



Captain Mark Phillips Clinic: An Auditor's Perspective

By Donna Gulnac

I wasn't sure what kind of reaction to expect when I told several of my co-workers I was taking two vacation days to watch (not even ride in) a clinic at "my barn." I was convinced they would secretly believe I had finally gone over the edge with my "horse obsession." When I mentioned the clinic would be given by Captain Mark Phillips, however, they all said "Wow!" and uniformly agreed it would be a great opportunity for me. Of course, they were mainly reacting to Captain Phillips' connection with British royalty, but when I explained that he is the coach (officially, the Chef d'Equipe) of the USET's Eventing Team and reminded them he was an Olympic gold medalist for the British team, they were even more impressed by the prospect.

"My barn" is Mill Creek Equestrian Center in Topanga and I have ridden there for a number of years. I don't own a horse, but use their (very fine) school horses and I have never competed at an event. I won't pretend to give an expert analysis of the clinic, though I think I gained a number of insights that could be helpful to riders of any level. I will try to share what I think were the highlights—at least, what I found most meaningful and useful to me as an auditor.

The clinic was held October 14-15. It consisted of two private half-hour dressage lessons each morning, followed by three two-hour jumping sessions each afternoon. The jumping sessions were taught at Training, Training/Preliminary and Preliminary/Intermediate levels and the same riders for each group attended both days. The first day of jumping covered basics for stadium jumping; the second day focused on cross country techniques. The majority of the riders were from Mill Creek, but several riders from other barns trailed in to take part in this significant event.

Before I go into specifics about the sessions, I want to make some general observations about Captain Phillips' teaching style. I saw many riders going into the ring on the first day who were as anxious as if they were going to a show, but many of them seemed to relax after spending a few minutes with him. He was personable, charming and polite—in fact, he often thanked riders for

doing as he asked.

Cory Walkey, the owner of Mill Creek, concurred that he was extremely approachable and added that she found his instructions to his students to be concise and easy to understand. He also had very visual ways of describing what he was after, which I found to be helpful. For example, he used a crop to represent the horse's back and his hand next to the crop was the rider. He moved the crop to simulate the horse in various stages of jumping and kept his hand still to illustrate that the rider's position should remain



the same at each stage. What I was truly impressed by, however, was his skill in assessing each rider's strengths and weaknesses in a matter of minutes. I feel that this ability, together with his non-threatening manner and clear explanations, enabled him to get

the most from the students in the short time he had with them.

The first two dressage lessons on Monday turned out to be complimentary to each other because the horses were temperamentally opposite (at least during these sessions). This gave us an opportunity to compare how he deals with different types of horses. The first horse required a holding seat and hands, while the second horse needed more pushing into collection. During the first session, Captain Phillips said that he liked it when horses "jigged" at the walk, because he could use that energy to "make the hind end work." With this rider, he emphasized that the slowing of the horse needed to be done with the seat and legs more than with the hands (one of those principles that I know, but often have a hard time accomplishing, because it's so psychologically counterintuitive for me). He also told this rider he didn't care if she had "one ounce or five pounds of pressure in her hands" as long as the contact was "elastic." Another of his goals was to get the horse to

move with a "falling down neck," because it makes the back more supple, and better enables the horse to get his hind legs under himself.

With the second rider that day, aside from working on getting the horse more forward, Captain Phillips pointed out that she should not allow the horse to "train" her. Specifically, the horse was "encouraging" her to drop her inside hand—I suppose because that was easier and more comfortable for the horse. Captain Phillips remarked that the hands must be even with each other and together and that riders should use "a pair of hands." This idea came up again on the second day with even the most advanced dressage rider to participate in this clinic (and again and again throughout the clinic). I don't know if I find it more comforting or more daunting that many riders have this same "hand" problem that I have!

Another concept that was reinforced for me while watching the dressage sessions was that you have to learn to walk before you can run—literally. Captain Phillips emphasized how crucial it is to perfect one building block at a time, i.e., a rider should be secure and competent at the walk when learning new skills before moving on to the trot, etc. I have been told this quite often at Mill Creek, but we all tend to get impatient with the learning process at times, so it was valuable to relearn that principle. He also stated a very similar notion in one of the jumping sessions when he said: "riders should train today for what they will need tomorrow, not for what they can get away with today."

During the warm-ups in the jumping, Captain Phillips again stressed the same principles of getting the horse to move forward, use his hind end and stretch down his neck. I once had an instructor who explicitly characterized jumping as "dressage over fences" and this was brought home to me again by watching these sessions. He also focused very heavily on getting riders to establish and maintain "rhythm and balance" every step of the way to a fence and this was to be done by utilizing those dressage basics. At one point he said "balance plus rhythm equals power" and what I think he meant was that having those two essential elements gives a horse the best possible chance of successfully negotiating a fence. Another related phrase that I feel I can take with me every time I jump is "maintain the rhythm until the eye works;" meaning, until riders see a distance and know whether to lengthen, shorten or do nothing, they need to make sure the horse's stride stays exactly the same. This wasn't a new concept to me, in fact I had an entire lesson where we worked exclusively on this skill just two days before the clinic, but this memorable and meaningful expression really "clicked" for me.

I watched the first jumping session with

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Heather White, who rode her horse Cuning Rascal (a.k.a. Wiley) in the Preliminary/Intermediate division of the clinic. Heather pointed out that Captain Phillips did not use gridlines, unlike the instructors in every other clinic in which she had participated (I read somewhere that Captain Phillips believes these need to be set individually for each horse). She feels that gridlines tend to emphasize the rider, since horses are essentially "locked in" to distances through a grid, and that Captain Phillips' method enabled participants to work on the horse/rider combination throughout the entire session, which she considers much more valuable in the time-limited clinic setting.

Another key concept was that of communication with the horse—to make sure that we are always communicating with our horses and that we are always aware of exactly what we are communicating. A few times, when riders saw the correct distance three or four strides out from a fence, they would relax and drop the contact instead of continuing to ride all the way to the fence, so the horses would lose the rhythm and balance and end up getting a bad distance to the jump. This was obviously done subconsciously, but the horses were doing exactly as they were told.

On the subject of distances, I was a little surprised in what Captain Phillips considered a "bad distance." Whenever a distance was

even slightly too long, he would make the rider repeat the jump over and over again until she got either a perfect distance or one that was too short—and he was quite happy with the short distances. I had always been taught that it's better to be too short than too long to a fence and when in doubt, add a stride. To see that Captain Phillips endorsed this as well made me realize that it's not just a guideline for the inexperienced, but a necessity as jumps get bigger and/or more complex.

Earlier I mentioned that sometimes I had difficulty psychologically with using more leg to slow a horse down; the same holds true for the procedure of releasing or lightening up on the reins to bring back the "hot" horses that fight against the contact. Intellectually, I know that I'm not supposed to give the horse something to pull against, but emotionally it's hard to give up what seems like control.


Captain Phillips demonstrated very vividly and effectively why this works by showing the "physics" of what happens when you release the rein. He had a rider pull on one end of the rein while he pulled on the other end from the ground. As he released the rein on his end, the riders had snapped back away from him. When he did it again and had the rider release this time, he almost fell backwards to the ground. It's an unpleasant reaction, so if the rider keeps squeezing and releasing the reins in that manner, the horse will eventually stop pulling and soften to the hand, thus giving the control back to the rider.

He demonstrated this by riding two different horses that had become too excited during the exercises. Within a matter of minutes of using this method (and don't forget, this includes a lot of leg), he had the horses calmed down and paying attention to his aids. As a side note, I used this technique in my lesson Tuesday night after the clinic ended when I was riding a school horse with a reputation for being a little wild in his evening lessons. It truly worked for me and I now feel more comfortable and confident using this tool than I ever had before.

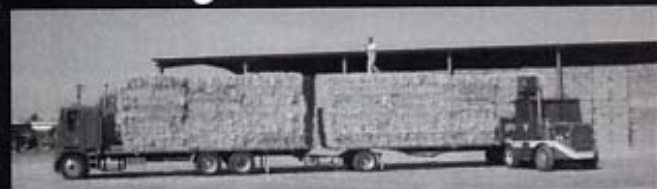
Before the clinic began, I think I expected to have some epiphany; a deep understanding that wasn't there before or some wonderful new trick that would bring my riding up to the next level if I tried it. In retrospect, I'm immensely relieved there was no great "revelation" because it would have meant that something in my training was seriously missing. As for tricks, I know those don't really exist. Captain Phillips confirmed that good riding is all about hard work and just putting in the miles in the saddle. In fact, he quipped: "If I knew 20 years ago what I know today, all of the other competitors would have just had stay at home!"

After the dressage sessions on the first day, I had asked Mette Rosencrantz, the dressage instructor at Mill Creek, if she had learned anything. She said that watching Captain Phillips teach had reaffirmed for her that "we all speak the same language." Her meaning was twofold: that eventing/jumping and dressage instructors (at least the very good ones) teach their students the same flat work basics, e.g., the required quality of the canter is exactly the same whether or not you are jumping fences; and secondly, that each type of instructor has the same goal in mind and teaches the same basics to achieve that goal. Captain Phillips did teach familiar fundamentals, but expressed them in new ways—some of which really spoke to me, as I have mentioned throughout this article. Many clinic riders echoed that sentiment and I could see for myself that "new ways" of thinking about "old" concepts visibly improved their riding.

I also spoke to Jennifer Johnson, the instructor and trainer for the more advanced competitors at Mill Creek, and asked her what her overall impression of the clinic was. She said that it made her and the other instructors feel "rejuvenated and re-energized" and that they were looking forward to trying out some of Captain Phillip's techniques in their classes. This excitement was also something I could clearly see on the faces of the clinic participants and my fellow auditors. I must certainly confess to feeling a renewed enthusiasm for riding and an appreciation for the wisdom of holding this sort of clinic, particularly with an instructor of Captain Mark Phillips' stature and reputation in the field.

One final comment, and I apologize for what sounds like a shameless plug, but I was genuinely impressed by the turnout of all the Mill Creek riders and their horses. In addition, they all rode exceptionally well and many rode the best I've ever seen them ride. I hope that Cory was pleased; she has every reason to be proud of her students' performance in this clinic. 

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