

Fun Facts with Hakan Wahlman

Holly Grayton

Do you know how many canter strides a typical horse takes in 1 minute? About 100; this is true regardless of the size of the horse! How do I know this? Stepping outside the box, I recently took part in a clinic with Hakan Wahlman – a Finnish fellow brought to Alberta by Old Gate Farm and Halfsteps Dressage. Prior to the clinic I was told he did work “in hand”, and I thought it could be interesting and that I might learn some things... that turned out to be quite an understatement! #hakanisagod

I have a young horse, Luc, and currently my greatest struggle is the flying change. So on day one of the clinic I was prepared to start with the biggest challenge. I handed Mr Wahlman the long lines and asked that he fix this problem – today! Although somewhat of a joking request, as everyone giggled, I was secretly serious! To his credit, he responded with “Ok” and went to work, certain that I was a lunatic.

After witnessing about 40 minutes of jaw dropping in hand work (he had my horse leg yielding across the arena, in stunning form using only the long lines!) he came to me and said, “He doesn’t push enough from behind and needs



more strength”. These were two things I knew but when an expert tells you, the confirmation is encouraging.

He continued with my horse in the long lines and called across the arena, “Can you come back again this week?”, to which I immediately responded “Yes!” While I walked my horse out, Hakan met my mother and told her “I think a couple more rides and he will have the changes”. Bold words I thought, from a man that hadn’t yet seen the horse ridden.

Nevertheless, my horse and I happily returned two days later, ready to learn some more. This time I rode Luc and we did minimal trot as Hakan wanted to save his energy for the canter work. And work it was! I was expecting this dressage guy to tell me to go slow... No, no. “Move on in the canter!” he said. From there we began leg yielding off the outside leg down the wall in somewhat of a ‘travers like’ position while he says, “Keep the canter, keep the canter”. This spotlighted the weakness but provided the exact exercise for improvement. It was hard work for my horse and me too but Luc and I kept trying. Then, onward to the haunches in on a 12m circle. What a workout and as you might imagine, one direction flowed pretty well but the other,

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not so much!

After a short rest, Hakan asked what we had done to date to get the flying change. I respond with a confident "He does them over a pole every time! But doesn't even think about doing it without the pole." Hakan smiled and said, "Have you tried violence?" My stunned face published my answer NO!? WHAT? NO! Hakan giggled at his provocative statement and said, "I'm kidding, but seriously you'll have to use your whip at the exact (EXACT) moment you want him to change to encourage him to jump through."

Fun Fact #2: a flying change takes about 0.6 seconds to complete which means the 'swing phase' or changing phase takes up to 0.2 seconds. As Hakan puts it, "This is the amount of time you have to ask for and complete the change."


So together we continued. Hakan directed me to pick the track and he would watch. Luc and I went along the long wall, turned back on a half circle and just as we arrived I did a half halt and tapped him with my whip in my new outside hand and BAM he changed! Immediately. No kidding! Clean, powerful, and expressive! I threw my hands in the air and called Hakan a genius. We repeated this and got a few solid changes each way, enough to root the lesson in our minds and muscles. I was thrilled! We continue this lesson at home and our success percentage is very good.

There is true process and theory behind the man. Here is Hakan's scale to success:

Before anything, your horse must have great character! Then,

1. Tact or rhythm to your gaits
2. Looseness within the gait
3. Contact – they should accept the contact
4. Activity of the hind legs – everything comes from behind, as long as it is going forward!
5. Straightness – this means that your horse bends and flexes, turns and yields equal both sides. Therefore, there will be no tricks to traveling straight.
6. Collection – this is not just shortness; the movement of the hind legs must be as high as in the regular work.

Hakan's advice is, "When you run into trouble go back to this list and build again. Don't tell your horse what not to do, instead tell him what you want!"

What am I saying to you? Step out of the box, learn from someone new, ask for the impossible – you just might learn how to do what seems impossible. 

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