

When Certification Is Good For An Instructor's Business

Riders looking for a new instructor have limited means to determine a professional's pros and cons. That's when having a certified level of competency is half the battle—for both instructors and students.

Amber Heintzberger

When Harriet Peterson and her husband, Jim, moved from Billings, Mont., to Lynchburg, Va., Harriet decided to take a year or so to work on her own education. Jim, an English professor, had just taken a position at Randolph-Macon Women's College in Lynchburg, so Harriet had to develop a new clientele as a dressage instructor.

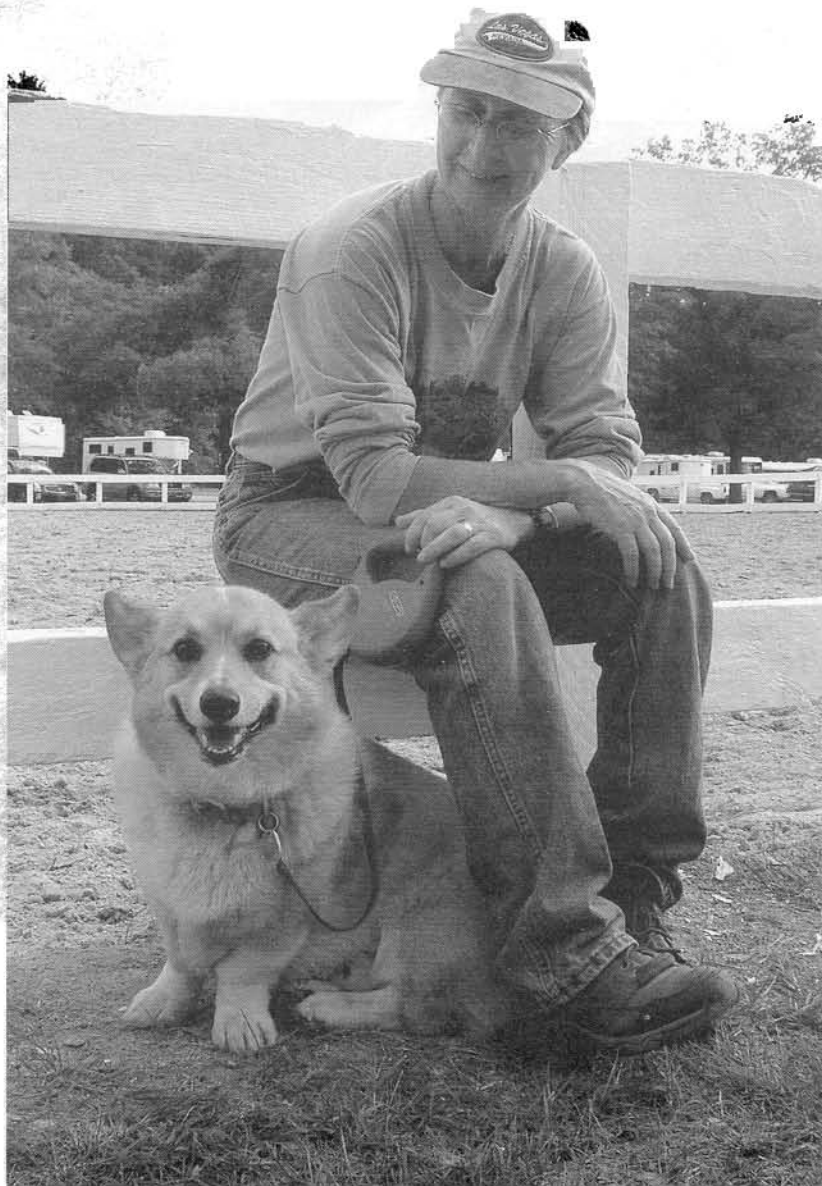
She'd already had to develop a new business in Montana, where there were fewer dressage riders than in her previous South Carolina home, and she figured certification would be a good way to make herself marketable.

Before turning to dressage, Harriet, 54, was an accomplished event rider, competing up to the intermediate level. With Tell So, she won the 1984 U.S. Combined Training Association Mare of the Year award, and in 1987 she won the Eastern DeBroke Trophy at preliminary on the Hanoverian gelding Apaint.

"I'd been lucky in my eventing career that I never had a lot of falls, but in 1988 I had a couple of falls that made me think," she said.

"I found that certification gives people an initial confidence that the basics are there," said Harriet Peterson, with her dog Dylan.

"That same year I got a horse named Bailey in training that was really more of a dressage horse, so it was a natural transition. I'm glad that I did the higher levels of eventing, but I was always concerned that I would get myself or my horse hurt. And I felt that I still had so much more to learn in dressage."



(Amber Heintzberger Photo)

Harriet did make one return to eventing, competing at a novice horse trial in Montana. "It was really fun galloping over the mesa," she recalled.

But in 1999, she earned her r-rated certification as a dressage judge and became involved in the U.S. Dressage Federation's then-blossoming Instructor Certification Program.

As a 1972 graduate of the horse-masters' course at the Potomac Horse Center in Maryland, Harriet wasn't without qualifications. But she wanted something that would prove to her new students that she was really qualified to teach dressage.

► It Was Overwhelming

The certification program has changed in just the six years since Peterson participated. Then, there was no required preparation, other than a pre-examination to determine if she was ready to go take the big exam. And the exams have been separated since trying to pass at more than one level in the same weekend was overwhelming. Peterson did the exams for teaching through second level and teaching through fourth level in the same weekend, which is no longer allowed.

"I took two oral exams, two written exams, longeing the horse, longeing the rider, and I did at least three riding tests and four or five teaching sessions, all in a weekend," recalled Peterson. "I got through all of them, except for longeing the rider, which I retook later. But it was just too much."

Although she initially took the exams in 1999, Peterson completed her certification in 2001, when she passed the section on longeing the rider.

In preparation for the exam, Peterson spent a lot of time reading to strengthen her knowledge of dressage theory. Her reading included Steinbrecht's *Gymnasium of the Horse*, Ljungquist's *Practical Dressage Manual*, the German Equestrian Fede-

ration's *Advanced Techniques of Riding*, and the USDF Manual. She said that the USDF Manual is much improved since then, when it was really a compilation of unorganized notes. She also said that Kyra Kyrklund's book *Dressage With Kyra* was beneficial.

"To me it was intimidating because I'm pretty self-taught," she recalled. "I've learned

a lot here and there, but mostly from the horses.

"A big thing I had to do was get myself comfortable with the theory behind what I was doing. I felt like I was often translating from feel to theory, instead of being well-versed in the theory to begin with. I needed to learn why we do things in the

classical way and the reasons behind what we do."

Now, preparatory workshops are required before taking the examinations. But when Peterson got her certification, those workshops weren't mandatory. Luckily for her, years before she became involved with the ICP program, Peterson took part in two instruc-

Involved In Certification From The Start

Eliza Sydnor organized the first instructors' certification workshop in which she took part. Her mother, Cindy Sydnor, is an examiner, and the workshops and exams were held at the family's Braeburn Farm in Snow Camp, N.C.

"She's great at teaching them, but not so great at organizing," said Eliza with a smile.

Cindy, who became an examiner in 1990, started the workshops in North Carolina because instructors in the Southeast had no chance to prepare for the exams. Eliza was only 15 when she started organizing the workshops. Before long, she was organizing the exams too.

She actually participated in her first workshop at age 19, but you have to be 21 to take the test, which she took last year, a couple of days after her 22nd birthday. She's now certified to teach up to second level.

Eliza works in partnership with her mother. She has a number of horses in training, and she starts young horses for Hanoverian breeder Lucille Mulkey at Honey Locust Farm.

Eliza said that being involved in the workshops has paid unexpected dividends. "I've met people at workshops, even just auditing them. You get into conversations, and then six months later you get a call to take a horse in training," she said.

Unlike most of the certification candidates, she learned to teach in the program.

"It was like a college setting: 'This is how you teach a lesson,'" she said.

She also learned by her mother's example. "My mom really follows a plan and goes from A to B, and she summarizes the lesson at the end, rather than just standing in the corner screaming, 'half-halt!' now and then," she explained.

A lot of experienced instructors have to learn how to teach according to the U.S. Dressage Federation's preferred methods. "When people come into the certification program and have to watch a horse and rider and explain what's going on, it's a style that not everyone has learned," conceded Eliza. "Maybe this way isn't easiest

if you don't have an analytical style, but it's good for the students because they really understand the lesson when they leave."

She added, "Some instructors are good at 'riding the horse through the student.' Maybe the horse goes well in the lesson, but then they can't replicate that later. My students can go home and use what they learned."

Eliza and Cindy also went to Maui last year to conduct a six-day "Mega-workshop," since there is a limited amount of assistance available to instructors in Hawaii. Cindy did most of the teaching, while Eliza put together a few PowerPoint presentations for the workshops.

The workshop consisted of one day each of longeing the horse, longeing the rider, riding a familiar horse, riding an unfamiliar horse, teaching a private lesson, and teaching a group lesson. Next year they plan to return to conduct a pre-certification workshop and perhaps an examination.

In 2004 there were just two examinations held in the United States—one in California and one in North Carolina. Eliza helped organize the testing in North Carolina. "We had people from all over the country," said Eliza.

But some instructors don't believe it's worth giving up the income of several days' teaching to go to workshops or exams.

"It's definitely hard for some people to leave their business behind," acknowledged Eliza. "That's why we organize them in such a way that local North Carolina instructors can come for a day and go home in time to ride a horse or two."

Eliza thinks that the benefits of certification outweigh the short-term loss of business. "People need to look at it as continuing education," she said. "Doctors have to have a certain number of hours of continuing education per year to keep their licenses. You may lose a couple of days, but you'll be a better rider and teacher in the long run."

Eliza noted that one instructor's students paid for her to attend one of their workshops. "They knew that she wouldn't go on her own, but they felt that it was worth it for their own benefit," she said.



The USDF instructor's certification program seemed like taking a college course to Eliza Sydnor.

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tor's seminars with Maj. Anders Lundgren, once as an auditor and once as a participating instructor. She said that even though quite a lot of time had passed, the experience of teaching in the seminar while talking into a microphone helped her have the confidence to teach under the critical eye of the examiners.

"It was good to put myself in that situation," she said.

► Take It With A Friend

Also, friend Martha Kemmer, a USDF-certified instructor to second level from Tryon, N.C., accompanied Peterson to the exam since she was seeking her certification to teach up to fourth level. She filled Peterson in on what to expect, and the two friends gave each other moral support through the weekend's pressure.

"The testing was like a three-ring circus," Peterson recalled. "There were two examiners, and we were usually in front of one of them at a time in 30-minute sessions.

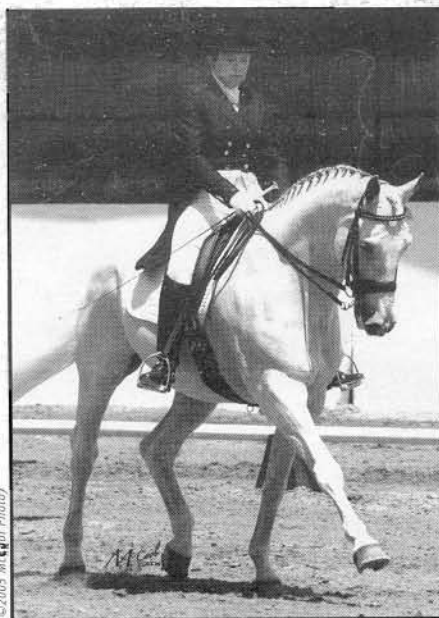
"We did have a chance to get to know our students' and horses' backgrounds beforehand, which was helpful because you have to be able to get on a horse and fairly quickly assess its strengths and weaknesses, what you will do with them that day, then how the session went. Then you have to tell the examiner what you'd do with that horse if it came to you for training for a few months."

Assessing and critiquing was an essential part of the exam, she said. "It was the same with lessons. Your ability to assess horse and rider and pick out their main issue was very important. I had to work on being more organized; to have to vocalize a plan was very good for me."

Peterson believes that certification was a way to deepen her own education and improve her credibility with new students. But she doubts whether her business is any more successful for having gone through the process. Still, she recommends it for up-and-coming dressage professionals.

"When I first moved to Montana, I started picking up students quickly, but I went through a period of really being 'tried out' to see if I knew what I was talking about," she said. "Certification may have given them more confidence in me in the beginning. I've been building my business in Virginia since I got certified, and I find that it gives people an initial confidence that the basics are there and that I'm not just making it up as I go along.

"I don't think that my business would be that different without certification, because I've been in the business a long time and have had success on a variety of horses, and that probably counts for just as much," she added. "But for anyone young who is thinking about a career in dressage, I'd recommend that they get certified."



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