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HAWAII AT WORK



DENNIS ODA / DODA@STARBULLETIN.COM
Suzi Hillis teaches dressage horsemanship in rural Waimanalo. On Thursday, she gave instructions to 9-year-old Taylor Yamamoto as she rode her horse, "Haley," in the covered arena.

She's not just horsing around

Training horses and humans in the "dressage" tradition is serious business for Suzi Hillis

By Mark Coleman
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Suzi Hillis says she has been crazy about horses for as long as she can remember, and by happenstance was able to build a career around that passion. She moved to Hawaii with her parents in 1973 after graduating from

Verdugo Hills High School in southern California. After getting married, she moved to Maui, where she and her husband ran a car rental agency for several years. Following their divorce, more than 20 years ago, she moved back to Oahu to be near her parents, and while looking for a place to stable her pony came upon Tammie and Joe Ryan's Hilltop Equestrian Center in Waimanalo. Hillis also was able to rent a home on the property, which made it easy for her to eventually start working at the center as a riding instructor. Hillis, 50, continues to live on the ranch, these days with a significant other.

Question: You're a dressage instructor. What is dressage?

Answer: "Dressage" (pronounced like "massage") is a style of horseback riding.

Q: How did you learn dressage?

A: Well, when I was a kid, I always wanted to ride horses, and there are so many different equestrian disciplines. ...

Q: Really?

A: Oh yeah, there are hundreds, -- cowboy, polo -- and each one has its own requirements.

Q: So what are you teaching?

A: What I teach is a balanced-seat form of riding. It's really the ultimate communication with your horse. You use very, very minute signals to the horse to indicate what you want them to do. So to the naked eye, someone who is not trained in this form of riding, they would not recognize what you're doing to communicate with the horse.

Q: You said there are different kinds of equestrian disciplines. What kind would this be?

A: This is dressage. Dressage means training of the horse. So what we do is we have a training scale in which we produce the horses to different levels, then accomplish different things at different levels before going on to the next level. This is a systematic training of the horse in a gymnastic manner to achieve the balance of the horse.

Q: Where do the humans come in?

A: We're the ones that have to learn to communicate with the horse. And that's a lot easier said than done. Not only do you have to learn how to communicate these minute signals, but you're also on a moving object that has a mind of its own.

You can relate it to ballroom dancing, where you have a partner you're trying to lead, but your partner is 1,500 pounds. So if your partner doesn't want to do what you want them to do, the rider has to very diplomatically tell the horses to do what you want them to do -- because you don't want something that large mad at you, right? (Laughter)

And the beginner rider isn't that much in control of their own body either. So it's a lot more complicated than

Suzi Hillis

Title: Manager and dressage instructor at Hilltop Equestrian Center in Waimanalo

Job: Teaches horses how to respond to minute signals from their riders, and riders how to communicate those signals.

just getting on a horse and going for a ride.



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 Hillis let "Regalo," owned by student
 Stephanie Liem, nuzzle toward her
 pocket where she had some treats.

Q: How many horses do you work with?

A: Well, there's around 30 at the ranch, and I feel like a mother to most of them because they live here and I'm the overseer to make sure they're taken care of properly, but I work with about 12 or 15 of those personally.

Q: What kind of horses are they mostly?

A: A lot of our horses are imported from Europe, where dressage was founded and they've been breeding them for hundreds of years. They have the quality of horses that are bred specifically for this, for the movement and for the capability of doing the kind of movement we ask for. We do a lot sideways things and things like that. Have you heard of the Lippizanner horses?

A: Yeah.

Q: That's the type of riding that we do. That's dressage. It takes around eight years to fully train a horse to do what we do at the highest level that we compete here.

Q: There's local competition?

A: Yes. We have eight or 10 shows a year, and we hold three or four of those at our facility.

Q: Who's "we"?

A: The Aloha State Dressage Society.

Q: Is that a big group?

A: We have probably up to 150 members, depending on the time of the year.

Q: So who's the champion this year?

A: Because the horses are at different stages of training, we have champions at each level. So we have lots of champions. (Laughter)

Q: Who owns the horses that you train?

A: I have four lesson horses at the ranch for students that don't have their own horses, and the other ones are owned by the students.

Q: Who actually takes care of the horses you work with?

A: We have a blacksmith, and we have a veterinarian, and there's all the work that goes on around the barn -- the groomers and feeders. Then there's the people who take care of the arena, because you have to groom the arena as well as the horses. There are so many things that take place behind the scenes. People don't realize what it takes to maintain a horse facility.

Q: How many other riding teachers are there at the Hilltop Equestrian Center?

A: We have three others that work here: a couple part time and one other full time.

Q: How big is the center?

A: Our place is about eight acres.



DENNIS ODA / DODA@STARBULLETIN.COM
Suzi Hillis teaches both horses and humans the art of

dressage at the Hilltop Equestrian Center in Waimanalo. On Thursday, she watched as 15-year-old Rita Forman practiced on her horse "Charlie." Forman has been riding for the past 8 years.

Q: Does all the teaching and riding take place at the center?

A: Right, in our arena. We don't trail ride or go out in the field. It's like when you go to a dance, you dance on the dance floor. We do take our horses out recreationally once in a while, but usually most of us are in training or preparing for a competition. It's a serious work environment, more of a riding academy than just a stable. You have to be pretty into it to be here.

Q: Have you ever been hurt on the job?

A: On a regular basis. (Laughter) But, no, working with animals, it's something that's going to happen to everybody. If a horse steps on your toes, it's going to hurt. They're large animals. But with experience, you learn to be safe. When you start taking the horses for granted, you're going to get hurt. ... But most of the time it's a minor injury. ...

Also, we don't do a lot of jumping here. Jumping is a very high-risk part of the sport. We do dressage. It's one of the safer types of equestrian sports.

Q: What kind of people are your students mostly?

A: I work with a lot of kids, and I love working with kids because they're like little sponges, because they absorb and learn a whole lot quicker than adults with preconceived ideas -- though I do teach adults. One (adult student) was given lessons as a gift from his coworkers for his retirement. So I work with people of all ages.

Q: When you say "kids," what do you mean?

A: I start children usually from 7 on, but I've started them as young as 5. It's the little girls usually who go horse crazy, and that's just the way I was. I think the first words out of my mouth were, "I want a horse."

Q: Do you have any role models in the business?

A: I would say my role model, that I've worked with for about 18 years, is Linda Hosoi, who is our senior trainer here.

Q: Do you have a favorite horse movie?

A: Oh my god. I like all the horse movies. I'm always awed by the "The Man from Snowy River," when that man takes the horse off the cliff. It's not fake; he really does it. It just makes your heart stop. And, of course, "The Black Stallion." The horses are so beautiful. But there's just so many of them (horse movies). When you're horse crazy, you just love them all.

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