

## **Gavilan Chapter CDS Benefit Clinic with Gail Hoff-Carmona**

On March 9-10, 2009, Gavilan Chapter hosted a benefit clinic with Dr. Gail Hoff-Carmona, Owner & Director of Los Alamos Dressage Center, Ojai, CA. The clinic was hosted by Ann James at her lovely Spring Valley Farm in Morgan Hill, and was a charity benefit to help the increasing numbers of homeless horses that are being turned in to the local San Martin Animal Shelter.

Over the course of the two days, Gail coached students and horses ranging from training level to Prix St. Georges. She stressed fundamentals including taking the time to allow your horse to understand what you are asking and to listen to your horse who will always let you know when you, the rider, get things right. Gail taught us to focus on using proper seat, weight and leg aids to ask for transitions and movements before worrying about messing with the reins. During warm-up and periodic refreshes during the lesson, she taught us to get the horse's hind end engine going forward actively and freely into a soft and flexible contact. As a judge, Gail also clearly differentiated between what a rider might ask of their horse for training and schooling purposes versus what you would do in a show ring.

Gail is a master in diagnosing the foundational issues that may be underlying difficulties with a movement such as the tempi changes and expert in the use of logical schooling exercises and school figures to address the underlying issues. She also has a keen eye for rider position and biomechanical issues that may be hampering the horse in his attempts to comply with the rider's requests.

Both auditors and riders were rewarded with frequent opportunities to ask questions, and Gail demonstrated some of her training concepts on straightness and balance via the use of un-mounted exercises where the riders could experience with their own bodies what they were asking of their horses.

At the request of one student, Gail rode the lovely Arabian-Friesian cross mare, Bella. Watching Gail ride Bella was a clear demonstration of all of the guiding principles that Gail was trying to impart to us in our lessons. As a rider, Gail was quiet, patient, and so subtle that she sometimes appeared to be doing almost nothing. However, by watching Bella, you could see the transformation that was taking place. Bella's movements slowly transformed from tight, flat and hurried to soft, rhythmic and flowing.

One of the students in the clinic summed it up beautifully in the following appreciative email: “He taught me to take my time, because he needs to figure out what my body is asking him to do with a transition. He taught me that two reins are better than one, and I should trust that equal weight is correct. He taught me to stay on my outside rein and use my outside seat bone and inside leg to execute the correct bend in the corner. He taught me to give him some space when I transition from the trot to the walk and the walk to the trot - he taught me that quiet is better than stressed. He taught me how to be persistent and consistent and to understand when he's confused while doing turn on the haunches - we'll just try again till we get it right. In the end, he rewarded me with sweat above his eyes, a thin layer of perfect foam around the bit and a relaxed and grateful nudge with his muzzle. It was wonderful. I have a new attitude and a new relationship - THANK YOU!!”

As a postscript, thanks to the combined generosity of Gail, Spring Valley Farm, and all of the riders and auditors, Gavilan Chapter was able to donate \$350 to the veterinary fund for the horses at the San Martin Animal Shelter. We all had such fun that we hope to get Gail to visit us again later this year!