

TRAUSTI TEACHES US TO DANCE

BY HELGA THORDARSON

The Tölt in Harmony philosophy came to California in November, when ten riders enjoyed a clinic with Trausti Þór Guðmundsson, a master riding instructor on his first teaching trip to North America. The clinic was hosted by Kimberly Hart at Sunland Ranch in Encinitas, CA.

Trausti maintains a breeding and training farm in Kirkjuferjuhjáleiga, Iceland. He also runs a busy international riding school and travels regularly to Sweden, Norway, Germany, and elsewhere to teach pupils to ride “harmoniously and beautifully.” A fiercely curious individual, Trausti also ventures to far-flung places to explore foreign equestrian traditions. He rides under instructors for other breeds and disciplines in pursuit of new ideas and techniques to integrate into his approach.

Trausti is one of the developers of the new Tölt in Harmony approach. He believes that Tölt in Harmony has much to offer, as it places clear communication and the well being of the horse above other considerations. He is eager to share the concept and hopes to see Tölt in Harmony’s positive influence spread to both Icelandic competitions and pleasure



Trausti with Kimberly Hart on Rauði. The clinic was held at Kimberly’s Sunland Ranch in November. Photo by Ellyn Norris.

riding around the world.

This approach to riding Icelandic horses—which is quickly gaining popularity in Iceland and Europe—has hardly arrived on our coast, so there was much anticipation and curiosity about what we would learn at this inaugural U.S. clinic by a master Tölt in Harmony instructor.

NO ELEVATOR

The group gathered at Sunland Ranch, under palm trees in balmy November weather, found Trausti to be engaging,

warm, encouraging, outspoken, and hilarious. His enthusiasm and devotion to the horses’ well-being and spirit were instantly apparent and contagious. Because the clinic included novice and intermediate riders, as well as horses at different levels of training, Trausti explained that we would not “rush” into Tölt in Harmony routines or do a Tölt in Harmony riding test. We weren’t ready, and Trausti refused to skip steps, as this runs counter to the very core of his philosophy: “There



“Trausti likes this picture,” Helga notes, “because Eyvindur and I look focused and studious. Eyvindur’s carriage looks good, too. He’s round and ‘leading with his forehead.’ Trausti put this photo up as his Facebook banner picture after the clinic.” Photo by Ellyn Norris.

is no elevator to expertise; you have to take the stairs!”

Over the two days of intensive riding sessions that followed, we did, indeed, *take the stairs*. Trausti provided a splendid introduction to the basic building blocks of horse and rider communication—elements that form the foundation for everything that later flows into Tölt in Harmony.

Trausti also threw down this challenge at the start of the clinic: He would return to California to provide a true Tölt in Harmony clinic *only* if we proved to be eager pupils with the “hunger” to learn and improve. Trausti made it clear that he simply isn’t interested in teaching students who “don’t want to work hard and do the homework.” (We got the message: *The game was on!*)

WHAT IS TÖLT IN HARMONY?

Tölt in Harmony is much more than a new mode of Icelandic horse competition. Per Trausti, it is a “philosophy,” an outlook, a way of being. Tölt in Harmony puts the relationship with the horse at the center of life and informs everything we do—from greeting the horse in the morning to thanking him for a beautiful ride at the close of the day. Trausti teaches that this connection, and the communication that flows from it, is the key to everything—it’s “where the magic happens.”

The goal of Tölt in Harmony, then, is not to excel at a new type of competition, but rather to seek and practice a beautiful and harmonious way of riding. Tölt in Harmony develops and perfects the collaboration between horse and rider, so that aids are invisible and the “conversation” between horse and rider remains hidden and altogether private. Patient, stepwise work over a long time is required to develop a horse that is engaged, balanced, moving with even tempo and rhythm, and able to use all his strength to do what the rider asks. The aim of Tölt in Harmony is very ambitious, in fact: It is “full understanding, where rider and horse look as one.”

Trausti began with an introductory lecture to the group, explaining the powerful influence that Portuguese classical riding master Nuño Oliveira has had on his thinking. Trausti’s view is continually evolving as he integrates new ideas into his thinking. He outlined his current view of the classical training stages that form



Trausti Pór Guðmundsson teaches the basics of Tölt in Harmony to Susanne Hoover (left) and Dionne Rubio at the clinic at Sunland Ranch in Encinitas, CA. Photo by Ellyn Norris.

the basis of Tölt in Harmony:

Ease: The horse is unafraid and shows basic respect.

Rhythm and beat: The horse has “decided” to be a riding horse and collaborate with his rider. He can be engaged in a working mode, with regularity and tempo.

Forwardness/Contact: Forwardness must come before contact. One cannot achieve rein contact until the horse is moving forward and the energy is “flowing into your hands.”

Impulsion: Trausti defines this as “bounce or swing,” or engaged energy coming from the horse’s hind-end.

Straightness: evenness.

Flexibility: suppleness, lack of stiffness and tension.

Collection: engagement, lightness, and balance.

A slow progression through these stages ultimately results in an “educated horse.” And Tölt in Harmony requires a very well-educated horse, as the circular and figure-eight patterns are ridden without walls or rails: The horse must carry himself in a balanced frame and be in perfect communication with the rider.

DO SIMPLE THINGS WELL

After the theory session, Trausti began with individual lessons. He observed each rider and rode each horse. At the end of each lesson, Trausti offered his honest assessment of the partnership and skill level of horse and rider. He warned us not to be impatient, stating that we should expect to practice everything we learn “at least 1,833 times.” With characteristic intensity, Trausti offered this guiding

principle: “Do simple things well and the difficult things will follow!”

To this end, he had us practice proper whole and half halts, use of calves and thighs as invisible aids, and “canceling” a departure to walk if the horse fails to yield. He encouraged us to ride actively, with mindful awareness of each micro-component of movement and communication. He emphasized the importance of doing extensive work at the walk and ensuring correct transitions, circles, and proper “frames” for the horse.



For Trausti, the phrase that best captures the connection between a horse and rider is this: “Contact established. Both parties interested.” Photo by Sara Dögg Traustadóttir.

We focused on asking our horses to yield softly and to carry themselves with pride. Meanwhile, Trausti took photos with the iPad that was always with him. In the arena (during sessions), he shared before and after pictures showing our changing seats and how the horses were beginning to come into better frames. This was instructive and extremely motivating. In some cases, seeing the transformation of a hollow-backed horse (“He’s moving like a banana!”) into a rounder frame brought riders to cheers and tears of joy.

Trausti used memorable phrases to capture his concept of “doing simple things well.” Some favorites from the clinic:

“A circle is not a circle unless it is a circle!”

“Never ride wrongly through a corner!”

“The rider should have immobile hands and mobile fingers! Close your hands during each transition, then open them.”

“If the horse does not yield, your hands should be like oak. When the horse yields, your hands become like butter.” We practiced this with walk/halt and walk/tölt transitions. Trausti explained that the horse must “find the release himself” by lowering the head. The rider’s hands must be steady, “still,” and ready to receive the horse’s yield. We must not be caught unawares and pull back on the reins at that moment, as this negates the perceived release for the horse and renders the exercise counterproductive. (I found this concept to be similar to Eyjólfur (Jolli) Ísólfsson’s concept of helping the horse find its “comfort zone.”)

IT’S A PRIVATE CONVERSATION

Trausti continually called out riders for clumsy over-cueing and obvious aids. He counseled that cues must be subtle and graduated, otherwise the rider is “always shouting” at the horse. He sees too many riders “always clucking and tapping away with the heels,” which encourages the horse to tune out and disengage. He instructed: “First use the seat to cue. If the horse does not respond, use the calf. And then use Walter, if you need him!” Walter is the balanced Walter Feldman whip, which Trausti recommends. We had many laughs through the clinic, because he



Under Trausti’s tutelage, riders Rand Christensen and Jason Christensen worked on asking their horses to yield softly and carry themselves with pride. Photo by Elynn Norris.

refers to any whip as “Walter,” as in “You need your Walter! Use your Walter, now!”

Trausti directed us to control the direction of the horse primarily with our seat and legs, with minimal rein cueing. Along the same lines, he instructed



Helga and Eyvindur frá Oddhóli establishing contact. Photo by Elynn Norris.

us to “use no heels. Use calves only to cue.” When we failed miserably at attempts to leave our heels out of the equation, Trausti admonished us: “People, ride as if you have no feet!” All ten students struggled with this, and riders from Western riding backgrounds had particular difficulty. We were humbled, and promised Trausti that we would practice “riding with no feet” at least 1,833 times.

TRAUSTI’S PHILOSOPHY

Trausti emphasized the importance of keeping our horses interested, curious, and “sometimes a little bit surprised.” The rider’s job is to create an “atmosphere” that stimulates and engages the horse in the partnership. For Trausti, the phrase that best captures the mutuality and lively connection needed between a horse and rider is this: “Contact established. Both parties interested.”

He encouraged us to “Try things! Be curious and inspired because riding is only 10 percent technique and 90 percent heart and feeling.” Trausti is a big believer in using music and recommends it to enhance the “feeling” part of riding. He believes that music can awaken and “surprise” both horse and rider—helping them discover new ways of “working together from the heart.” Music provides us with the “patience we need to get a good result.” Trausti also believes that music encourages us “not to think too much” and thereby helps riders from becoming too cerebral about their horsemanship.

IT'S NOT ABOUT RIDING IN CIRCLES

Learning to ride harmoniously and classically, with invisible aids, requires immense patience, Trausti said, and Tölt in Harmony, like all good horsemanship, is necessarily a “life-long journey.”

At the close of the clinic, Trausti wrote a summary for each student that could be accessed at his riding school website, via a password. These individual assessments offered a brief training plan to help horse and rider improve and move to the next step. They were concise and helpful.

Trausti also shared observations on our group as a whole. He noted that our horses needed to be “more forward and more energetic.” He advised us to work in open spaces, in new areas, and on the trail to make the work stimulating and fun for the horse. He noted that training can occur on every ride, and that riding “in nature” more easily taps into a horse’s innate spirit and natural forwardness. The rider needs that reserve of energy available, such that the horse “wants to go a little faster than the rein contact allows—this is how you fill your hands with power.” Without that forwardness, Trausti says, “your hands are empty.”

He re-iterated that Tölt in Harmony is not an endpoint, but rather “a lifestyle, a way of being that you choose for yourself and your horse.” Tölt in Harmony concepts and skills can be tested formally on the figure-eight courses that now offer



Trausti and clinic participant Mitch Martin discuss the finer points of Tölt in Harmony. Photo by Elyn Norris.



“A circle is not a circle unless it is a circle!” Trausti coaching Helga Thordarson and Eyvindur frá Oddhóli. Photo by Elyn Norris.

competitors an alternative to the oval track. But the approach encompasses so much more than riding in circles. According to Trausti, Tölt in Harmony is a pathway to increased pleasure and beautiful riding that can happen anywhere.

Trausti also shared that he was surprised at the quality of the horses at this U.S. clinic. He believed that several of the horses could ultimately perform Tölt in Harmony quite well and a few might have the ability to represent the U.S. in the World Championships. All of us were primarily trail riders, with little or no competition experience, but we were duly inspired!

TRAUSTI'S DREAM

Trausti concluded by stating that he has a “big ambition.” He expects all pupils in his international riding school to become better riders. He wants each and every one of us to experience “the pure joy of a slow, dancing tölt.” Given these high expectations, it makes perfect sense that Trausti requires passion and perseverance in his students. Those of us who experienced moments of genuine “dancing” with our horses were hooked—and we hoped that the prerequisite tenacity had been demonstrated. As the clinic drew to a close late Sunday, we waited to hear if we had passed Trausti’s test: Were we enthusiastic and dedicated enough to warrant his return for a second clinic? We were all quite pleased when, as the sun

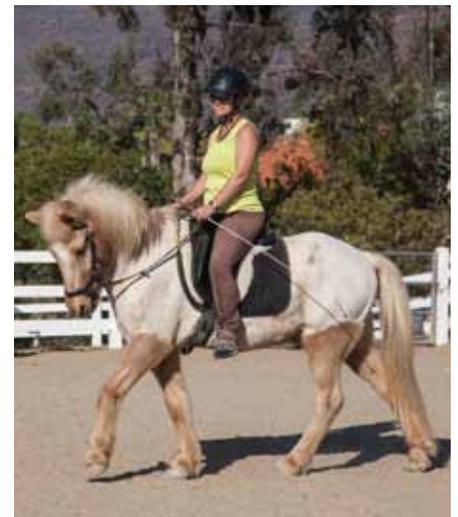
waned in the west, Trausti smiled broadly and inquired, casually, “Okay, my California students ... when shall I return?”

Trausti’s reputation as a gifted teacher is well-earned and his clinics are highly recommended. We eagerly anticipate his return in May, when our group will perhaps be ready for a beginning-level Tölt in Harmony course. In the meanwhile, we are busy practicing what we learned ... all of it ... 1,833 times. Stay tuned.

MORE INFO

Visit Trausti’s Riding School at <http://traustisridingschool.weebly.com>

See the Tölt in Harmony patterns in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zo2qYQTRzAE>



Susanne Hoover on Drifandi, practicing good circles. Photo by Elyn Norris.