

Rodrigo Pessoa teaches & talks to Sonoma fans.

by Kim F. Miller

Rodrigo Pessoa's clinic was a great opportunity to learn from one of the world's best show jumping riders. And it was just plain cool to be in his midst. The fact that the Olympic and World Equestrian Games individual gold medalist and three-time World Cup Show Jumping champion was clinicing in the U.S. for the first time, and that it was held in one of the most beautiful corners of our world, the Sonoma Horse Park, made it even better.

Fifteen amateur, junior and professional riders took part in the Aug. 1 & 2 clinic, sponsored by Taylor Harris Insurance Services. Another few hundred learned by listening and watching, sustained by great food and drink that is the signature of SHP's elegant Antarés VIP berm. A special highlight for all was the open Q & A session with Rodrigo during the lunch break on the second day. It was an unusual chance to chat with a superstar and we all took good advantage of it once we got over our collective awe.

Professional and personable, Rodrigo took everybody's questions seriously. Pressed to name his favorite horses, Rodrigo said, "I've been very fortunate to ride some unbelievable horses, but I do have a soft spot for Special Envoy and a little horse named Oasis." As his first mount in Europe's Senior division, Special Envoy "was my

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teacher and a very generous horse who put me on the map." Oasis was a "small horse with a huge heart." He rode Oasis, originally purchased for McLain Ward, in 2005, but the horse died of rhino flu after just a year together. Oasis possessed Rodrigo's favorite trait in a horse: intelligence. "He was so smart he would anticipate what I wanted. He made my job easy."

When asked the most important characteristic in a jumper prospect, Rodrigo said he'd take intelligence over athletic ability. "I look for how a horse responds to what I am asking: how he's going to correct himself. I want a horse that looks out for themselves and, also, the horse may have to save me from time to time."

He admires the same thing in a rider. "I like riders who can capture, retain and put information to use," he said. "I don't mind someone asking me 100 questions, but they have to be *different* questions."

The American-bred Thoroughbred and 1988 Olympic silver medalist Gem Twist was the horse Rodrigo said he most wished he could have ridden. "He was a spectacular horse, just perfect, and a tough competitor."

He did not have any secret or special strategy when it came to mental preparation before competition. The son of the equally legendary show jumper Nelson Pessoa, Rodrigo entered the

Grand Prix ranks very young and contested his first Olympics at 19. He attributed his cool head before and on course to many years of experience. Simplicity is at the core of everything for Rodrigo. As for show prep, "I just try to keep my routine the same. I don't try to overdo it," he said. "Keep it simple and put aside all else when you are riding and competing."

Rodrigo said his physical preparations as an athlete were even simpler. "The athlete in our sport is the horse," he noted without apology. "I'm not saying a rider can be sloppy, but leading a healthy lifestyle is enough to do show jumping. If you are using strength, you are not doing it right."

Fresh from winning the previous weekend's Grand Prix at the Sonoma Horse Park, veteran rider Helen McNaught asked Rodrigo who his main influences have been. He noted his good fortune in being Nelson Pessoa's son and being raised among the world's top riders. He singled out German Olympian Ludger Beerbaum as an important influence. "When I was beginning, Ludger was already very good. I realized that if I wanted to become that good, I'd need to go after him as much as I could." He lauded Ludger's long career. "He has never lost his motivation through good times and bad."

Abby Weese and Ace soaring over a warm-up fence in the clinic's professional session. Rodrigo recalled competing against Ace when Richard Spooner campaigned him, and had high compliments for Abby and Ace's potential.



Peggy Munkdale, Tara Couch, Lynne Lancaster, Leslie Wright, Jordan Matteri.
Photo: Deb Dawson



Meredith Herman, Hannah Holik, Dani Korsh, Joey Pedroni, Gina Gregory.
Photo: Deb Dawson



Abby Weese, Chelsea Jones, Jill Humphrey, Allison Kroff & Nicole Bloom.
Photo: Deb Dawson



Allison Kroff



Rodrigo taking a break in the lifeguard chair standard.

Rodrigo had many compliments for the Sonoma Horse Park and its muse, Ashley Herman Griffin. It was the first time he had visited Northern California and he said he loved the area's peaceful beauty. "The Sonoma Horse Park is a new horse park and I think it has a lot of potential," Rodrigo said. "With Ashley and her great energy, I think it has the right people to go all the way."

He explained that he doesn't normally coach or give clinics because of his schedule. In addition to training and competing, Rodrigo is president of the International Jumping Riders Club and is the rider representative on the FEI Show Jumping Committee. He's also involved in two showcase events, the Gucci Masters in Paris and the Audi Masters in Brussels, of which his dad is a co-organizer. As a cram course in show jumping promotion, Ashley signed on to orchestrate the VIP areas at both events last fall. It was through that connection that Rodrigo agreed to come clinic in the States for the first time.

Rodrigo said he looked forward to returning to the Sonoma Horse Park and seeing how it had progressed. Does that mean he'll be returning to clinic next year? He closed the Q&A with a big smile and a reminder about his busy schedule (especially in an Olympic year), but he didn't say "no." Rodrigo's daughter with his first wife Keri Potter lives in San Diego, so he already has a great reason to come West.

The clinic's participants did our region proud. Although the seemingly simple shoulder-in dominated much of day one's focus, the second day's full jumping course produced rounds that, in general, needed just a little individualized tweaking.

As Rodrigo said, the Sonoma Horse Park is growing into its potential. Celebrating just its second season of rated shows, the venue drew its first sell-out of 700 horses for the AA-rated HMI Equestrian Classic II that preceded the clinic. Most were expected to stay on for the summer's marquee event, the Giant Steps Charity Classic, that followed. Kudos to all!



The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at kimfmiller1@mac.com or 949-644-2165.

Article reprinted with permission, California Riding Magazine, September, 2011.

