

David O'Connor August 2009 clinic report

As a Short Listed Canadian Team rider, I have had the good fortune to ride with David a great deal, particularly over the last few years. I wish our 'technical advisor' lived closer, but truthfully, it is actually ME who should live a little 'closer' to the hub of eventing in North America.

I have known Karen and David for nearly 20 years- before they were famous Olympic medal winners. They are the same people that they were then, just with many more nice horses, an incredible farm, and a secretary! Aside from being 'real' people, they are 'real' horseman. 'Horseman' is not a word we see embodied as much as we should. Many upper level riders are riders and competitors, but not horseman. This clinic reminded me of why time with David had been inspiring and helpful in the past.

David knows how to think like a horse and he knows how to teach people to think like a horse. Not every great rider can be a great conveyor of knowledge, but David has a way of making things easy to understand. On more occasions than I can count, he said over the three days, 'these are simple concepts, it is not magic'. Apparently, the ease is in the explanation and understanding, not necessarily the application! David's point was that back to basics is what is important. He stressed direction, speed, balance and rhythm. Those basic concepts might not seem like the stuff magic is made from, as we have all heard and read those components hundreds of times. However, the point of his teaching is that without those four basics, nothing else can happen correctly. I had several students participating, and from a coach perspective, he was helpful as well. Unless the rider is aware of what happens, he or she cannot fix it. It is the coach's job to have the rider notice those 'moments' of where the 4 basics unravel.

With regards to position corrections, he is a form is function kind of a coach- the position corrections that affect the horse's way of going are very important to him. He stresses that the rider has to move in the saddle to move with the horse.

He was keen on always providing a way 'out' for the horse that was a positive. He also stressed repetition of exercises so that the horse clearly understood what was being asked, without over doing it. While there were not any exercises that we had not seen or experienced before, his level of understanding of each rider's issue made it very clear what needed to happen in order to progress. It was clear that he was excited about being part of our learning experience.

In addition to the over fences clinic, he also did a demonstration of his work that he does with the horses on the line. Karen and David start all of their horses over XC fences on the end of a rope. His interest in pursuing on-line training is not that it should be an end in itself, but rather a stepping- stone to other means of communication while on the back of the horse. Thursday afternoon several of us participated in his cross- country course design clinic. Many BC course designers took advantage of David's considerable experience, which was a super opportunity. As a rider, course design is an interesting perspective to see the fences from.

It was an honour to learn from such a knowledgeable man. Canada is incredibly fortunate to have him assisting our Canadian Team.

-Submitted by Chelan Kozak