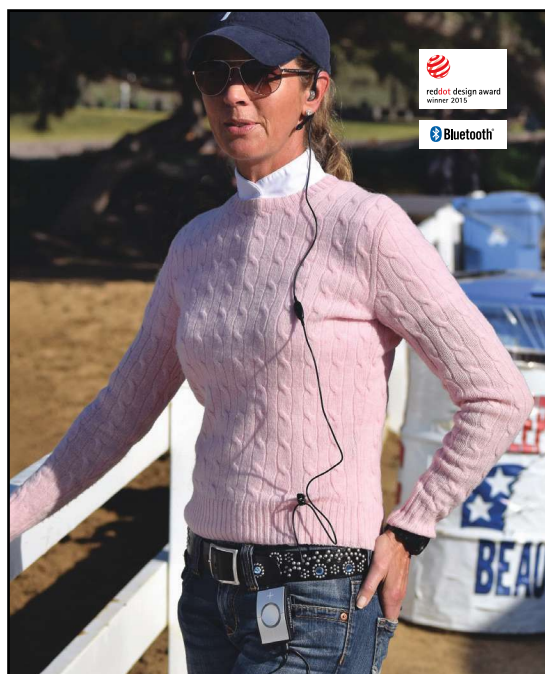
**ALMOST LIKE A SHOW:** Clinic turnout is like show turnout, minus the show clothes and (sometimes) the braiding. Demonstration rider Endel Ots attends to Samhitas after the 2016 Adequan/USDF FEI-Level Trainers Conference East. Because of the high-profile nature of this event, Samhitas is braided.

already offered within our region.”

Make the effort to put pen to paper while you watch. “Taking notes when auditing is a tool that everyone should use. You can go over them afterward and reconnect with valuable information,” Sproule-Hansen says. “There is often so much that happens; without writing things down, you could end up with just an impression of the clinic and lose out on usable tips.”

Realize that auditing is a learning, not socializing, environment. “To get the most out of auditing, you need to pay attention. Spend less time discussing with your neighbors what’s happening, and listen to the clinician,” advises Ka’awaloa.

If you are attending an event that encourages audience participation, Davenport recommends keeping questions on topic. “Ask questions that will be beneficial to the entire audience. Try not to go on and on about your own individual horse or problem if the Q&A won’t be beneficial to the larger group.”



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Realize, too, that not every clinic is open to auditors. "When we have clinics at our place, I try not to have a lot of auditors. It's easy for things to be taken out of context. With social media, everyone has to be very careful about how they teach and what they say," says Hickey, who gives the example of working with a horse that's behind the leg and needs the whip to back up getting the horse on the aids. "This could be put in the wrong light."

Above all, try to have empathy for

the riders, especially the ones who are having problems.

"As an auditor, stay open-minded about what is being taught and uncritical of the riders you are watching," says Davenport. "It is not always easy to ride in front of an audience. Most riders are doing their best."

## The Big Day

In the run-up to a clinic, Ka'awaloa recommends getting solid in your basic work, being up to speed on

terminology, and making sure you and your horse are physically fit enough to handle the demands of the typical 45-minute session. Advance prep with your regular instructor is key to being clinic-ready.

"Your ride will be much better if you watch a few lessons at a similar level beforehand. You'll get an idea of how the clinician is looking at the training scale and prioritizing things," Hickey advises. "People make the mistake of trailering in, tacking up, and having a lesson without having done any homework. They're setting themselves up for fifty-percent productivity. Either participate first as an auditor, or arrive early and watch lessons. You'll get so much more out of your lesson."

At the beginning of your ride, introduce yourself and your horse to the clinician, offering such details as your horse's age, the level you're currently schooling or showing, and how long the two of you have been together. Koffler-Stanfield recommends also explaining what you feel your horse is good at and what needs work, as well as stating your clinic expectations.

Don't expect a single clinic to transform your riding. "I hope to get one or two good gems from each lesson. This is what you can realistically expect, particularly with a clinician who doesn't know you and your horse," says Koffler-Stanfield. "There's only so much information you can take in in forty-five minutes."

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If your ride is in a symposium, “Understand that you and your horse are there to help the presenter make or reinforce a point related to the overall theme of the symposium,” says Davenport. “You may discover surprising things about yourself and your horse, but you may also experience frustration about missing the opportunity to tackle some things with an expert that you and your horse need to work on.”

Ka’awaloa advises keeping an open mind. “You should not expect to make a big leap forward, but do expect to learn something new, so pay attention and try. Be a willing student. You’re paying the clinician to tell you what to do.”

“There is nothing less productive than a resistant student,” adds Sproule-Hansen.

That said, “There are times when you end up in the uncomfortable situation of feeling like the instructor is unfair to your horse or to you,” says Koffler-Stanfield. If this happens, “It’s OK to say something, especially if you feel like it’s too much work for your

horse. Never be disrespectful, but you are your horse’s advocate.”

## It’s Not About Bragging Rights

You may have heard riders—even dressage professionals—rattling off long lists of big-name trainers they’ve “clinicked” with. Some may find the name-dropping impressive, but our experts advise against riding with every trainer who comes to town.

“There certainly are times when you need a new set of eyes on a training issue or the horse’s development,” says Hickey, “but avoid bouncing around from clinician to clinician. In fairness to the student and to the horse, training should be within the same basic system or it makes too much confusion. If the clinicians go together well, that can be useful; but if the clinicians aren’t sending the same message, sometimes it slows down the rider’s progress and the horse’s development.”

## The Bigger Picture

In the best-case clinic scenario, your own instructor is on board.

“I think clinics can also be very useful with new ideas for the at-home trainer; it can be especially helpful if the instructor can attend the clinic as well,” Hickey says.

Doing so, of course, requires a certain amount of confidence on the instructor’s part. “The regular instructor has to be secure enough to allow the student to go ride,” says Hickey.

Know that the clinic experience may vary depending on whether you’re a “regular” with the clinician.

“When I clinic, I gauge what I teach and how much I’m pushing based on if and when I’ll see them again,” Hickey explains. “At a one-time clinic, you have to be very careful explaining why, when, and how. You could give someone information they can’t follow through with if you won’t see them again.”

If you do your homework, choose wisely, and remain open-minded, “you may come away with astonishing ‘lightbulb moments’ when a concept

## Running Smoothly

Signing up for a clinic, like entering a show, entails paperwork—application forms, payments, liability releases. Some organizers require videos of applicants and their horses.

“Both demo riders and auditors should pay attention to application deadlines and make every effort to submit paperwork, and if required of riders, videos, in a timely manner,” says New England Dressage Association event organizer Sally Davenport. “Last-minute or late submissions are frustrating.”

“Fill out paperwork completely,” Davenport continues. “Don’t leave the organizer needing to contact you for further information. If you have special requests as a demo rider, such as ‘my stallion needs a corner stall,’ please specify that up front, not when you arrive at the clinic.”

Last, remember your good manners. Davenport reminds all participants: “Be courteous to riders, fellow auditors, facility, staff, and volunteers. Remember, you are a guest at someone else’s barn.”



or technique really ‘feels’ understood, or you may come away perhaps thinking, ‘That just doesn’t work for me, but I’m glad I tried,’” says Davenport.



Make the most of your session. “Have a good time,” says Koffler-Stanfield. “Clinics are meant to be fun. It’s a learning environment. You’ve paid a lot of money to be there; if you don’t understand something, ask. You want to listen and absorb information.” ▲

*Natalie DeFee Mendik is an award-winning journalist specializing in equine media. Visit her online at [MendikMedia.com](http://MendikMedia.com).*

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