

# Speaking for the horses

HELEN FIRTH CAUGHT UP WITH CELEBRATED DRESSAGE TRAINER LEONIE BRAMALL AT HER RECENT NZ CLINIC. RIDING PICTURE OPPOSITE: VOLKER DUSCHE, ALL OTHER IMAGES: TRISH DUNELL

When it comes to dressage, Canadian-born Leonie Bramall is a class act. Not only has she ridden some of Germany's best stallions, but she also trains one of Germany's top riders, Heike Kemmer. Leonie travelled to Hong Kong last year as Heike's personal Olympic coach, where she helped Heike and Bonaparte win team gold and individual bronze medals.

And while you might not expect to find an Olympic coach of Leonie's calibre teaching in little New Zealand, that's exactly what she has done for the past five years. She has built up a loyal band of riders, including Andrea Bank, Kylie Baker and Casey Johnson (who've all trained with Leonie at her home in Hanover), and eventer John Twomey.

Leonie doesn't turn up to a clinic in her

breeches; she says her students have to sweat. "Teaching is much more than me just getting on and riding the horses around. Sure, that's easier, but it's not helpful. A rider may see their horse go and then they get on and torture it even more, because they're not adept enough in their riding to go there.

"I try to be the mediator for the horse, to let the rider understand what the horse is feeling and why they are reacting in a certain way."

In Germany, Leonie has 24 horses in training, competes successfully from young horse classes through to Grand Prix, and also teaches from 4pm until 9pm most days. It's an intensely busy life. "I have a lot of sincere people who come to me with very normal horses, and they manage to move

on, like people here. I love it," she says.

So just how does a 45-year-old Canadian come to be regarded as one of Germany's most beautiful professional riders and top trainers? By having lots of natural talent, and being in the right place, at the right time.

Leonie grew up in Vancouver in a non-horsey family, but became involved with pony club and eventing. She worked hard, cleaning stables and giving lessons, in order to support her hobby.

At that time, the famous German dressage trainer Johann Hinnemann was coach for the Canadian team, and he spotted Leonie's natural ability. He offered her a place as a working student, and at 18 she abandoned her plans to study veterinary medicine and (much to her father's horror) headed off to Germany. Her father didn't speak to her for two years, but she stayed with Johann for 15. Leonie learned her trade from one of the best: the former German team rider and national trainer's many well-known students include Ulla Salzgeber and Coby van Baalen.

"The way Jo taught made sense to me. He was really into finding out what was happening mechanically with the horse and I used to spend hours watching him ride," recalls Leonie. "And I was really fortunate, because I already rode well and had a solid basis, so when I went to Germany I got a lot of advantages in terms of being able to ride good horses and move on."

While at Johann's, Leonie bought a three-year-old Oldenburg mare, Gilbona, which she ended up taking to the Olympics in 1992 and 1994, and the World Championships in 1996. "She was an absolute nutter, but she taught me how to ride, and she taught me patience," she says.

"She wanted to passage all the time, but Johann would say, 'No, don't let her do that. Trot with activity from behind and through into the contact.' That's one of the most important things I ever learned and it has followed me my whole life: if they offer passage, don't do it, because they just learn to block and suck back. You don't want to see a horse passaging when you're supposed to be doing collected trot."

It was during her time with Johann that Leonie first met Heike, and developed a close working relationship that continues today. For the last four years, she's helped Heike with her stable star, Bonaparte. "He's wonderful. He comes out and looks like a Western pony, he just cruises around," she laughs. "He's not a '10' mover and his trot



A team effort: Leonie with regular student, Andrea Bank, and stallion



*Leonie is a successful competitor at the highest level in Europe*

is very normal, but he has this range of motion – he can go small and he can go big. And he’s a good competitor. Once you start him up and get him purring, he just rises to the occasion.”

While at Johann’s, Leonie got to ride his top horses, including the World and European medal mount *Ideal*, and later competed on the stallions *Rohdiamant* and *Relevant*.

Then the stallion *Botticello* came along. He was six years old and beautiful, but incredibly difficult. The owner knew Leonie and offered her the ride. “My first experience with *Botticello* was that the horse spent an hour trying to lunge me! We actually ended up at the world championships for young horses just a few weeks later and he came ninth in the six-year-old final, so it was awesome to move him on so quickly,” she says.

And this dispels the myth that riders like Leonie only have super flash and talented horses. “No, I don’t get horses because they are great and function – I get horses because they have problems and don’t function. I have to do my homework and go back, back, back... to where there is some line of communication and I can start to get things sorted out.”

Leonie and *Botticello* went on to notch up 64 placings, including 25 wins, at Advanced level, before he was sold to a Swedish rider. “He would never have been a super Grand

Prix horse, because of the way he was built. It was not easy for him,” she says. “That is the mistake people often make – they think because a horse has gone Advanced it will do Grand Prix, but that is not always the case. In Germany, the small tour horses often stay there, because there are so many other horses who can do Grand Prix properly. To ride around with 50% is just not where it’s at.”

These days Leonie is based at the breeding and training barn, Gestut Muhlenort, in the heart of the Hanoverian breeding district, with her German partner, Volker Dusche. Volker, who is an expert on dressage pedigrees and conformation, comes from a long line of horse breeders. Seven years ago, the couple started their own business, breeding and producing a few select young horses of their own, and training horses for owners. Andrea Banks’ imported stallion *Doringcourt* and Kylie Baker’s *Woodsbee* both started out in Leonie’s stable.

“Usually I don’t get to keep the good ones, like those two!” says Leonie. “I don’t have a sponsor and I’m not independently wealthy, so I have to earn money by riding other people’s horses and selling our own young ones. But it’s fun to match our horses with the right people and see them be successful – I get a kick out of doing that.”

Over the past few years, Leonie has seen that we are beginning to breed and import better horses here, but believes the one

thing missing is the mare lines. “You’ve got a lot of bad-tempered thoroughbred mare lines, which don’t make good riding horses. A dressage horse has to be tolerant and want to work through its body.”

Conformation, she says, is everything. A horse may have the most amazing movement, but if he has a short neck, for example, when you try to train him he will lock up in the body, because there is no space for all that movement to go.

“You can train any horse to do tricks – they do it in the circus all the time. But if you want a horse to ride competition dressage on, you need to have something that’s suited for the job, because otherwise you are actually working against their bodies, and you make them sore.”

Leonie is keen to improve the standard of dressage in New Zealand, although she has possibly inadvertently ruffled a few feathers.

“If you don’t expand your horizons, you can think what you’re doing is really good and then you get a bit precious if somebody rocks your boat. I think here sometimes people think they are riding Grand Prix and I come in and say, ‘Well, you need to get your horse on the bit’, and they are offended, which is really sad, because that’s not how it is intended. They don’t understand they can only get their piaffe and passage better if they go back and work on the basics.”

# A clinic with Leonie Bramall

LEONIE WORKS WITH FOUR OF HER REGULAR NEW ZEALAND STUDENTS, TO SHOW THE PROGRESSIVE NATURE OF HER TRAINING, FROM NOVICE THROUGH TO OPEN MEDIUM LEVEL

## The Level 2 horse

**PR Ragazzo** (by Rosentau), six-year-old gelding, bred by Carol Eivers, ridden by Debbie Williams

Debbie Williams' attractive and leggy youngster is a good 17hh tall and is also, as Leonie says, 'full on': he can be difficult when it comes to coping with new environments. Although he starts off a little too round in his neck, Leonie isn't concerned – her major priority is getting Debbie to connect him through her leg to the bridle. That doesn't mean she's pulling his head down, but is using little sponging signals with her hand. "At the moment I wouldn't

want to be asking him to go deeper and longer; we're dealing with a situation rather than worrying about riding perfect dressage," she explains. "He's very alert, which is not bad, it's just something he has to learn to cope with. He's allowed to eyeball things, but he's not allowed to stop and stare – he's to keep doing what you're doing together."

When it comes to dealing with spooky horses like this one, Leonie says it's important the rider doesn't overreact to the situation, that they just leave their hands quietly on and use the leg. Disciplining horses properly, without getting personal, is one of

the hardest things to teach people, she says.

"You have to be a leader; the horse has to follow you. You don't want to punish them for spooking. There are situations where you basically have to stop, and say 'don't run', but as soon as they stop, you relax. As soon as the horse stops, most people start getting after them, which is wrong – you're punishing them for stopping, which makes the horse more scared. You have to think how the horse sees it. If he's running off and you give him a snag in the mouth and he stops, then you have to go into neutral."

Leonie gets Debbie to ride some canter



*PR Ragazzo starts off too deep in his neck, but Leonie says that's not the right thing to focus on. He's a spooky horse, so Debbie is dealing with the situation rather than trying to ride perfect dressage – Leonie encourages her to keep connecting the horse through to the bridle from her leg*



*Debbie copes with her horse's alert nature in a way Leonie approves of; rather than making a big deal of the spook, she concentrates on getting him back on her aids*



*Leonie tells Debbie to push her elbows towards her horse's ears in each stride of the canter, rather than gathering backwards*



*Debbie is able to stretch her horse in a relaxed manner to finish, which shows her work has been along the right lines*



*By the lesson's end, PR Ragazzo is working in a much better frame, really using his hocks and swinging through his back – Leonie is happy!*



*Doringcourt has a fantastic walk, and maintains his rhythm perfectly in both the collected and extended gaits*



*Warming up in a soft and low frame, Doringcourt is still in balance*



*Riding trot-walk-trot in shoulder-in teaches the rider to keep the hocks stepping under in the downward transitions.*



*Doringcourt has learned right from the start to use his body correctly in both the transitions and half-halts, without blocking – that's an important stepping stone to the piaffe, later on in the training, says Leonie*

transitions, asking for the canter on the closed side of the circle, which gives her the best chance of doing a good transition. Leonie wants her to have the feeling that he's an aeroplane landing, with the rear wheels coming down first and the nose staying up. In the canter, she tells Debbie to think of riding positively into the stride, with her shoulders staying back but her elbows pushing forward.

With the canter and trot work improving and her horse more attentive by the second, Debbie is then able to ask him to stretch his nose and open his throat a little more. "This is a better stretch now, but at the beginning it would have been pointless to try and achieve this, because he was too worried about everything. You want to stay alive to start!"

Leonie tells Debbie to think about her transitions being like flicking a switch on and off. She also wants her to stay very relaxed in her seat and thighs: "The worst thing you can do is try to push the horse with your seat, because they just tense, especially a sensitive horse like this that is worrying."

Leonie encourages Debbie to push her elbows forward towards her ears, so her horse is nicely carrying in front of her, and the lesson ends with Ragazzo much improved in his frame, with his throat more consistently open, and working in a nice cadenced trot.

"Do you feel that? He's pushing from behind, using his hips and stifles really well, and moving his hocks forward up underneath his body, to carry himself – that's exactly what I want to have happen. You can give your hands forward and he's maintaining the same rhythm, it's really good. We're going to finish here, because this was an excellent schooling exercise for this horse. It's the right time to stop – he's really good in his back and swinging."

### The Level 3 horse

**Doringcourt** (by Dressage Royal) six-year-old

stallion owned and ridden by Andrea Bank



*Starting counter-canter*

did his early training in Germany, where he was a winner in young horse classes. He is a stallion, but Leonie says he has a good character, is very trainable and is totally listening and tuned in to his rider.

Doringcourt has a wonderful overtrack in his extended walk, but what is really special about him is that when Andrea closes the stride, his rhythm and frame stay the same, says Leonie.

"He walks for a 10 in his extension and he walks for a 10 in his collection. There are very few horses that can walk with such a big overtrack and manage to find a way through their body rather than stiffening when you take a contact. You see a lot of horses that you think 'oh it's got a 10 walk', but as soon as you shorten the reins they are pacing."

Warming up with some trot-canter transitions, Leonie tells Andrea to keep her elbows working forwards, and to relax her seat. "Just go for the ride. Guide him with a minimal amount of pressure, so he's relaxing on your aids and moving more beautifully."

Warming up is a question of putting the horse in balance, says Leonie. Andrea is riding Doringcourt soft and long at the beginning, but at the same time the horse is carrying himself and following his rider.

Andrea and Doringcourt have really only just started playing with the lateral work, and Leonie gets them to do some trot-walk-



*Andrea and Doringcourt in a relaxed trot stretch to cool down*



*Doringcourt doesn't put a hoof wrong – a lovely canter to finish the lesson*

transitions within the shoulder-in, which works on engagement and the strengthening of the hind leg.

"I use this exercise a lot, because it keeps the rider using both legs. The horse doesn't just stop and go static in the walk, but closes the hocks more forwards towards the frame. It's riding three-dimensionally, rather than two-dimensionally. Teaching the horse to do transitions like this and to react to a circulatory half-halt, where the energy is flowing, is good preparation for the piaffe later on. The sooner I can do that on a young horse, the more I challenge him athletically and gymnastically.



Left to right: Trot stretching in the warm-up. Leonie immediately corrects Casey for riding backwards with her elbows; Casey co-ordinates her hands to keep an active outside rein and flexion to the inside; Casey keeps giving little half-halts, to help Rain Dance jump through the contact in the canter, rather than running on to her front legs; Counter-canter; Exercises like these shallow serpentine (loops) will help improve the efficiency and engagement in Rain Dance's canter

"You see a lot of horses just hang in their withers and slide into the walk. I want to get an efficient, crisp transition, not like chewing gum. It doesn't mean you're doing it abruptly, it just means they are efficiently working through their body."

Andrea also rides some baby travers, with Doringcourt in balance and his hind leg crossing nicely forward. Nothing changes – not the rhythm, or the frame, which is very important, says Leonie. "This is the basis. We not trying to do a '10' half-pass now, but to give him the tools we can call on later. Why should she try to force more? He's doing it totally happily and with very little pressure. We're taking care of his muscles and joints."

The lesson finishes with some counter canter on the 20-metre middle circle, interspersed with 10-metre circles in normal canter – the smaller circles allow the rider to work on the balance and repair the canter again. Doringcourt manages this easily, although at one point he does shoot away down the long

side when our photographer in the bushes frightens him. Andrea doesn't react, and the stallion quickly returns to his rhythm.

"A more amateur rider would be after him because he spooked and that's exactly the wrong thing to do. That's where it's hard sometimes, to get these people to understand what they're doing to their horses. It's not his fault – he's sensitive, and that's a good thing.

"A lot of people are a bit tense as riders. Andrea has a positive attitude so the horse has a good attitude," praises Leonie. "And I think the horse is great. I told him if he wants to run away from home, he can just get on the aeroplane and fly back to me!"

### The Level 4 horse

**Rain Dance MH** (by River Dance), seven-year-old mare, owned by Matthews Hanoverians, ridden by Casey Johnson

Casey warms Rain Dance up with some stretching in trot and walk, and straight away Leonie wants her to soften her elbows,

so she is giving the frame going forward. "Be careful, you're working backwards with your hand," she corrects. She also wants Casey to swing the horse through her shoulders, so she opens up in front and gets a better canter stride happening. "But don't push her down on her forehead. Work on getting the stride from behind, so the horse is jumping forward into the contact and getting more cadence off the ground. Don't use your back to push her forward, give an impulse in the canter stride off your leg, to encourage the jump of the canter more through."

Leonie tells Casey to use little half-halts and keep the rhythm, so she can increase the activity behind. She wants the mare to use her neck more efficiently, staying up in front, so she learns to balance and carry herself, rather than rolling up and pulling into her front legs.

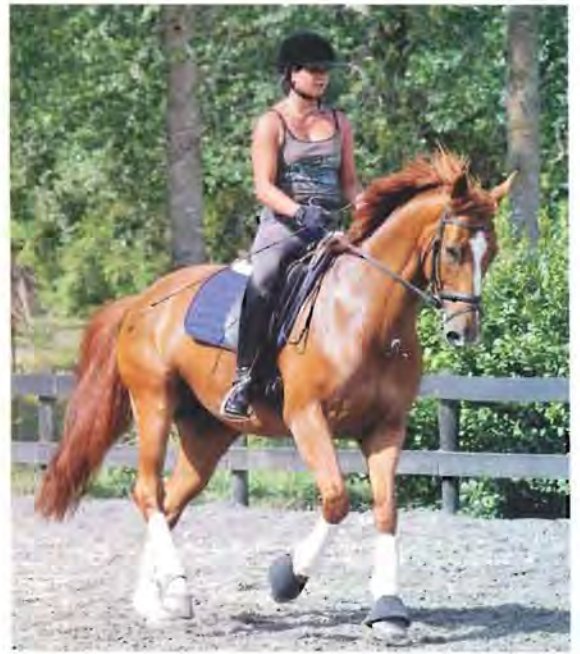
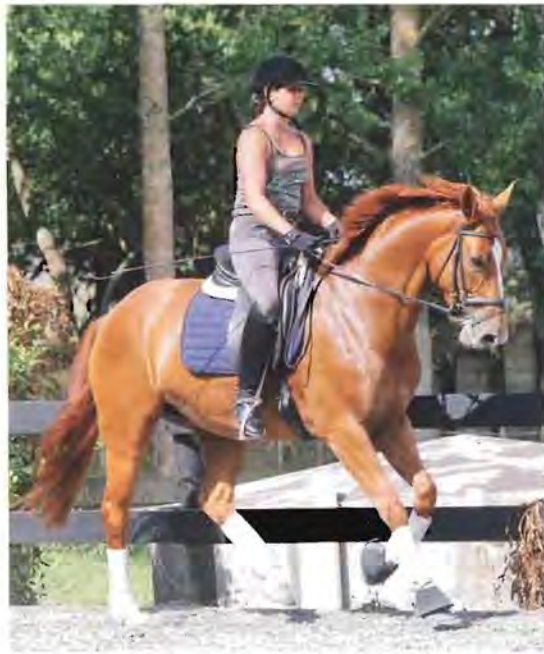
Working on the walk pirouettes, she tells Casey to coordinate an active outside rein (using little squeezes) with a flexion to the inside, connecting her through the inside leg.



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Rain Dance is good to the right, but has a little more difficulty on the left rein. "Be agile with your hand, so you're not actually holding her down, but you're always channelling and she just releases through her jaw on the outside and accepts your leg," says Leonie. "Give impulsive aids with your leg, in the rhythm, don't just press her so she feels jammed."

Into canter again, Leonie gets Casey to send Rain Dance once down the long side in a medium canter, and then it's on to the 10-metre circles and flat serpentines (or loops). "Work on this rhythm in your canter, so every single stride you're feeling and controlling, so she doesn't just push forwards and run. Think little half halts, engaging, engaging, keeping the frame educated. Your legs don't push and jump on her, so she clamps up in her body, but keep the energy working through the canter, keep the circulation going," she explains.

Coming back towards the track, Casey asks for a flying change – it's a little awkward, but it is clean and Leonie is pleased,

as Rain Dance has only just started these. "Pat her; she's totally in the learning phase," she encourages.

At this stage, the mare is still more comfortable with a somewhat lower frame, which Leonie doesn't mind. "I'd rather she learned to work through, using her body properly, rather than worrying about the extra bit of roundness."

The lesson ends with Casey in rising trot, letting Rain Dance stretch. Leonie is pleased with the mare's progress in canter and that is Casey's homework – to keep the mare in front of her leg and jumping through the contact in canter.

"She changes cleanly now to left and right, which is good, but she does a little bit of a twist and is trying to use a very big space to change. She needs to work on cantering a little more efficiently through her body in order to get those changes more under control. It's not a matter of doing lots of changes now, but working on improving the efficiency of the canter."

### The Level 5 Horse

**Limonit** (by Lancier), nine-year-old Hanoverian stallion, owned by Chris and Annie Wills, ridden by Andrea Bank

The Wills' handsome imported stallion, Limonit, has recently been doing lots of jumping and hacking, which Leonie says has really helped him. Like most stallions, he has lost some condition through the breeding season, but he still looks fine. This is Limonit's first time back in the double bridle, so Leonie encourages Andrea to let him longer in his neck right off the bat, giving him a good feeling with her hand. "He's certainly a lot happier in this double bridle than he used to be and it's starting out nice and positive – your schooling is paying off now," she notes.

Limonit has a huge canter and Leonie has been working with Andrea on getting it more organised, and also on the canter pirouettes and improving the transitions. "He's a very big-moving horse and has to learn to balance himself and close the hind leg. When you're doing higher-level dressage,

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## TRAINING



Warming up in trot, Limonit is much happier than he used to be in the double bridle and working positively right from the start



Limonit has a really big canter for Andrea to organise



Leonie tells Andrea to use half-halts in the trot to encourage Limonit to slow the tempo but stay active behind



Making the transition from extended to collected walk – Andrea rides the hocks towards the horse's frame so his neck stays the same, rather than pulling his front end back

### Leonie's top tip

Leave emotion out of your training. Horses don't sit in their barn at night dreaming up ways to annoy you. If you are in a good space, your horse will be in a good space.

you don't want to be big all the time.”

Switching from the extended walk into collected walk, Leonie tells Andrea to keep the rhythm and drop her seat into neutral and heavy: “Move his hocks closer towards his frame, not his frame backwards towards his hocks.” From this good balanced walk, Andrea is able to ask for a similarly balanced canter and then begins to school some travers in canter on a small circle, which is preparation for the canter pirouettes later.

“The important part is not the hind-quarters coming in, it's the loading of the outside hind leg. Keeping the balance, every stride, so you're asking him to stay under behind and open his front end. It's not about the smallness, but the controlling. It's often harder to do a travers on a six-metre circle than it is to just do a pirouette.

“It's this basis which gives them the bal-

ance. Too many people try to just ride canter pirouettes, they don't take a year of building, strengthening and balancing work, and that's where they get into trouble – the horse comes in and goes wheeling around, you see that much too often. It's the same thing with flying changes, it's about working on developing the quality of the canter, and using that as the basis to go on with the exercises.”

Leonie is very happy with the way Limonit has gone, his first time back in the double bridle, and after some lateral work and the canter work elects to leave him here, finishing with a trot stretch. “This is lovely, just trotting like this, he's really stretching, moving his hocks forward, his face is relaxed, his ears are happy, he's mouthing the bit, he's got his mouth closed around the bit, and that's how it should be.”

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Riding travers on a circle is important preparation for the canter



A happy trot stretch to finish