



The Spanish Riding School “presents the best examples of collection in the world,” says Paul Belasik.
FREDERIC CHEHU FOR ARND BRONKHORST PHOTO

OVERLY ROUND AND AIRS ABOVE THE GROUND:

The Road To Modern Dressage

Our regular columnist reaches out to renowned classical dressage expert Paul Belasik to unravel the history, politics and misconceptions around today's Grand Prix movements.

By **Jeremy Steinberg**

When the Chronicle asked me to write a column on the evolution of dressage and the current Grand Prix movements, I wanted to include how and why the airs above ground came into being and why they're not used in modern tests. Why the piaffe, and where did it come from?

True collection is the key in any form of dressage, but what defines that collection, and how did it come into being? I called my friend Paul Belasik, whose knowledge on such topics is vast, and his mind is like an encyclopedia, and my column evolved into an interview.

I often hear references to the “masters,” like Xenophon, the Duke of Newcastle, François Robichon de la Guérinière and Antoine de Pluvinel, who seem to be the origin for dressage as we see it today. How would you summarize the beginnings of dressage and its earliest influencers?

One of the earliest written references about training a horse on the flat goes back to Xenophon, 440 BC. What set Xenophon’s writing apart for others and me is that it’s not just about horse training—one foot here, another there, that kind of bit. There is “art talk” in it. He says, “Anything forced can never be beautiful.” From Xenophon we can trace the literary threads throughout all of Europe with courtly riding, artist riders who were compensated by royalty.

In the 1500s there was a big jump when the forces of the Renaissance met the Iberian horse in northern Italy. Federico Grisone and Giovanni Battista Pignatelli had schools in Italy, and noblemen from all over Europe went to their schools and then returned to their home countries. We then have Pluvinel and Guérinière in the 1600-1700s in France. In Germany, there’s Georg Engelhard von Loehneysen, and then it’s on to Louis Seeger and Gustav Steinbrecht.

Dressage then was not unlike today; it rose with powerful sponsors and fell when those sponsors lost interest or were politically and financially destroyed. Louis XIV in France had a ridiculously opulent stable employing hundreds of ecuyers. Then at the end of the 1700s the French Revolution occurred, and in a matter of years, Louis XIV’s court was gone. Small, independent trainers have always kept it alive.

You often hear that the airs above the ground were for military use and intimidation. How likely do you think that is?

There are a lot of theories about airs being used in battle. You know how difficult it is to train a horse to do these airs. To me, it’s inconceivable that anyone could prepare enough specialist horses and then use them in battle. I think riders saw horses in play and in mating postures. They were enthralled. They tried to copy them but needed the airs to be in control. So an amazing discipline emerges. It is guided by art—riders evoking beauty, not destruction and war.

Why were airs above the ground not included in the Grand Prix test?

If you go to the Official Instruction Handbook of the German National Equestrian Federation, “The German Riding and Driving System, Book 2,” in the Advanced Dressage Section, you see two paragraphs before and after they give a brief description of the airs, etc. They say, “Very few horses are suitable for even more advanced training, which includes work in the pillars, work in the long reins, and high school movements above the ground, such as levade, pesade, courbette and capriole ... All these high school jumps are rarely executed and only by especially suitable horses. It is therefore unnecessary to provide further explanations.”

Apparently, it’s so rare, it doesn’t warrant further thought. That’s pretty much the dressage competition answer. They didn’t understand that the jumps were a natural conclusion and a proof that all the previous training of collection was correct. When a piaffe is a set up for an air it must help balance the horse towards the rear. The piaffe’s collecting ability is paramount; it must sit and lighten the forehand. When the piaffe in itself is the end result, all kinds of mistakes get accepted and justified.

“To me, it’s inconceivable that anyone could prepare enough specialist horses and then use them in battle.”

So let me get this right: The Germans made a unilateral decision that shaped the future for everyone? Shocking. You don't have to answer that one. It's a veiled attempt at humor with a strong jab in the German rib cage.

Was there an influence of the breeding at this point that swayed the high school movements further from the mainstream? I'm referring to the huge visual difference between a more Baroque type of square built horse that you see in the etchings of Pluvinel and Guérinière compared to its warmblood cousin of today. It would seem that the more rectangular build of the modern sport horse would have more difficulty rolling enough onto the hind legs in order to perform many of those movements.

Yes, exactly. I write extensively about this subject in my new book, "Dressage For No Country." The Germans are still demanding that their horses be bred in a rectangular form. I don't see any capitulation to try to breed at least the dressage horses more close coupled, which would help with collection, in my mind.

So moving into the more modern day, where do you see the Grand Prix test emerging?

It evolved. There had been competitions and exhibitions forever. I think what you're referring to is the kind of test we see at Fédération Equestre Internationale shows or the Olympics. The modern Olympic Games first featured dressage in 1912, then in 1921 the FEI was founded. The first dressage tests were fairly simple, and horses had to jump a small jump at the end. They were testaments to a more well-

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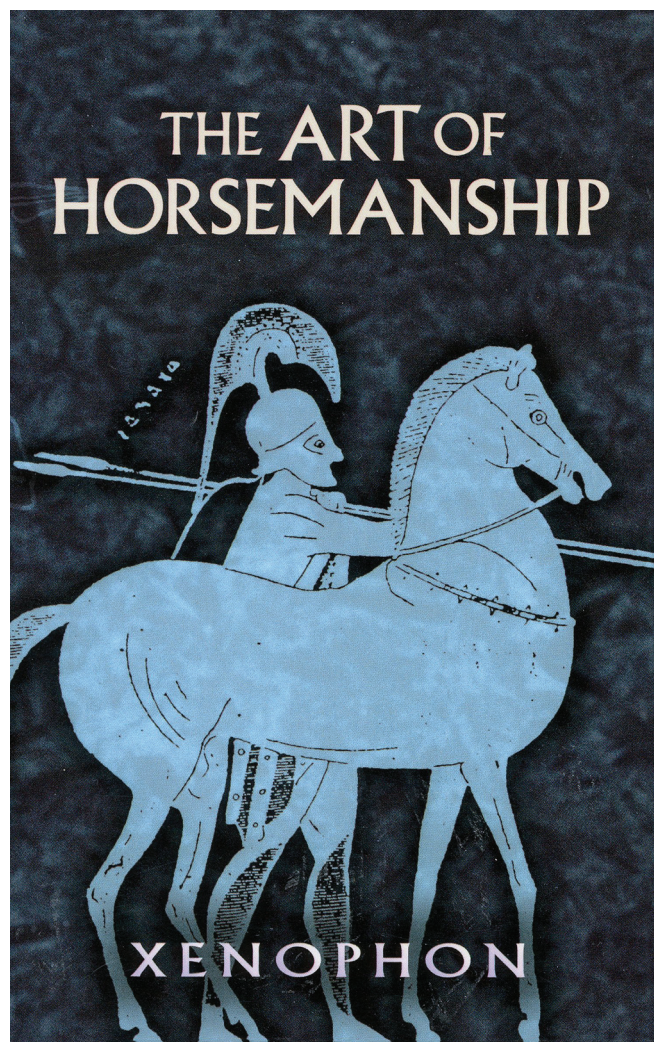
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rounded horse. Remember, this is all heavily influenced by the military and cavalries from all over. By 1936, you are seeing a dressage test that has piaffe, passage, pirouettes. So, I would say that is about the time when you see the kind of Grand Prix test that you're thinking about.

Thoughts on the one-tempi changes? Trick or gymnastic training? And were they in fact brought into to fashion by Baucher?

The origin of the one-tempi flying changes is generally credited to François Baucher, a circus rider. They were controversial as to whether they were something natural for a horse or they were “fancy paces,” i.e. circusy movements. However even Alois Podhajsky and the Spanish Riding School came to accept them, and they are universally accepted today.



One of the earliest written references about training a horse on the flat goes back to Xenophon, 440 BC. KIERAN PAULSEN PHOTO

It seems there are movements like the shoulder-in that had many initial forms and evolved into many current forms and uses, but you can credit that “invention” to a person like La Guérinière or the Duke of Newcastle. Was there an evolution of the canter pirouette, or did it just appear? Was there an inventor of the pirouette?

There is a long and strong evolution of canter pirouettes but not a specific inventor that I know of. It goes all the way back to bullfighting and airs above the ground, during the time of the Duke of Newcastle and Guérinière. You see these curved jumps and turns.

I have some films of the Spanish Riding School and Henri St. Cyr on a competition horse, probably in the 1950s or so. Here the pirouettes are only four strides; they are quick and spinning. Today, we try for six to eight strides to make a complete revolution. To me, this was a sensible progression if you value more pure gaits. Even with six to eight strides, the stride still breaks rhythm from three to four beats, but I think it's more beautiful and more balanced looking. It's the result of a good canter and not just a trick.

What would you say are the three or four most important qualities of the canter pirouette?

First of all is collection. Remember, some airs above the ground are canter based. A canter gets rocked back and forth into a terre à terre, and then when it's really loaded behind the horse leaps up into a capriole, for example. Even if you don't do airs, show that you know the history of dressage and master real collection. Second, no pushing it around with the front legs, spinning. Third, are the strides symmetrical, fluid and smooth? Fourth, the position of the rider: Are they helping or hindering the horse?

Where do you first see the piaffe come into being? Is any one person credited for the effort?

It would be very difficult to know where and when the ridden piaffe originated. It's a natural movement of an excited horse. In terms of classical dressage, you can look at the piaffe by itself as a trot-like movement with no real suspension between the diagonal pairs of legs. You can also look at it as part of the continuum of energy in the trot. This energy can be adjusted from the extended trot, the most horizontal and fastest trot, to the collected trots—same tempo, same power, but not

covering much ground, hence slower speed. Like a low gear in a machine, much power but little speed. It can be and is used to collect a horse, rebalance it to the rear as preparation for an air above the ground. When a rider and horse can exhibit all the various trots including piaffe seamlessly, it can also be a proof that this combination has mastered balance in that gait. That skill in the end is more important than the piaffe by itself.

Piaffe and passage were removed from the test for a few years just after World War II because of the lack of horses and riders who knew it well. Was there a significant change that took place when it was reintroduced?

I think there was just a recess because of the great destruction of the war, but when you say this was because of a lack of experienced horses and riders who knew how to do these things, well, that becomes very interesting. There actually were quite a few horses and riders who knew these movements very well, but they weren't warmbloods. There were Lipizzaners at the

Spanish Riding School, and there were Iberian horses in Portugal and Spain.

Have you read "The Perfect Horse" by Elizabeth Letts? This is a must read for every serious dressage rider. It is historical, but it shows unequivocally the power of Gustav Rau and the ideas for warmblood dominance. Rau controlled almost all horse activities in Germany. He was director of the German Olympic Committee for Equestrian Sport; he organized the equestrian events for the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, and he tried to replace Hanoverians for the Lipizzaners at the SRS when Podhajsky was director. To me, these are some of the initial reasons for the German dominance in competition dressage and the virtual monopoly of warmbloods at the highest levels of competition today.

Everything I've read regarding the decision to remove the piaffe and passage from the tests at that point refers to this lack of skilled horses and riders, but what I hear you saying is the skill was in fact there, just not in the Western European militaries at that time. It seems



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at that point there was already a divide between what we now think of classical dressage and competition dressage. So this divide has been in play since the introduction of any kind of test riding, or am I wrong?

I don't think you are wrong. It wasn't just because there was a military concentration. When dressage competitions were still young, Podhajsky tried to show Lipizzaners, and the judges soundly criticized them. The message was clear: They wanted a certain type in horse shows. The riders who knew something about collection weren't going to be humiliated and present their horses before a totally biased group of judges. Only very recently have the Spanish and Portuguese come close to breaking through the bias barrier. So as you say, the divide continues to grow. I could show it to you in the education of judges.

The first book I can remember reading that not only talked about long and low, but showed photos of it in use was Erik Herbermann's "The Dressage Formula" from 1999. Before that I haven't found anything. Is long and low a 20th century addition? When did long and low or long, round and deep come into play?

If you will indulge me, this is a bit of a long answer. We have to go over some simple biomechanics. Imagine two sawhorses. Put them a few feet apart, and place a board on top, letting the ends stick out past each sawhorse. Think of a seesaw, but with two fulcrums. A horse has these two fulcrums. One is the lumbosacral area, and the other is the withers. The whole history of classical dressage is to walk behind the one sawhorse and push the board down and under at the tail end of the horse. When you do that, the front of the board goes up, and if it were

“The message was clear: They wanted a certain type in horse shows.”



attached to the sawhorse, the front sawhorse goes up too. If a person is sitting on the board in the middle of the sawhorses, they will be lifted up. That's collection.

In long and low work, we walk around to the front of the other sawhorse and push that side down and under. The head of the horse goes down; the back end is lightened. And if that "rear" sawhorse is attached, it is raised up. It's the opposite of collection. A lot of confusion comes from the fact that if a person is sitting on the middle of the board and you push the "head" sawhorse down, they will also be raised up. All kinds of crazy theories come about explaining the back lifting. Now you can put a horse's head down to stretch and limber up, but you cannot collect, period. That's pretty much the story.

I ask my students to find me a painting, tapestry, sculpture or photo of a horse anywhere in the world being ridden with its head down before 1950 or so. There are none. This a new phenomenon. Even recently, you

don't see this kind of riding at the Spanish Riding School. You won't see it in Portugal or Spain; you wouldn't see it at Saumur in France. It's basically a central European/Scandinavian phenomenon.

After a lot of study, I think it comes from the cavalries teaching novices how to ride. Instructors had groups to teach; they had to keep them from getting injured, so they just told them: "Put your hands down, and don't yank on the reins. Practice learning to sit, and don't fall off." No magic, no great theory.

Because people are such vicious imitators, they started copying this and started inventing explanations and validations. The result was that thousands of years of the study of collection was, no pun intended, turned on its head. Now people try to defend this idea all time, that if you push the horse forward enough, even with its head down, it will somehow magically collect. You've run into this thinking, haven't you?



Although no one individual is credited with "inventing" the canter pirouette, the movement has evolved from a "spinning" four strides to today's six- to eight-stride movement, demonstrated by Megan Lane and Zodiac MW.
LINDSAY BERRETH PHOTO

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The sawhorse analogy is a good one. Let me play devil's advocate for a second, though: If, in either scenario, either lowering the back end or lowering the front end, both result in the lifting of the back, couldn't one argue that lowering the neck or front end of the seesaw is easier for both horse and rider—and in doing so, creates a space into which you could later drive the hind legs? I'm referring to the saying that I often hear about the horse using its abdominal muscles and lifting its stomach.

Second, I do hear that kind of thinking all the time. The idea that low hands are less harmful to a horse's mouth makes sense to me. You can control bouncing and lower your center of gravity by doing so, so learning to sit can be enhanced by the technique. My question is: Why has there been such an evolution to the low hands with the broken elbow-hand-mouth line? I agree that much of the style came about teaching the less talented or balanced riders. But then why is it still so popular even for our relatively advanced riders to ride with their hands on their thighs?

You can use long and low to warm up or cool down, as you would with any stretching exercise. I've written a lot about it. In order to master collection, you need exercises that build strength and flexibility in the back end. Too many riders feel the contraction in the back and panic, thinking it must be wrong. They drop the reins, thinking, "Oh Lord! Loosen the back again!" They need to feel a good levade. Then I wouldn't have to talk anymore.

You've been to Vienna and observed the work of the Spanish Riding School. Do you still believe they're a good example of classical dressage?

For a long time, the Spanish Riding School was a repository or living museum that housed a very pure form of classical dressage training. I grew up exploring a lot of systems and always came back to that system. I still feel it presents the best examples of collection in the world. Unfortunately, fairly recently it changed. I feel certain people tried to make money off art, and the School lost its way. In the last few weeks, I've heard rumors that it might be trying to go back. We'll see. The world has changed. I feel these national divisions, ruthless competitions, "who is the best" mentality, have served their purpose. We have to move on; we're all in this together. The art is universal. 🐾

JEREMY STEINBERG

Grand Prix trainer and competitor Jeremy Steinberg was the U.S. Equestrian Federation national dressage youth coach from 2010 to 2014. The 1996 FEI North American Young Riders Championships individual dressage gold medalist, he is a former U.S. Dressage Federation Junior/Young Rider Clinic Series clinician. He credits much of his dressage education to the late Dietrich von Hopffgarten, his longtime friend and mentor. Today Steinberg runs a boutique-style training business in Aiken, South Carolina, and travels the country giving clinics. Learn more at steinbergdressage.com.

PAUL BELASIK

Paul Belasik is a highly respected international rider, trainer, writer and teacher, and an avowed proponent of classical equestrian ideals. Belasik has sought wisdom from great riding masters such as Dr. Henri L.M. van Schaik and Nuno Oliveira, and his wide-ranging studies include the concepts of Zen Buddhism and martial arts. Belasik has written eight books, and he gives clinics, lectures and demonstrations internationally while training clients at his Pennsylvania Riding Academy at Lost Hollow Farm.