

The young dressage

with Leonie Bramall

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Lesson objectives

- Building strength in the young horse
- Introducing leg-yield



Our trainer

Leonie Bramall was the perfect dressage coach for this lesson: not only is she the trainer of Olympic bronze medallist Heike Kemmer, but she also produces many starry young horses of her own. In fact, Leonie bred and started Woodsbee, our equine model for this lesson. Leonie and Woodsbee won a four-year-old championship in Germany before he was sold to Kylie, so this was a welcome reunion for Leonie and the handsome chestnut gelding.

Leonie usually begins with a longer rein, but given the circumstances, she's happy to start with this kind of walk – Kylie has an allowing contact and Woodsbee is striding nicely forward

Leonie lives at Gestut Muhlenort, a dressage training and breeding stable in the heart of the Hanoverian breeding area, where she and her partner, Volker, juggle an extremely busy life, bringing on youngsters, teaching riders and competing to Grand Prix level for different owners.

Leonie visits New Zealand a couple of times each year, and it is in fact a privilege to have a trainer of her calibre. Not only is Leonie an Olympic trainer, she has also competed at the Olympics herself and is generally regarded as one of the most beautiful professional riders in Germany. After moving to Germany from her native Canada at the age of 18, Leonie spent 15 years riding for Johann Hinneman, and later trained horses at Stud Vorwerk, where she worked with the famous dressage stallions, Relevant and Rohdiamant.

Our rider

Kylie Baker, 35, is a project supervisor and lives on her family's farm in Dairy Flat. She recently came third in the Advanced FEI World Dressage Challenge on Danzante.

Kylie has trained with Leonie before, but has waited more than a year for the chance to have another lesson with her. "It would be my dream to have a lesson with Leonie every day," she says.

Kylie bought the stunning six-year-old Wolkentanz II gelding Woodsbee, who she rides for our lesson, from Leonie in 2007. Unfortunately for Kylie, Woodsbee was stuck in Australia en route to New Zealand for almost a year due to the equine influenza outbreak.

"It was a nightmare – I had a lovely new young horse sitting in Aussie not being worked. I was tearing my hair out," she says. "Woodsbee



horse

Leonie is delighted to see Woodsbee again. He's certainly grown since she put him on the plane to New Zealand a year and a half ago, but after his enforced break he has a lot of filling out to do and needs to get going again.

Leonie always loved this horse, and says he has a good motor with three good gaits, and scored over eight for his final mark in the young horse classes. He's a bit of a live wire, but he's also kind.

"I think a lot of the problems you have here are because of the temperaments of the bloodlines, especially with the mares. I rode this horse's mother, she went through the mare testing; she had an excellent character, and so does he. He's not dead, he's spunky, but he has a quality of character for riding, and that's half the battle: a normal horse can rise to greatness if it has good character, but a horse with bad character is always a problem and it takes a special person to take them on.

"If I send a horse over here to an amateur like Kylie, it has to fit into her lifestyle. I can't send her something that's trotting for a 10, but that she can't control. That's was a huge priority, because I'm coming back here every year, and my head's in a noose if it's not working out!"

Leonie is a firm believer in giving young horses the right start. She and Volker have four broodmares and she finds their own babies very easy to break in, because they already have so much trust and confidence in people. "We start them off properly, even as foals – we don't just turn them out and let them go rogue. We lead them in out and from the paddock as a group, run our hands down their legs and pick up their feet. It's just small things, but they are used to being handled and touched."

Leonie and Volker start their horses as rising three-year-olds, beginning them on the lunge, and once they are at the point



stayed with Wayne Williamson, a Kiwi living in Sydney, who did an amazing job of looking after him. However, Woodsbee was completely out of work as it was a financial struggle for me to come up with his agistment money, let alone pay to have him ridden on top of that."



It's a windy day and Woodsbee is a powerful young horse who has been out of work for some time. Kylie sensibly lunges him to ensure he's settled in his new surroundings, prior to hopping aboard

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Kylie has a tendency to collapse her left hip, but after correction from Leonie she's staying nicely centred here

where they can walk and trot around the arena with a rider up, they are turned out again for a few months. Then, at the end of their three-year-old year, they will go to a couple of competitions with the older horses – not to be ridden, but to simply stand in the truck and be led around.

“If you give horses a chance to learn, rather than forcing them to do something they are not capable of coping with mentally or physically, they take everything in their stride,” believes Leonie. “Then they have a basis of understanding and trust, and they can deal with things that are scary or exciting.

“It’s very interesting to see horses progress if you have them from a baby. There are times when they are three-year-olds where you think ‘oh man, is this ever going to make it?’, but suddenly, when they are six, they are where they need to be.”

A matter of balance

To begin, Leonie would like to see Woodsbee come out and walk on a long rein. However, it’s a windy day, and not an easy situation to be riding a powerful young horse in, so Kylie keeps a light rein contact. “I’ve got to take my rider into consideration. If I was on him I’d be walking him on a

loose rein, because if he leapt up and ran off it wouldn’t bother me. But I have to keep my rider safe, so I’ve got to make a compromise,” says Leonie. “He’s striding nicely forward into the bridle and he’s already got a little bit of a foaming mouth, which is super. He’s not losing his rhythm or being blocked by her hand – she’s riding on what I call an allowing contact.”

Throughout the warming up period, Leonie encourages Kylie to ride Woodsbee with a slightly longer neck, so he has freedom in his shoulders and doesn’t lose movement in his forehand. “Don’t be nervous – nothing horrible is going to happen!” she reassures Kylie.

Leonie tells Kylie that Woodsbee should be reaching not by sucking downwards and backwards, but by pulling into her hand. She wants Kylie to drop her seat down into the saddle, so she’s giving her horse confidence. “Remember, there may be something in the bushes that catches his eye and makes him jump. You want to sit deeply in the saddle and stay relaxed, so you’re not putting tension into his body. Try to control him more off your seat and leg, rather than the hand being your controlling factor.”

Moving into trot, she tells Kylie to think of starting at position five on a scale of one to 10, so Woodsbee learns he’s on the job, even at this age. “Prepare to trot and give him the best possible start, which is a good frame and an even rhythm, with him pushing forward from behind.”

Leonie’s main priority in the warm-up is that the horse remains in balance, not that he’s necessarily trotting around with his head on the ground. “The horse can only stretch so far as he can balance – there’s no point in me putting him down really low if he’s falling on his forehand or he’s out of control. I’m looking for a balance from back to front,” she explains. “Usually with young horses, I ask for more of a stretch at the end of the ride, when the horse has had

a chance to settle in and the rider is warmed up and driving.

“My other big thing is to release the tension on the underneck, so the horse isn’t holding his neck in position with the muscles running along his windpipe. Woodsbee has a nice arch in his neck. Of course he could go longer, so he reaches more, but he’s still weak, so this is fine at this stage.”

Preserving the paces

Woodsbee naturally has a great walk, which Leonie says is a precious thing, and something Kylie should take care of when she’s training. “You don’t want to lose the quality of your basic gaits, which happens when horses get pushed too fast. Some riders are happy because they had an eight horse and now they have a seven horse, which still means they’re getting 70%...but they shouldn’t be!”

Coping with scary monsters

Leonie wants Kylie to ride into the next stride, not what’s in the past. Instead of waiting to see what’s happening, Leonie tells her to ride positively and take care of what’s coming up. This is especially important with young horses.

At one point, Woodsbee has a bit of a look at some sheep in the corner: “He’s never seen a sheep before – we don’t have them in Germany!” laughs Leonie. “This is the point where you have to really help him, so he doesn’t think he has to take off and rescue you.” She gets Kylie to flex Woodsbee to the inside with her wrist. The second his attention is back in the arena, she must soften her hand and push forward with her legs.

The canter

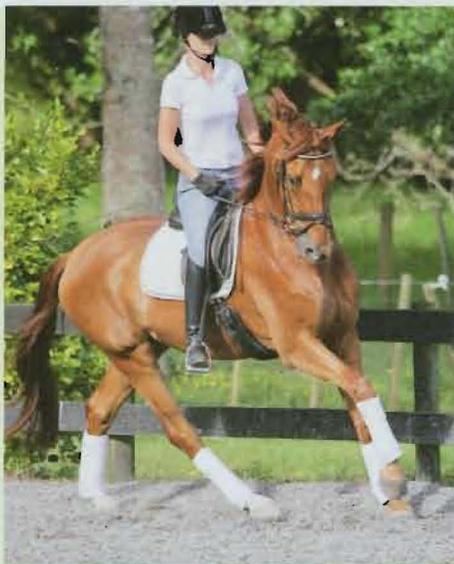
Canter tends to be the most challenging pace on a young horse, but like Woodsbee’s other gaits, his canter is fabulous: soft, balanced and reaching. Leonie tells Kylie to



Woodsbee is built to do the job and it shows – Kylie has an athlete under her butt!

Riding young horses – Leonie’s top tips

- Young horses are only as good as the riders that are on them – you’ve got to make an effort to ride effectively and correctly.
- It’s very important to be confident on a young horse; you have to be the leader, so they don’t feel they need to rescue you.
- Riding a young horse is like driving a truck compared to a little car – their reactions are slower.
- Always think about the next stride, not the one you have now. What has happened has finished; you must always ride into the future.
- Sometimes horses that don’t do well in the young horse classes go on to become really good because they are the ones that are still sensitive several years down the road.
- If you have a problem when you first go into the arena, that’s probably going to haunt you for the rest of the ride, so you need to relax more into the horse at that moment and give him confidence.
- Young horses are like a good wine: they need time to ripen!



ride sitting trot for a few strides before she asks for the canter transition – otherwise, every time she sits, Woodsbee will think that is the aid to canter. She also says the canter transition should be like flicking a switch on: there shouldn’t be any warming up into it, or building up the revs.

“Relax your thighs; you don’t want to be pressing his ribs. And your lower leg is a little static. Soften your knee and give him a little bump off your ankle, as if you’re giving a new canter departure aid every stride with your inside leg,” instructs Leonie.

Forget about flexing

Leonie doesn’t like to use the word ‘flexion’ where young horses are concerned. She prefers the term ‘hollowing’ and simply tells Kylie to look for the inside of Woodsbee’s eye.

“You can’t start with flexion or bending until the horse is balanced from behind and going into both reins. Otherwise, all that happens is the rider pulls the head to the inside, the shoulder pops out and the horse starts going crooked,” explains Leonie.

Starting leg-yield

Leg-yield is a new concept for Woodsbee. Leonie has Kylie introduce the exercise by riding up the long side, then pushing his quarters in off the track. On the right rein, for example, she should think of the left hind stepping towards the right fore. It’s a sideways-forwards movement, with the emphasis on forwards.

Leonie tends to start young horses in leg-yield this way, rather than by pushing them over from the three-quarter line, because there is less danger of the horse falling over



Like all his paces, Woodsbee’s canter is divine!



Beginning leg-yield in walk – Kylie pushes Woodsbee’s right hind in off the track, towards the left fore

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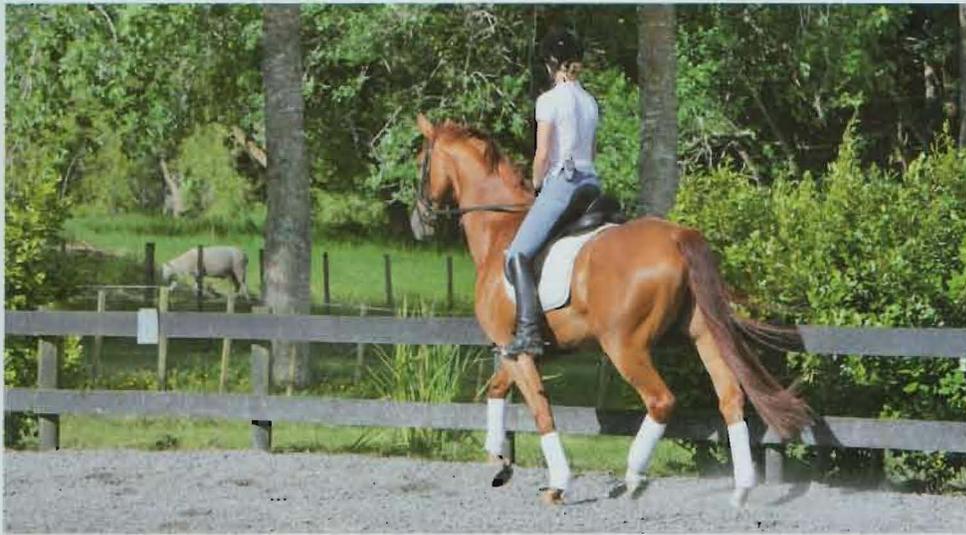
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Woodsbee spots the sheep! Kylie simply softens him to the inside with her wrist and literally a second later has his attention back

the outside shoulder.

Woodsbee very quickly gets the idea. It's a bit wiggly, but considering it's the first time in his life he's attempted the exercise, it's just fine, says Leonie. She gets Kylie to trot on. "We've confused him with something new, so now we're going to do something that he knows how to do – just trot normally on a circle."

Circle-serpentine exercise

Next, Leonie has Kylie ride a suppling exercise, consisting of a 10-metre circle in the corner of the long side, then a shallow three-loop serpentine, followed by another 10-metre circle in the corner at the other end. Kylie rides the exercise in sitting trot: the changes of bend and alternating between rising and sitting trot work on Woodsbee's balance.

"That's the weirdest circle I've ever seen. You are the pilot – you're going to crash the plane!" observes Leonie. "What you school is going to happen to you at a competition, so you have to be a little more on track about where you're going and what you're riding."

Get hacking!

Leonie tells Kylie she should to get Woodsbee out hacking in order to condition him.

"It's terrible for a young horse to stay in the arena all the time," she believes. "They need to broaden their horizons. You build much more of a partnership if you hack out. Kylie needs to get out and do things that are a little bit scary, so her horse learns to trust her, and she gives him the confidence that it's okay."

Kylie's thoughts

Kylie says Leonie is the most amazing trainer she has ever come across. "She has a brilliant eye and doesn't miss a thing. She is totally honest and you can trust anything she says as being gold. She has a firm and direct way of teaching which I love, too: there is nothing worse than someone saying 'good' when you know it is not!"

"My lesson was brilliant. As I had waited more than a year for it, it really was a Dream Lesson! I think the depth of Leonie and Volker's knowledge and training is really shown in Woodsbee. He had nearly a year

off work, travelled to the other side of the world and didn't know me, but he was so well trained and broken in, that it was as if I had sat on him only yesterday – he hadn't forgotten a thing." **H&P**

Postscript: Kylie and Woodsbee made their competition debut at the Waitemata Dressage Championships, where they won their very first test (Level 2).



Kylie's homework

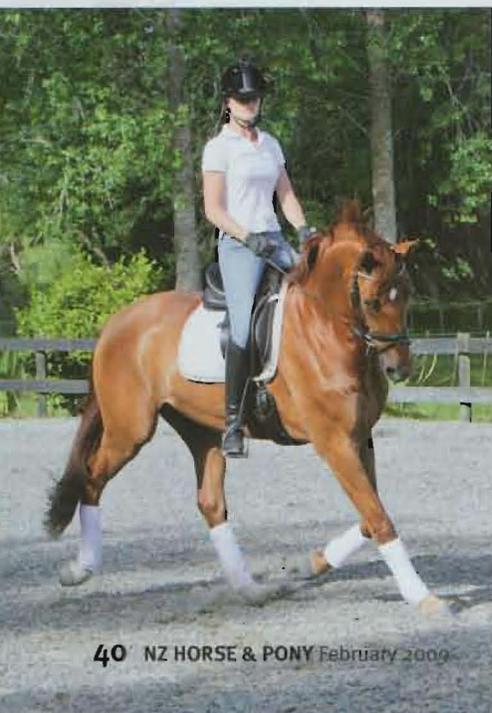
Because Kylie has trained with Leonie before, she's already had a dose of riding without stirrups and on the lunge, which Leonie says has really helped her seat.

However, Kylie still tends to collapse to the left, so she needs to keep her right hip down. Kylie also has a stiff left arm, and Leonie wants her to work on carrying her hands, so she can communicate more with her horse through the contact.

As far as Woodsbee is concerned, he just needs to build up strength and condition. "The next half year is about getting this horse strong. But Kylie's got an athlete under her butt: even though he's just trotting around in a longish sort of frame, his hind legs are still going where they need to go."

She tells Kylie she needs to:

- Work on her seat, especially staying centred in her hips
- Relax her thighs and use her lower leg more effectively
- Ride in the 'here and now'
- Build up Woodsbee's strength with lots of hacking



Above: Leonie doesn't talk about 'flexing' with the young horse. Instead, she just wants the rider to be able to see the horse's inside eyelashes

Left: Riding the shallow three-loop serpentine in sitting trot works on Woodsbee's balance