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HOOFBEATS

By Pat Murphy, Contributing Writer

## Finding your own inner horse

Lucky for us, living in the Santa Ynez Valley means that horse owners have access to the finest information and training available anywhere in the world. One of those trainers is the remarkable German-born Katja Elk.

She gained her expertise not only through extensive study with the finest teachers, but while overcoming incredible obstacles in her own life.

Elk went from being wheelchair-bound from fibromyalgia (when it was considered incurable) to attaining glowing health and being able to ride several horses a day. Now she has become a talented instructor, whose seminars are filled with avid fans. She attributes much of it to the magical powers of horses and enlightening mental work. Elk is somehow able to extend the new information about the former mysteries of human thinking to encompass and engage the mind and actions of a horse along the principles of classical dressage.

She is an advocate of living in the here and now and understanding the way horses think and feel about things. For instance, the various ways our energy is transmitted to the horse, even when we are some distance away in a field and approaching to catch them. Dressage is Elk's forté and she is able to convey its attributes for both the horse and rider. The message one emerges with is the importance of the synergy between you and your horse.

In a relaxing change in the presentation of horse seminars, Elk took her group of students to lunch at Grappolo's private dining room. There they enjoyed her fascinating presentation while dining on fine cuisine. It was a diverse and interesting group, made up of avid horse addicts, many of whom attributed their joie de vivre from having a horse become their best friend.

One of the students, Marsha Lefkowitz, brought chuckles when she confessed to starting out riding cows on a farm in Alabama. But she soon progressed to a horse from an Indian reservation and on to finer horses and dressage. Karla Zuehlke is 10 years deep in dressage and also rides western.

"I use dressage in western riding because it is simply knowing how to communicate well with your horse," she told us, "and dressage has different levels of training." She and her husband, Neil, love to go over to the SYV Equestrian Center for the cow sorting contests.

Another seminar student, Shelly Marks, told us that being with horses frees her spirit; and author Trina Mitchum has been riding since she was a toddler of two. Alix Kendall is famous for importing fine dressage horses and noted trainers from Europe. Suz Roehls found horse friendship even while growing up in Africa and Thailand, and Bonnie Sargeant was enthused about soaking up horse wisdom. So you see, there are opportunities to meet fascinating people at these seminars, as well as to gain a better command of one's riding techniques. Plus, you can form a strong, albeit invisible, bond with your equine partner. But then, we already know that every powerful thing is really not visible.

Elk immerses herself in the writings of highly respected trainers from both America and abroad. We liked this quote from George Theodorescu of Romania and Germany, who has trained a number of Olympic medalists and world champions. He was asked, what physical and mental qualities are most important for a rider to develop in order to advance? His answer was, "A rider must have a deep passion for horses. If he has that, it's enough."

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