

Training with top-level horse master a great feeling

As “horsey” folks, we often have opportunities to expand and improve our communication and relationship with our equine friends.

I have found it very important to keep an open mind and always look for opportunities to learn new things, some of which we can incorporate into our own way of doing things.

There are many individuals out there who have skills, knowledge and ability to share with those of us who want to learn more.

There are also lots of so-called experts out there just trying to separate you and your money, but you can even learn something from them — even if the thing you learn is flagged as something you would never do.

There is a great feeling when you encounter someone who really is a “master” at what he or she does and wants to share those skills with you.

I recently had the unique experience of participating in activities with a German Driving Master by the name of Frank Winkler.

Frank is a top-level coach, trainer and competitor with many years of experience in preparing horses and drivers for competition at very high levels. He himself has many championships driving everything from singles to a 10-in-hand (10 Friesians in five pairs in front of the carriage).

Frank was here in Canada visiting his daughter and helping her with very high level dressage horses, but he couldn't resist getting involved with a few local drivers in helping them start horses or improve the skills of horses and drivers already driving.

My introduction to Frank was when I was assisting

Happy Trails



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a friend with his four-in-hand of Hackney horses. It takes several knowledgeable folks to help get four healthy, active horses all hitched and driving but, under Frank's expert direction, it all went well.

I rode on the carriage with Frank and the owner of the horses. After observing the behaviour of each horse, we made adjustments to the harness then Frank took over as driver and showed us how it is really done at a very high level.

It was awesome!

He showed the owner and I how to improve our rein-handling skills with the four, how to achieve good driven dressage movements and how to do it all calmly, quietly and effectively.

What a treat!

He then asked the owner if he had ever galloped the four horses in harness, the response was “no.” Next thing we knew, Frank was asking the horses for a gallop and off we went. I thought the owner's eyeballs were going to pop out of his head. Frank remained calm, gave good directions to the horses with his skillful handling of the lines and whip and all went well!

We circled the arena quite a few times, did a rein change (direction change) across the arena and circled a few times the other direction. The horses settled nicely into the gait and all went well. When Frank asked them, they calmly slowed to a trot then a walk and all was good.

In another session, Frank was working with very green (untrained) horses and helping them learn how to be driven.

The highlight of that session was putting two rather

robust Canadian geldings together to drive as a pair — one gelding had never been driven and the other was a more seasoned driving horse but he had never been driving in a pair.

Frank was extremely confident all would go well but some of us were a little concerned about the outcome of this first drive. After a couple of somewhat rough starts, the horses got it figured out and were absolutely outstanding.

The horse that had never been driven had been in a regular program of dressage riding and those skills really came through in the driving. That horse actually behaved better than the more experienced horse. It really showcased how dressage riding and driving really complement each other.

Frank said he really likes to drive dressage horses to help improve the use of their hindquarters and explained how developing skills under saddle benefits the driving horse.

We chatted quite a bit about techniques and skills to teach a western riding horse to be a driving horse as well. This is one of my personal projects beginning this year so it was an interesting discussion filled with me asking a lot of questions and Frank responding with his suggestions.

One of the topics we talked about was how the skills under saddle in the western world can translate into good driving skills — I can hardly wait to put in to practice some of the things we chatted about. The bottom line is to keep an open mind and be ready for new learning opportunities — your horse will thank you!

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