

## Classical Dressage Versus Competitive Dressage

In response to Doris Kay Halstead's *Horseman's Forum* entitled *Classical Dressage Sculpts A Sound And Happy Horse* (p. 84, Aug. 9), Politz offers his own opinion on the classical versus competitive dressage debate.

Gerhard Politz

Some of the contributions to this topic and in some cases those extolling the virtues of the Baroque breeds of horses have taken a slant that is slightly disturbing. Some authors seem to suggest that classical and competitive are mutually exclusive. This is simply unacceptable.

The real issue should be good training versus bad training. Bad training and bad riding can only be remedied by more education. This process must involve the trainers and judges alike.

When educating a horse, the principles of the Pyramid of Training must be strictly followed. The Pyramid of Training, although based on the German Cavalry Manual, is entirely founded on classical principles like those propounded by Pluvinet, Francois Robichon de la Guerinere, Loehneysen and others of their caliber. Thus they form a unifying link between the French, German, Portuguese and other branches of classical equitation.

In this context it might be interesting to examine from an historical perspective what exactly we mean by the term classical. Mostly we seem to agree that the ideas and ideals put forth by Xenophon are considered classical. His two surviving books, the *Hipparchikos* and *Peri Hippikes*, although discussing in some detail stable management and related subjects, are chiefly of a philosophical nature and tell us comparatively little of the actual training methods used in antiquity.

Xenophon was a student of Socrates. He abhorred the use of undue force and wanted to preserve the nature and the spirit of the horse in order to "make him proud and more beautiful." That is indeed also the philosophy behind the Pyramid of Training.

But what if we take a closer look at subsequent centuries where we have records of the training of horses. It becomes abundantly clear that we cannot apply the term classical in the

Xenophon sense to some practices prevalent in the 16th and 17th centuries.

How is it possible to understand or condone the brutal methods used by Frederico



In The Forum, horsemen are invited to express their views and offer constructive criticism on any topic relevant to working with and enjoying horses. The opinions expressed by the writers are entirely their own and not necessarily those of *The Chronicle of the Horse*.

Grisone and the School Of Naples, de la Broue or the Duke of Newcastle? Yet Grisone's followers were expert at teaching the airs above the ground. Is it natural to have a horse canter backwards a la Francois Baucher or to teach him circus tricks like bowing or sitting on his haunches like a dog or to do the Spanish walk?

Let us examine more critically some of the concepts we considered classical, such as Wilhelm Mueseler's idea of "bracing the back." We now know that we use the abdominal muscles to achieve engagement with the seat.

Another one is Col. Alois Podhajsky's insistence that there is a phase of suspension in the piaffe. We know now that that is not true. Even at the Spanish Riding School, the stallions have no phase of suspension at the piaffe.



Faustus shows his correct self carriage and lightness in the extended trot with Gerhard Politz.

### ► The Horse—An Athlete

We need to bear in mind that horses are by nature, not even intended to carry the weight of the rider, let alone perform Grand Prix dressage or airs above the ground at the command of a rider. This takes careful training, not only in the intricacies of the movements, but first and foremost to gymnasticize the horse so that he acquires the incredible strength necessary to perform what we ask him to do.

Twenty years ago there were no chiropractors, acupuncturists and masseuses for horses. But I don't think our horses were more sore in those days. We just knew when to back off with the intensity of the training and how to get a horse through a difficult period. That's simply called "good training."

These days we know where a horse is hurting and how much; and we have an expert "fix it."

But does it perhaps create less discerning and careful riders? There is no doubt that bad riding and training cause more muscular and skeletal problems for the horse. Even good and correct training inevitably

causes the horse some muscle soreness.

Bad training can certainly form a horse like the caricature depicted in Figure 2 in the article by Doris Kay Halstead. However to suggest that this is "Competitive Self Carriage" is quite preposterous. What we are looking at is simply (the result of) bad riding.

On the other hand, Col. Cadre's admonition to follow the rules of the Federation Equestre Internationale as to how a horse should be presented in competition should be taken seriously. There are far too many riders in the show ring who should learn to ride at home, and far too many trainers who don't know the difference between schooling and training the horse at home and presenting him in front of a judge.

This is definitely where the judges have an important and leading role to play. The judge's comments should be more educational than seems to be the common practice. Perhaps this would also necessitate more education for the judges.

Judges should not hesitate to reward good training and riding with high marks and be equally courageous in punishing bad training with the low marks it deserves and make appropriate comments.

In the United States, generally speaking, the responsibility judges have as a group in influencing and guiding the training of dressage has not been fully realized and exploited. As in Europe, judges' forums in the United States should also include trainers and more open

discussion should be encouraged wherever possible between judges and riders.

A horse in competition, and a rider hoping to win the class, must fulfill the criteria of the FEI. If the horse is not strong enough to carry himself throughout the test in the appropriate outline for the level, he should not be shown with the expectation to get a blue ribbon.

A correct, classically trained horse, i.e. ideal self carriage, swinging back, opening of the frame in extensions etc., even if he makes small mistakes, should always be rated higher than a leg mover who may be very accurate.

## ► The Horse's Back

Throughout the entire education of the horse, the functioning of the back muscles remains the key component of successful training. Without an incredibly strong back the horse would never be able to perform all the tasks we demand of him with the desired quality of the gaits. A trainer often like to use the phrase "get his back up" but is that what we really want?

If a horse were indeed able to keep his back up, he would look rather like the drawing in Figure 1 of Halstead's article, without proper contour to the back. In fact, the back would be rather like an ironing board and the rider would get the feeling of sitting on top of a mountain. What we do want is a swinging back. This implies relaxation and elasticity. A horse that has these qualities will almost suck you into the saddle in an extended trot.

What happens in the back is reflected in the neck and vice versa. Anatomically, this connection can be made quite easily: The nuchal ligament is attached to the cranium and runs through the neck, is attached at the withers, and continues as the supraspinous ligament through the back and then attaches to the sacrum.

Imagine these ligaments, rather like steel cables running from cranium to sacrum and the withers acting as a fulcrum. If the lever in front of the fulcrum (the neck) is lowered, the lever on the other side of the fulcrum (the back) is lifted. When in this position, the back muscles, receiving support from the abdominals, and motivated by the action of the horse's hind legs, can function in relaxation and without constraint.

Over time the back muscles and abdominals become strong enough to not only carry the rider's weight without undue tension but also to perform basic training exercises with confidence and in relaxation, and eventually in collection and elevation.

A knowledgeable trainer who "feels" his horse, will always put the neck in a position that enables the back to function in the best possible way. This may entail quite a variety of neck positions from long and low as in "allowing the horse to chew the reins out of the hands" to relative self carriage with the poll

the highest point and the nose line in front of the vertical.

These different neck positions are absolutely essential in order to keep the horse's back relaxed, supple and swinging. Any training that focuses on the neck having to be in one position most of the time causes fixation and rigidity in the back and this can happen at both ends of the spectrum, high and low.

For each individual horse the time frame in which to establish the basics is somewhat different, but should take anything from two to three years, and in some cases, particularly with high-strung horses and weak-backed ones, even longer.

From then on progress toward collection and teaching upper level movements can be accomplished relatively easily. However, if the basic training is hurried and the goals (stepping stones of the Pyramid of Training) are not established for the sake of teaching "the tricks," these shortcomings will manifest themselves in various ways throughout the training.

## ► Relative Self Carriage And Absolute Self Carriage

There should be no question that the FEI rules regarding the way of going of a correctly trained horse must apply when the horse is being shown. The rules must be the criteria for the rider and the judge. But is that also how every horse should be ridden in training? From an anatomical and psychological aspect there are good reasons not to.

There are some rather important misconceptions regarding the training of the horse which, paradoxically enough, may originate from classical concepts, in particular the term "self carriage".

Some of these misconceptions are evidenced by such phrases as "elevating the forehead", "making the shoulders come up," "raising the withers," etc. This is literally putting the cart before the horse.

Such phrases imply riding with the hands in order to simulate the appearance of an elevated forehead and the result is a horse, which is ridden from front to back. Such riding does indeed create caricatures of horses that are broken in the 3rd/4th vertebrae, go behind the vertical, are hollow in the back, with hind legs not tracking up or working out behind.

Although these horses carry the neck high and may be able to execute movements with great accuracy and appropriate straightness and bend, provided the rider is skilled enough, their elevation is not natural but rather the result of strong use of hands. This kind of elevation is called "absolute elevation" (perhaps

because it has absolutely nothing to do with what's behind the saddle!).

These horses are generally unhappy in their work, tend to become stoic or resistant, may have an inclination to rear and certainly need a chiropractor more often than horses schooled according to the Pyramid of Training.

When a horse goes in collection, he bends and articulates the joints in his haunches in the proper manner, and the haunches are lowered, which results in elevation of the forehead.

The greatest evidence of this should be seen at the Grand Prix level, but it should happen throughout the levels according to the required degree of collection and to the ability and conformation of the horse.

If this process is indeed the natural result of the engagement of the haunches and relative to their lowering it is called relative elevation. In the context of classical philosophy of training of the horse this is considered a positive result.

During the course of training, such horses develop a top line in which the muscles just in front of the withers and along the crest acquire a contour that gives an appearance of a lengthened neck. The muscles of the under neck are more or less atrophied. The withers themselves appear to be more sculpted. The muscles in the back and particularly in the loins are strong but without rigidity. There seems to be a proper place for the saddle to fit comfortably on the horse's back.

In recent years Iberian horses have made a spectacular debut in international competition, particularly since their breeders have placed more emphasis on producing horses that can also extend stride.

Their riders are expert trainers with solid, classical educations and combine correct schooling with just the right touch of showmanship. I've ridden quite a few Baroque-

type horses and when correctly trained they're a lot of fun because of their natural aptitude for collection. They're generally intelligent and have a pleasant character and, because of their size, make an ideal match

for the small rider. But they do need to be correctly trained, just like any other dressage horse.

Good riding will serve any type of horse, and bad riding can only be improved through education and an open mind. ▲

*Editor's Note: The author, formerly of Stuttgart, Germany, immigrated to southern California in 1987. He is a British Horse Society Instructor, a German Reitlehrer FN, a USDF Instructor and Certification Examiner. He has 30 years of experience studying, training, teaching and competing according to the classical principles and the Pyramid of Training.*

**"The real issue should be good training versus bad training."**

**"A knowledgeable trainer who 'feels' his horse, will always put the neck in a position that enables the back to function in the best possible way."**