

## Riding Out Loud

An unusual teaching tool improves this rider's awareness.

By Liz Bromberg

A college professor once said that she could not teach anything to her students. She could only create an environment in which they could learn. Our riding instructors face a similar challenge. After all, they can't sit in the saddle with us. There is a certain amount that we just have to fumble through and figure out for ourselves.

My instructor, Lynn Leath, has the patience of Job. Many of her students, like me, are women of a certain age who didn't grow up with today's regimen of soccer, T-ball, karate and other such self-esteem-building athletic activities. We come to her with varying (often marginal) levels of fitness, coordination and experience. Then we ask her to transform us into dressage riders. Always last on the bench in gym



Courtesy, Liz Bromberg

### Liz Bromberg and Magda

class, incapable of throwing, catching, running, hitting, doing splits, cartwheels or any other gymnastic maneuvers, I knew from an early age that I was not a natural athlete. Still, I developed an early obsession for horses, and I wanted to ride. Decades later, I am just beginning to learn.

My instructor only asks one thing of her students: that we try to do our best. Then, she racks her brain for everything she can think of to help us learn.

Most recently, Lynn shared a learning method that she had adopted last season in Florida, while working with her own instructor, Cathy Morelli. The idea is to give a running commentary as you ride—a play-by-play schooling session. It gave Cathy a clearer picture of what Lynn was feeling and doing, and then Cathy could chime in when her priorities differed from Lynn's.

When Lynn suggested that I try this out, I hesitated. Talk and ride at the same time? Too much like walking and chewing gum.

My prevailing weakness is an inability to multi-task. While I ride with a marginal level of competence at home or in lessons, once I get to a horse show, my brain freezes, even when it's hot enough to waive the coat rule. I forget how to inventory my horse's parts. Head, neck, shoulders and haunches bulge and twist in divergent directions. Softness, straightness, flexion and connection elude me entirely. My elegantly long-backed mare, Magda, unravels to the length of a 25-car freight train with comparable elasticity. Without my instructor there to get us back on track, my mare's neck and shoulders descend to a peanut-pushing silhouette. Our

scores reflect the picture in humiliatingly high definition.

So I began to narrate my rides. Stilted and hesitant at first, I hated to hear my own voice. Worse yet, my actions did not reflect my intentions. I would feel the need for more left flexion say, and I would say “flexion,” but nothing happened. The mare didn’t flex at the poll.

That was when the fluorescent light bulb began to flicker above my head. Yes, I felt what was going on under my seat, and I thought about what I needed to do to correct it, but my aids didn’t come through. I needed to act more effectively.

My play-by-play commentary grew more fluent with time. I shed my inhibitions about riding out loud. The light bulb shimmered. I recognized that there is no one right answer for every horse in every moment. But whatever the situation, you have to try something, not just sit there and hope for the best. By trusting my feel and by testing different corrections, I could discover what created the desired response, and what didn’t, in any given situation.

As our schooling progressed, it grew increasingly apparent to me that every stride called for a correction either to the horse or to me. Lynn and I developed a shorthand language that allowed for rapid fire narrative: flexion, shoulder, straighten, energy, haunches, rhythm, half halt, half halt, half halt, etc.

Eventually, the unthinkable happened—Magda compressed longitudinally by a degree or two. She elevated vertically just a whisker. The halts came through with a touch more energy. The trot grew more cadenced. The canter developed with greater softness. The light bulb glowed brightly. Riding out loud made me more proactive. It gave me the confidence to trust my instincts and the impetus to ride every stride. Now if only I could do it without moving my lips. 