

Speaking for the horses

HELEN FIRTH CAUGHT UP WITH CELEBRATED DRESSAGE TRAINER LEONIE BRAMALL AT HER RECENT NZ CLINIC. RIDING PICTURE OPPOSITE: VOLKER DUSCHE, ALL OTHER IMAGES: TRISH DUNELL

When it comes to dressage, Canadian-born Leonie Bramall is a class act. Not only has she ridden some of Germany's best stallions, but she also trains one of Germany's top riders, Heike Kemmer. Leonie travelled to Hong Kong last year as Heike's personal Olympic coach, where she helped Heike and Bonaparte win team gold and individual bronze medals.

And while you might not expect to find an Olympic coach of Leonie's calibre teaching in little New Zealand, that's exactly what she has done for the past five years. She has built up a loyal band of riders, including Andrea Bank, Kylie Baker and Casey Johnson (who've all trained with Leonie at her home in Hanover), and eventer John Twomey.

Leonie doesn't turn up to a clinic in her

breeches; she says her students have to sweat. "Teaching is much more than me just getting on and riding the horses around. Sure, that's easier, but it's not helpful. A rider may see their horse go and then they get on and torture it even more, because they're not adept enough in their riding to go there.

"I try to be the mediator for the horse, to let the rider understand what the horse is feeling and why they are reacting in a certain way."

In Germany, Leonie has 24 horses in training, competes successfully from young horse classes through to Grand Prix, and also teaches from 4pm until 9pm most days. It's an intensely busy life. "I have a lot of sincere people who come to me with very normal horses, and they manage to move

on, like people here. I love it," she says.

So just how does a 45-year-old Canadian come to be regarded as one of Germany's most beautiful professional riders and top trainers? By having lots of natural talent, and being in the right place, at the right time.

Leonie grew up in Vancouver in a non-horsey family, but became involved with pony club and eventing. She worked hard, cleaning stables and giving lessons, in order to support her hobby.

At that time, the famous German dressage trainer Johann Hinnemann was coach for the Canadian team, and he spotted Leonie's natural ability. He offered her a place as a working student, and at 18 she abandoned her plans to study veterinary medicine and (much to her father's horror) headed off to Germany. Her father didn't speak to her for two years, but she stayed with Johann for 15. Leonie learned her trade from one of the best: the former German team rider and national trainer's many well-known students include Ulla Salzgeber and Coby van Baalen.

"The way Jo taught made sense to me. He was really into finding out what was happening mechanically with the horse and I used to spend hours watching him ride," recalls Leonie. "And I was really fortunate, because I already rode well and had a solid basis, so when I went to Germany I got a lot of advantages in terms of being able to ride good horses and move on."

While at Johann's, Leonie bought a three-year-old Oldenburg mare, Gilbona, which she ended up taking to the Olympics in 1992 and 1994, and the World Championships in 1996. "She was an absolute nutter, but she taught me how to ride, and she taught me patience," she says.

"She wanted to passage all the time, but Johann would say, 'No, don't let her do that. Trot with activity from behind and through into the contact.' That's one of the most important things I ever learned and it has followed me my whole life: if they offer passage, don't do it, because they just learn to block and suck back. You don't want to see a horse passaging when you're supposed to be doing collected trot."

It was during her time with Johann that Leonie first met Heike, and developed a close working relationship that continues today. For the last four years, she's helped Heike with her stable star, Bonaparte. "He's wonderful. He comes out and looks like a Western pony, he just cruises around," she laughs. "He's not a '10' mover and his trot



A team effort: Leonie with regular student, Andrea Bank, and stallion Doringcourt



Leonie is a successful competitor at the highest level in Europe

is very normal, but he has this range of motion – he can go small and he can go big. And he's a good competitor. Once you start him up and get him purring, he just rises to the occasion."

While at Johann's, Leonie got to ride his top horses, including the World and European medal mount Ideaal, and later competed on the stallions Rohdiamant and Relevant.

Then the stallion Botticello came along. He was six years old and beautiful, but incredibly difficult. The owner knew Leonie and offered her the ride. "My first experience with Botticello was that the horse spent an hour trying to lunge me! We actually ended up at the world championships for young horses just a few weeks later and he came ninth in the six-year-old final, so it was awesome to move him on so quickly," she says.

And this dispels the myth that riders like Leonie only have super flash and talented horses. "No, I don't get horses because they are great and function – I get horses because they have problems and don't function. I have to do my homework and go back, back, back... to where there is some line of communication and I can start to get things sorted out."

Leonie and Botticello went on to notch up 64 placings, including 25 wins, at Advanced level, before he was sold to a Swedish rider. "He would never have been a super Grand

Prix horse, because of the way he was built. It was not easy for him," she says. "That is the mistake people often make – they think because a horse has gone Advanced it will do Grand Prix, but that is not always the case. In Germany, the small tour horses often stay there, because there are so many other horses who can do Grand Prix properly. To ride around with 50% is just not where it's at."

These days Leonie is based at the breeding and training barn, Gestut Muhlenort, in the heart of the Hanoverian breeding district, with her German partner, Volker Dusche. Volker, who is an expert on dressage pedigrees and conformation, comes from a long line of horse breeders. Seven years ago, the couple started their own business, breeding and producing a few select young horses of their own, and training horses for owners. Andrea Banks' imported stallion Doringcourt and Kylie Baker's Woodsbee both started out in Leonie's stable.

"Usually I don't get to keep the good ones, like those two!" says Leonie. "I don't have a sponsor and I'm not independently wealthy, so I have to earn money by riding other people's horses and selling our own young ones. But it's fun to match our horses with the right people and see them be successful – I get a kick out of doing that."

Over the past few years, Leonie has seen that we are beginning to breed and import better horses here, but believes the one

thing missing is the mare lines. "You've got a lot of bad-tempered thoroughbred mare lines, which don't make good riding horses. A dressage horse has to be tolerant and want to work through its body."

Conformation, she says, is everything. A horse may have the most amazing movement, but if he has a short neck, for example, when you try to train him he will lock up in the body, because there is no space for all that movement to go.

"You can train any horse to do tricks – they do it in the circus all the time. But if you want a horse to ride competition dressage on, you need to have something that's suited for the job, because otherwise you are actually working against their bodies, and you make them sore."

Leonie is keen to improve the standard of dressage in New Zealand, although she has possibly inadvertently ruffled a few feathers.

"If you don't expand your horizons, you can think what you're doing is really good and then you get a bit precious if somebody rocks your boat. I think here sometimes people think they are riding Grand Prix and I come in and say, 'Well, you need to get your horse on the bit', and they are offended, which is really sad, because that's not how it is intended. They don't understand they can only get their piaffe and passage better if they go back and work on the basics."