

# Summit at Salem

Peggy Alderman coaches Denny Emerson riding Bada Bing.

By Stephen Kinney

**F**rom time to time over the last few years Denny Emerson has indulged me in communication on topics of horsemanship. Often they relate to how he thinks classical training ideas mesh with saddle seat techniques as practiced in Morgan show stables. With more than 100,000 Facebook followers, Denny's page occasionally features healthy discourse on the very topic, sometimes from sport horse enthusiasts critical of saddle seat riding. At some point I asked the eventing gold medalist and one-time endurance rider, "Denny, have you ever actually ridden an animated, up-headed saddle seat horse?" He had, in fact, ridden Lippitt Tweedle Dee at Vermont shows in the early 1960s during his association with Robert Lippitt Knight's Green Mountain Stock Farm. He was quick to acknowledge that horse was not the same animal as today's Morgan show horses. So I asked, if presented with the opportunity, would he give it a try? As you will read, he is adventurous.

I mentioned this, somewhat casually, in a phone conversation with record-breaking rider and driver Peggy Alderman. Without



ABOVE: Denny Emerson, Peggy Alderman, and five-time English Pleasure World Champion Bada Bing (photo © Heidi Osgood-Metcalf).



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** As a preamble to working horses, Peggy shares with Denny her comparison of animating a saddle seat horse to popping a wheelie (photo © Heidi Osgood-Metcalf); Denny riding saddle seat in 1962 aboard Lippitt Tweedle Dee, owned by Deane Davis who would later be Governor of Vermont (*The Morgan Horse*, September 1962); Denny found steering a driving horse through a corner “counter-intuitive.” Peggy explains an animated driving horse does not turn its head, it leads with its inside shoulder and pushes from the outside hind leg. The concept is perfectly illustrated in this photo of Roadster to Bike World Champion Flairetation (photo © Howard Schatzberg/Bonnie Sogoloff).

missing a beat she said, “Let me know when he’s ready. I’ll bring ‘Dave’ in and work him.” Dave is the barn name of Bada Bing, whose five wins of the Morgan English Pleasure World Championship makes him the most decorated winner of that title ever.

COVID-19 intervened, but finally on Saturday, July 10, 2021, we convened at Salem Farm in North Clarendon, Vermont. Present, in addition to Denny, Peggy, and myself, were Jenna Domanico, Peggy’s assistant; Denny brought with him working student, Amber Borne; videographer Shane Darnell recorded the riding, driving, and exchange of ideas; and photographer Heidi Osgood-Metcalf documented the event for posterity.

### A PREAMBLE

When a discussion began in the barn aisle, Peggy offered philosophy behind her training of an English pleasure horse.

**PEGGY:** I like to use analogies. I compare what we do in our saddle seat horses to doing a wheelie. You don’t start by pulling up on the handlebars, you start by getting some motion and forward energy. Then you can balance your handlebars. If you want to go a distance doing a wheelie, you have to marry your energy—your peddling—with the amount of lift. You’ll need that to maintain your lift.

Most riders, when their horse gets forward, respond with more bridle pressure which enhances the problem due to the lack of impulsion. The rider needs to maintain their bridle position and ask for more impulsion from the hind quarters, maintaining an athletic stance with the hindquarters underneath.

If you are doing that and your horse is resistant—if you are not getting your horse to remain raised up—and you add a lateral move, they have to balance for you. I train all of my saddle seat horses to leg yield. If I am going down a straightaway and feel like I am losing my horse, I’m able to do a quick lateral move, left-right. You can’t even see

it, but that horse will come up underneath himself. He has no choice.

### DRIVING BEFORE RIDING

Peggy proposes that for Denny to get the feel of an upright frame in front of him and how a high-trotting horse uses its legs, it would be a good idea to drive behind an animated harness horse. They get in a pleasure cart together. By the end of the work out, the stated goal had been achieved. Denny was at the lines, with his horse straight and his reins centered, behind a horse that raised up, went forward, and became animated. That may have been the end product, but the process involved a discussion of mechanics. It became one of Denny’s main themes about the day’s lessons. He found steering a harness horse “counter-intuitive” for someone whose primary experience was riding. He mentioned several times going into corners thinking he needed to use his inside rein to turn, with Peggy instructing him to straighten the mare’s head using the outside rein. During the harness segment, this aspect of driving became the primary discussion between Peggy, the master of taking roadsters through corners, and Denny, who has made tight turns on the backs of stadium-jumping horses.

Peggy starts with the simple instructions of how to hold the reins with three fingers in the handholds. She clucks to push the mare on, asking Denny to feel how light she becomes in the bridle when animated from behind. They are working to the left, so in the instructions that follow the left rein is the inside rein and the right the outside.

**PEGGY** [currently doing the driving]: She was fading a little on that turn. So we are going to add a little more push [uses a voice command]. There, she is more stable with a little more push.

**DENNY:** What would this be called?

**PEGGY:** A pleasure trot, this is a pleasure horse. Now, before I pass the reins back to you I am going to show you how we go through a corner.



### DENNY DRIVES

Denny was just a month away from his 80th birthday and proved you are never too old to learn new things. The session with Peggy was the veteran horseman's first driving lesson (photos © Heidi Osgood-Metcalf).

**DENNY:** She is actually leaning into the turn.

**PEGGY:** Yes, she is actually crossing over. It's almost a lateral move. If you do that and the horse is animated and you turn them this way they stay back over their hind ends. You never see her head turn.

**DENNY:** That is a subtle thing.

**PEGGY:** Yes, again, turning initiated from the back end. They don't turn around the corner, they push around the corner from the outside hind leg.

**DENNY** [now handling the lines]: She is getting too close to the fence!

**PEGGY:** Loosen your left [inside] rein. You turn her head back toward the rail and loosen your left [inside] rein. Then trust her. See she pushes from her outside. That is the basis, but you want to keep up your energy. Use the reins to bring her back so she is a little more animated. She is getting forward. It's a half halt. Not enough to stop her. Without energy they are not as steady. When you get good at this you really are not doing much with the reins.

**DENNY:** It does take trust. It is counter-intuitive to your instincts.

**PEGGY:** It's the exact same thing as though your car is trying to skid. The instinct to turn away is wrong. You have to keep your car straight or it goes into the ditch.

*Walking in the middle, grassy area of the ring, Peggy discusses Denny's instinct to move his hands as a unit to the right or left, rather than keeping them centered with the horse's tail always in the middle.*

**PEGGY:** They don't feel you doing that [moving the hands from one side to the other in unison] because the reins are going through two rings, the martingale and back pad. You can't neck rein a driving horse.

**DENNY:** My instinct to go left is to turn left.

**PEGGY:** It's hard when you've been a rider all your life. Let me demonstrate. My left rein is going to pull left. But my right rein is going to control her right hind. That will keep her head straight, not turned. Now she's engaged and what you want to feel is her leading into the inside shoulder.

*They are doing frequent changes of direction in the middle of the ring. With Denny getting the hang of it they return to the rail and Peggy animates the mare, with her voice, back into the trot and Jenna assists with baiting from the ground so Denny feels the horse stepping up.*

**PEGGY:** There is a sequence. Lighten, push, touch back, lighten again. All you need now is for her to look up, but you have to do that through impulsion. It's a half halt, so don't ever forget to let go. They are like an airplane. They will right themselves.

**DENNY** [on the way back to the barn]: Driving is totally, totally foreign to me.

### DENNY RIDES BADA BING

*After Denny mounts Bada Bing, Peggy discusses some of the differences Denny may experience on an animated horse and in a flat saddle.*

**PEGGY:** This horse will basically put you in the position he wants you in. You should turn your knee into the saddle. We ride mostly from the hip down, but with less calf than you may be used to. I would encourage you to shorten your reins. He does not want you to have much hold on his mouth, so bring your hands forward, toward his neck and above his



### RIDING FORWARD

Denny has made a career in eventing and today spends hours conditioning his Morgans and other horses up hills. Both functions require a forward seat (left photo © Tehir).

withers. Walk a circle by pushing on the outside with your leg to turn him. In fact this horse will half pass with you all day long, so go ahead and use that. Keep his head straight.

*Denny is not working on the rail. He is getting the feel of things by walking the horse on small circles around the middle of the ring and is doing lateral movements, asking Dave to half-pass in both directions. He asks about his position in the saddle and Peggy tells him he looks good but asks one question: "Are you comfortable?"*

**PEGGY:** When you go to trot you will not need to do much. You want to push him up into the bridle and do not lean forward. Stay back. Imagine you are on a see-saw and you want to stay on the back side of the see saw.

*After the first trots around the indoor ring in both directions, Denny comes to the middle for a chat with Peggy who asked how things felt.*

**DENNY:** The first thing is the saddle.

**PEGGY:** There is nothing securing you?

**DENNY:** There is that. But it is just different.

**PEGGY:** If you rode bareback as a kid, think of it that way.

**DENNY:** Let me try something. Let me try a sitting trot.

*Denny proposes that he goes back to the rail and spend some time in sitting trot to adjust his upper body posture to be "further back on the see saw." About a half rail into this:*

**PEGGY:** This horse will make you feel like a great rider. [After less than one turn around the arena she instructs]: Now lighten up the bridle. These horses go with less bridle than most people realize. More energy, less bridle. And start to post. Only your hips

go forward. Your shoulders stay back. Dave is saying "yes" Denny!

*Something remarkable has happened. Over the preceding month, Peggy had brought the 21-year-old, barefoot Bada Bing in to work so he would be ready for Denny to ride. She let us know when we arrived at the farm that the horse may be too stiff to do much, but that Denny should ride him first to get used to the saddle and find his position and that we would use the younger performance horse Bazinga for Denny to experience greater animation. As Denny moved into his more optimal posting position, Bada Bing announced he wanted to be the star of the party. Bazinga stayed in the barn that day!*

*After a pause, Denny goes back to the rail commenting about adjusting his equitation: I need to think like I'm riding in the Medal McClay.*

*Peggy calls what happened next Denny's "victory pass." As Denny finds his balance, Bada Bing moves confidently into fully-forward animation, head high, bridle light. In the GoPro video footage you can hear the horse's hooves like a metronome.*

**DENNY:** He's 21. I turn 80 next month. This is my century ride!

*Denny comes into the middle again and we have a conference about what he has just experienced.*

**STEPHEN KINNEY:** Denny, everything changed. When the horse animated, you got back in your shoulders and posted so close to the horse. What do you think happened?

**DENNY:** I didn't realize I was tipping. That's why you need someone on the ground.

**STEPHEN:** How did it feel?

**DENNY:** For one thing, tremendous cadence. One, two, one, two, lift, sit, lift, sit.



### FINDING THE CENTER

Posting during the initial trot steps Denny was leading with his shoulders and “Dave” felt uncertain (1, 2). Denny proposed sitting the trot to become deeper in his seat and straighter in his shoulders (3, 4). When Denny returned to posting more centered both horse and rider got their groove on (5, 6) (all photos are screen captures from video shot by Shane Darnell).

*Denny talks directly to his student, Amber Borne.*

**DENNY:** It is what we have been talking about with “Tense” [her off-track Thoroughbred] trying to get power without speed.

**STEPHEN:** “Power without speed.” That’s a great description. When you asked, “is the tempo good?” you were sitting back and down and the horse was elevating.

**DENNY:** I didn’t know if it was too fast or too slow. It felt about right.

**PEGGY:** It was perfect. That is what we want in animation. We don’t want speed.

**STEPHEN:** Is there a comparison with any upper level dressage horse you have ridden in terms of lightness?

**DENNY:** Right. Nothing in your hands. Sit. Lift. Sit. Lift. I’m not a Grand Prix dressage rider, but I’ve been around. I don’t know what a German classicist would say. This morning, Amber was cantering over some fences on an off-the-track Thoroughbred. When she would half halt him and then give back to him, sometimes he would hold it, but sometimes he didn’t. What you want is the feeling this horse gives you, that when you soften, he continues to go forward without dropping.

**STEPHEN:** Where does that come from?

**PEGGY AND DENNY TOGETHER:** The back end.

**DENNY:** And his very light acceptance of the connection in the bridle, which is lovely. I hardly even touched the bits.

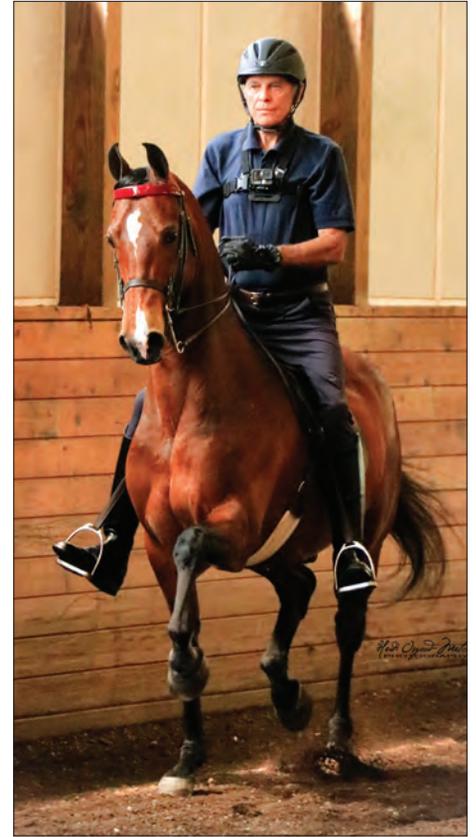
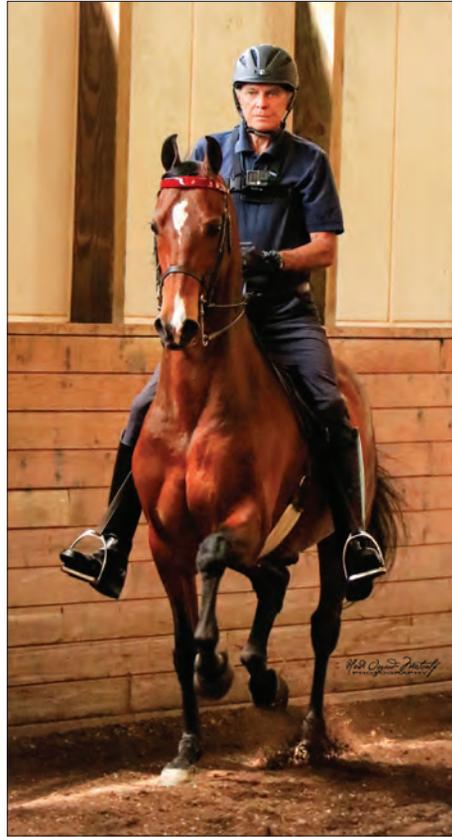
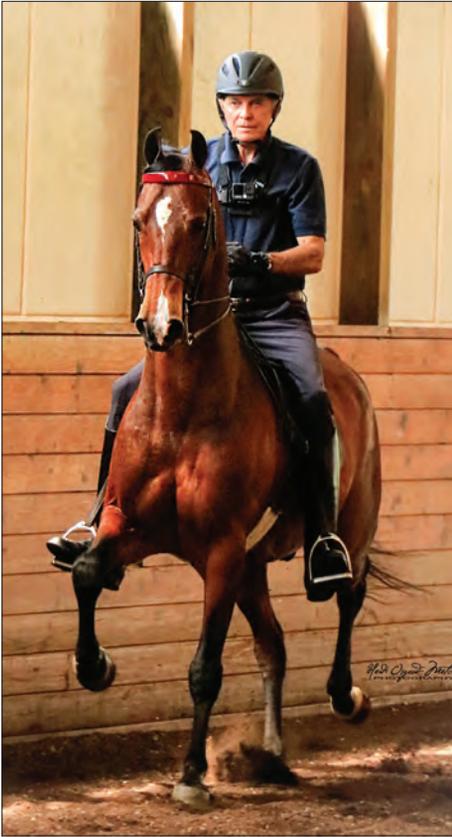
**PEGGY:** Anyone I’ve put on him I’ve had to say, “let go.” As soon as they let go, he does his thing.

**STEPHEN:** When you had your “victory pass” and he was his most elevated, you became that Grand Prix dressage rider. You sat in, you were straight, you were not forward. Did you feel that happening?

**DENNY:** Yes. But I was also conscious of trying to do it. My feeling was that if I want him to be up here, I have to be here too. You don’t want to be ahead of him, but you don’t want to be behind either. You want to be centered.

**STEPHEN:** You were conscious of doing it, but do you think the horse put you there, too?

**DENNY:** I think we put each other there. He helped me. But when I got there, it was easier for him. When I suggested I should do some sitting trot, I wanted to see where he went. Peggy asked if I rode bareback. I rode bareback as a kid all the time and I can still



### THE VICTORY PASS

Denny and “Dave” got it all together. Peggy ordered a double victory pass (photos © Heidi Osgood-Metcalf).

sit the trot pretty readily. When I sat, I felt him get more regulated. When Peggy said post again, he stayed that way. [Sitting the trot] dropped me down.

**PEGGY:** You want only the hips to move when you post...

**DENNY:** But the body to stay. Somebody once made the analogy of a kite. When you are posting, if the wind is coming at you from the front, you will lean into it. If you are the kite, what you want is the wind slightly pushing you from behind. Most people ride with their chin to the front. You should ride so straight that your sternum and chin are in alignment and then everything starts to pop. I am the person in the chain who rarely gets taught, and it is easy to slip in tiny aberrations in posture without knowing it.

### THE ROUNDTABLE

*After Denny dismounts and horses are cared for the entire group adjourns to a patio at the back of the Aldermans’s home. Sitting there one overlooks nearly endless acreage where retirees, broodmares, and young stock roam before Bear Mountain rises steep as a backdrop. Everyone who had participated or watched the day’s exchange was invited to share in a roundtable discussion.*

**STEPHEN:** There is this attitude, outside the show world, that saddle seat horses are somehow forced into their posture and action. We just saw a classically trained horseman ride an English Pleasure World Champion. Let’s dissect that. Peggy, talk about how

you prepare your horses for their jobs.

**PEGGY:** I’m fortunate that I break my horses right from colts. I start my horses to go forward. I teach them to move laterally before they are even hooked to a cart. It’s a huge advantage. It is riding in three dimension instead of two dimension. As soon as you ask a horse to move sideways—left or right—at the same time it is moving forward, a horse has to go underneath itself. They cannot move laterally if they are behind themselves. Do you agree with that Denny?

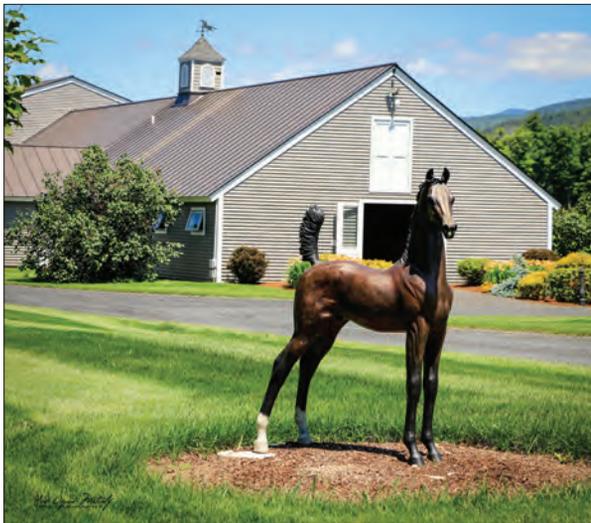
**DENNY:** In dressage they constantly talk about riding from the inside leg to the outside rein. Your inside leg creates energy that is collected in the outside rein and outside leg. And that takes the inside hind on a flight path that, if it went far enough, would land between the two front legs. When that leg hits the ground it is put in a weightlifting place. That is what I think you are talking about.

**PEGGY:** It is exactly what I am talking about.

**DENNY:** So many people talk about dressage as some ethereal concept. A lot of it is simple weightlifting.

**PEGGY:** Driving an elevated or animated horse, you can capture that energy in your outside rein, and it also opens up the inside shoulder. You can turn a horse handily with a direct rein, but not if you want to keep it animated and elevated.

**DENNY:** This is just like what happened when we were in the cart. I don’t know how to drive. My instinct coming into the corners was to slow down and Peggy’s instruction was to add push, let go of the reins, and trust the horse.



### SALEM SCENERY

The Maretta Kennedy sculpture of baby Bazinga on the drive to the barn and the view of Bear Mountain from the patio where we conducted our round-table (photos © Heidi Osgood-Metcalf).

**STEPHEN:** She told you to take the harness horse through the corner on the outside rein. You just said dressage is about collecting energy in the outside rein. Is that that same thing?

**DENNY:** [huge laugh] I don't know. I was too scared!

**PEGGY:** It is the same thing.

**DENNY:** My instinct was to take the inside rein and body English a horse around the corner. But you can't do that in a cart. The process was counter-intuitive.

**HEIDI OSGOOD-METCALF:** What did you feel were the similarities between the seats?

**DENNY:** When I got my act together they were the same thing. That is how I would want to ride in a dressage test. The left lead canter felt like I was riding on a floating cloud. I couldn't even hear the horse's feet touching the ground. I found myself sitting really quietly, exactly the way you want to ride down the center line in a dressage test. Stephen said I started out trotting by leading with my shoulders. When I sat the trot, I felt the rhythm coming through my seat and when I started posting again, I felt like my shoulders were better.

**SHANE DARNELL:** I didn't understand what you were trying to accomplish by sitting.

**DENNY:** I was trying to center myself. I had to find the feeling of being over the center. Ear, shoulder, hip, heel.

**AMBER BORNE:** We are all here for the love of the horse. People box themselves in. They will say, "I just do show jumping. That's all I want to know about." And then there is judgment for other disciplines. It's all the same thing. He just had to put his shoulders back to feel the horse and that is the same thing he would do on a dressage horse. He was just engaging the horse.

**DENNY:** Don't you think "engagement" is one of the most misunderstood concepts? I'll throw this out there and see what you guys think. Someone made the comment one time that there are two concepts of having a horse light in your hands. One is having a horse intimidated about going into the bit. That means he's backing off potential pain in his mouth. The other is lightness that is the

by-product of engagement of the stifles and the hock. A lift into lightness. There is a misperception overall that saddle seat horses are intimidated. So I'd like Peggy to talk to that point.

**PEGGY:** There are two points of view. One is that the bit is a barricade, that the horse should not approach. The other is that there is a connection. That's what I'm asking them to do.

**DENNY:** When the dressage coaches talk about connection, it is about the horse moving from the hind end into connection, rather than the connection being the result of pulling back. Have you ever seen the little trick where you put a piece of paper over two objects, one front and one back, and when you blow on the paper it hovers over them. A horse in collection hovers as a result of the push aid and the "whoa" aid. It is like using the slash key on your computer to say go-slash-don't go. That lift takes power and strength. I've seen Thoroughbreds off the track being asked to jump, and they don't have a lot of lift. A lot of the warmbloods they are breeding for sport events have hock articulation and lift bred in. Like the Morgan, they have a baroque build.

### FINAL TAKEAWAYS

*Before our goodbyes, we go around the table for final comments from all who watched the day's lessons unfold.*

**HEIDI:** As an artist I sometimes have to respond quickly to things around me. Given your background, Denny, it was fun for me to see you doing something so completely different, and how quickly you were able to adapt.

**PEGGY:** I agree. Especially when we started out driving, how quickly Denny got it.

**AMBER:** I agree with Peggy and Denny that riding bareback helps you a lot to find your center of balance. Riding bareback makes me more comfortable in the saddle.

**DENNY:** When I trail ride we go up so many hills and if you are trotting you have to lean to catch up with your horse. Otherwise



### THE ROUNDTABLE

In attendance at The Salem Summit: Shane Darnell, Peggy Alderman, Denny Emerson, Amber Borne, Heidi Osgood-Metcalf, Jenna Domanico, and Stephen Kinney.

you are behind them.

**SHANE:** The introduction Peggy gave Denny about doing a wheelie, I thought it was so instructive. I had Peggy explain it twice so I was sure I got it. But Bada Bing, 21 years old, bare-footed, doing that victory pass. I will never forget it.

**STEPHEN:** A performance vet once gave me riding advice about a horse I was showing: “follow, don’t lead.” Denny, to use your own words, after you “found your center,” you stopped trying to direct the horse, Bada Bing said, “OK, you got it, now let’s get some work done.” You were following.

**DENNY:** That’s when he got light.

**PEGGY:** I was so proud of Dave. Today reaffirmed my faith as a horseman. I am excited to have Denny here and show him the things we do.

**DENNY:** I don’t think there is much difference between our points of view. I’m a quiet trainer. I’m fundamentally calm. Your horse is used to being ridden calmly. I think that is where the Saddlebred-Morgan-park horse gets an unfair rap. I think that is the misperception. There’s no horse usage that can’t be taken too far in some direction. You can abuse anything.

**JENNA** [who had been caring for horses and joined us a bit late]: Horsemanship is universal. If you have a good seat you can ride

any seat. Bada Bing improved every pass as Denny got the feel and fine-tuned. It was that sitting trot.

**EVERYONE:** It’s unanimous. It was the sitting trot.

**DENNY:** This relates a bit. I was in Sheridan, Wyoming, 25 years ago, at Bob Tait’s ranch looking at young horses. Bob has a daughter whose boyfriend was riding one of the young horses. I watched this guy, in a Western saddle, loping his colt across an open field and he was soft and elegant and beautiful in the saddle, and I said, “Boy, that guy can ride.” And Bob Tait said, “Yup, the boy has ball bearings in his hips.” That same guy had placed in the top five in National Rodeo competition as a bareback rider. Here’s a rodeo bronc rider who has a beautiful seat, soft and centered and light.

**PEGGY:** Either you are there or you are not.

**STEPHEN:** Denny, you have more than 100,000 followers on Facebook, many from the larger equestrian world. If you were asked on Facebook what happened here today, what would you explain?

**DENNY:** First of all, how light the horse was. He had an innate center that was forward moving but light. It was the best canter I have ever sat on, beautiful, light, straight. And he’s 21 years old and can still be that light. Somebody needs to do an educational series of saddle seat-meets dressage-meets natural horsemanship. Nobody does that.

**STEPHEN:** We’re doing it today! ■