Book Review

Riding in the Moment,
Discover the Hidden Language of Dressage
By Michael Schaffer

Reviewed by Mary Daniels

This book is a bit of a sleeper. But I was pleasantly surprised to find that the author had written something so useful and so innovative that it could be called brilliant. Though the problem of how wooden and obscure the traditional language of dressage is has been cropping up here and there in the work of other authors, this is the first book I have come across that offers a system of viable solutions that won't offend the rule-bound.

Schaffer, an FEI-level trainer, instructor, clinician and author of Right From the Start, Create a Sane, Soft, Well-Balanced Horse, says the conventional language of dressage is "top down and mechanical." It begins at its end goal, with definitions and descriptions of trained horses ridden with refined aids. But the actual process of training a dressage horse is "bottom up and cognitive (getting the horse to understand what it is you want and allowing him to do it from light aids)."

Schaffer's ideas bring to mind that some of the best trainers of performance horses don't talk much. Perhaps language is inadequate to explain what it is they do. Schaffer's reduction of dressage-speak into common and easily understood ideas gives you a simple but effective plan to introduce a green horse that hasn't a clue to a mutual language by which a rider is able to communicate with him. I have never had anyone teach me this, though I have been able to observe trainers very experienced in starting young horses patiently go about it, and I am pretty sure what they are doing is not too different from Schaffer's bottom-up method of training.

Schaffer begins with what he calls the five first-tier basics: go, stop, turn in, move out and soften. These concepts are at the core of all dressage, he says. Master them, and then by combining them, you can easily create all of the movements we seek in a made dressage horse.

One important idea the author emphasizes is that it is always more important to use aids in a relaxed way than in a precise way. Ask often, accept what you can get, imperfect though it may be, but keep trying to

do better, and reward lavishly when you get the closest semblance. There are excellent photos breaking down how to go from having to develop and use light, cognitive aids. And isn't I that the way we all want to ride, but never knew how to start?

Most likely, any thinking rider will find this book useful in switching on new neuron paths in the brain. But I believe someone who is trying to either personally introduce or supervise the very early basic training of a young, green horse is going to find it useful and a way to prevent frustrations from escalating.

My helmet is off to this guy for thinking in an innovative way and putting it down on paper for the rest of us.