



AN INSIDE LOOK AT NINE YEARS OF COACHING IN ATLANTA:

Steady Progress, Inspiration, and Competitive Success with Paul Belasik

We asked Paul a few questions about his long-term clinic group in Atlanta, Georgia, his training philosophy as a visiting coach, and how regular clinics in Atlanta have added up to competitive success for these riders and their horses.

Q: How long have you been traveling to Atlanta to teach this group?

A: I guess it's been about nine years now. I see them every 90 days.

Q: Take us through a lesson: how do you teach; do you ever ride? What are the fundamentals of your teaching?

A: My teaching is informed by 45 years of experience, science, and a constant practice of mindfulness. I was a competitor and have coached different people and parariders to the highest levels of competition, including riders on Olympic teams. My teaching involves observing and evaluating fundamentals of position for the rider and technique for the horse. It follows classical principles, which I have written about many times but are probably best outlined in my book, *Dressage for the 21st Century*. I talk to riders at the beginning of the lesson to see what is going on, and before leaving I suggest homework for the training program.

To become better, the horse and rider must get out of their comfort zones. I believe in the concept of deliberate practice. Outside of your comfort zone, you will make mistakes. In the process of correcting mistakes is when you learn. If you want people to try, you had better not punish them for mistakes, so I know that I need to be patient, and yet push and encourage. Any instructor needs to know the material cold, or they just add to the seemingly growing confusion of how dressage works. So, I have to study all the time. I read, watch videos, do research.

A key part of my teaching and coaching philosophy is not to make myself indispensable. I tell riders not to worry about winning and losing, but to concentrate on riding well and doing really deliberate practice. Then, the winning often takes care of itself as a result. I usually don't go to shows, partly because my schedule precludes it, but also because if the rider doesn't have it at home, it won't appear magically at a show. I coach my riders that the practice has to be like the performance and the performance has to be like the practice.

The clinics become a high intensity practice. In the case of Atlanta, the lessons are serious workouts. We evaluate each piece and then develop an individual training plan forward. Now, where the classicism comes in quite strongly is that the toolbox I give each rider and horse to use in their practice is not about injections and drugs or rolkur or the newest trend, bits or equipment, or how to eke a few more points out of a dressage test. It is almost always about fundamentals: position of the rider, engagement of the hindquarters, symmetry of bend, the creative use of exercises to solve problems. My job is to be honest, never mean, but honest about real progress or lack of it. We also use video footage, an essential learning tool these days. We have a great videographer in Richard Taylor, who patiently films all the riders so they can study the lessons and see themselves and their horses. If I see something interesting during the lesson, I tell them on camera to please go back and look at that part.

I try not to ride the horses in the clinic, although it would actually be easier for the instructor to do that. I will get on a student's horse if something is not making sense to me and I need to feel it myself. For instance, the rider keeps insisting that the horse is stiff to the left and watching it, it seems exactly opposite. Then I need to feel what is going on to help. Otherwise, the rider has to struggle. Furthermore, when an expert rider rides, it can look so much better in a few minutes that it gives the wrong impression, that there is a quick fix. Somehow, you forget to factor in the years of hard work that the expert is bringing to the situation.

I think I keep a strong connection to my riders because as much as I am a teacher, I am a student. I am one of them. I am a student in the thick of problem-solving and practice. I know what my riders are going through because I have done it every day, breaking three-year olds, bringing horses through the FEI levels, working on position.

Q: People have mentioned that they see more progress with your clinics than with many others. You have also helped match some of these riders with their horses. Would you talk about this, too?

A: Most of the riders in Atlanta have high pressured, important jobs, yet they have all consistently improved and frequently qualify for their regionals and even nationals, earning championships in breed divisions, advancing levels each year. We have horses from every level, from first to Grand Prix, in this group. When I say I am not concerned with winning and losing, I don't mean that I am against competitions. I think going to competitions can be a good measure of your practice. My instruction is always to improve the rider and horse, learning the why and how. If you just want prizes and medals, you just need money; buy the right horse that judges like and you can win. It happens all the time, but you may know nothing about riding and training. And, you can miss the satisfaction of the continuous experience of learning and understanding the whole process.

I am always looking at the match of horse and rider. Since I sell a limited number of horses, it's really important that they fit. It's not good for business to think short-term and push a sale when you can see there are potential problems. Last week, I sold a second horse to a woman who bought her first horse from me seventeen years ago. Regardless of that aspect, which is limited as I said, part of my job is to use my experience to evaluate suitability and be frank with the rider if it is not the right match. If a person just has to have a certain horse, their dying mother gave them the horse and made them promise never to sell it, of course I will work with that rider. My only uncompromising stipulation is safety. If I feel the situation is dangerous, then I feel obligated to insist or refuse to work. The main thing I am looking for is a work ethic and compatibility. Opposites may attract, but they should never marry.

Q: Many of the riders who clinic with you have local trainers, some of whom may teach differently and cause confusion for the participants. How do you address that? Is it a problem?

A: No, not usually. I invite the trainers and often work with them. I ask them to tell me how the training has been going. I don't want it to become competitive, I want it to be team-building. In Atlanta, Andrea Manos is the resident trainer. We have an excellent relationship, with similar training philosophies. Students have the benefit of having a trainer with them on a daily or weekly basis and for me, the same. I am getting a professional opinion on what is going on with a horse and rider. And, she can work with the horses in between clinics if there is a training issue to resolve. Because I have a little distance, sometimes things are more visible to me.

Q: So what does it take on the participant's part to make clinicing with you a successful process?

A: Deliberate practice. Not just hours spent on a horse, but the right kind of hours. I know trainers who have spent thousands of hours on horses, but have not improved over decades. It has to be the right kind of practice. An adequate level of fitness on the rider's part is also essential, and constant self-education with an iron will to improve.



Susan Harding with Tigger (top) and Chandilyn Wicker on Ascenso (bottom), who along with others in the Atlanta group have repeatedly qualified for Regionals, Nationals and Breed Awards, on an amateur's schedule and some with high pressure jobs!

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"I have been consistently riding at least four times a year in clinics with Paul Belasik for the last 7 years. As an adult rider who came to the riding world very late in life, knowing very little about horses let alone dressage, Paul has taken me from a training level rider whose position was mostly fetal to a confident rider successfully competing at 4th level. As a result of following his training system, my young horse, who was a non-traditional dressage breed, went from training level to successfully competing and winning at the FEI levels.

Paul creates a warm and lively environment for horse and rider so that even the most novice rider feels completely at ease when participating in his clinics, especially the "first timers." Unlike other clinicians who lecture or just talk to the rider, Paul educates the rider and the auditors on the various exercises he has the rider working on, and finds solutions for the various issues that riders bring with them to the clinics.

No matter what level the rider is or what breed/experience level of the horse, Paul has a way of quickly getting right to the issue and determining what each pair needs to do in order to be more successful, regardless of if they do or don't compete, want to be better riders, improve their partnership with their horse or in some cases determine that a rider does not have the right horse.

Each clinic feels like a building block to the next phase in the horse and rider partnership, with both riders and auditors leaving the clinics feeling challenged, inspired and ready to implement what they have learned over the course of the clinic."

*-Susan Harding, CDPE
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