



► BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

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Are We Forgetting Tradition And History?

Whether it's in the search to solve a training problem or an effort to understand the reasons behind what we do, we should be looking to the basic tenets of the sport throughout history.

PHOTO BY LISA SLADE



A trainer friend of mine is struggling to get a horse to stop toe tapping the ground in front in the canter pirouettes. The horse is not taking a full stride cycle due to the lack of weight on the hind legs and overly weighted front leg.

The horse takes short, small steps in front, jabbing the toes of the front hooves into the ground, quickly hopping back up again, using the front fetlocks as springs and the neck as a lever to push and pull with the forehand around the pirouette. He's loaded over the forehand so much, he struggles to lift the forehand and shoulders high enough to get in a full stride due to lack of strength and understanding of the weight shift.

My friend's idea to correct this, instead of slowing things down and getting him stronger and more loaded behind, is to lower the neck of the horse to add more weight to the forehand so that the horse is forced to take deeper, longer, more ground-bound strides in front. She hopes he will have to straighten out his pasterns because of the weight of the lowered neck on them, land flat footed, and load the front feet so he can't tap the ground toe first.

But—I've never heard of putting a horse more on the forehand to solve a dressage issue. Why would you take one of the most highly collected movements a horse does and think the resolution to a problem involves more weight on the front legs? It seems very odd to me, but her idea is supported by more than one professional, and I fear this is because of a lack of understanding of the basic roots of the sport.

I often write about the art of the sport, the history of riding and dressage as more than just a show, sale or gimmick. Dressage is in fact an art, one of which we are custodians. It's important to understand that everything that goes along with it comes from somewhere, for a reason.

As we look at art in a museum, we're reminded of the time the painting was painted, the struggle of the age, the style of art or ideas being

created during that era and much more. The art is almost a history lesson. It is tangible, and it does not disappear.

Dressage is the opposite: After it's performed, it is gone. It is an ephemeral art. I wrote about that about a year ago in a column about the similarities to ballet dancing. Much like ballet, the art of dressage is carried from one generation to the next mostly in a verbal form. It's almost lore-like in its conveyance, so it's important we hold true to the history.

Honoring The Sport's Heritage

The Spanish Riding School, for example, has not written one book on horse training. Their methods are only handed down verbally, in a hands-on environment.

I often ask riders why certain things are done in the ways they are. Halting and saluting is no exception, and I take exception to the U.S. Equestrian Federation rule that states it is OK to salute with either hand when performing a test. Shame on the USEF committee that allowed that change, and shame on USDF for not speaking up and holding true to the art, history and education they are purveying, as it is absolute historic standard that all work done with the reins in one hand, saluting or otherwise, be done with the reins in the left hand. It is a military-based art we are supposed to be upholding, and it is up to us to hold true to the form of the art.

It has never been said to a soldier, "We don't care which hand you use to salute your superiors with. Either is fine, totally up to you." Saluting is a show of respect to the history of what we do.

One simple question can change a rider's view of the sport forever. A rider might wonder why it is only the right and go study the heritage from which it sprang, educating

himself about the history and in turn understanding more of the art.

The Spanish Riding School riders salute the painting of King Charles VI of France, who is credited for commissioning and creating the stable and riding hall. They salute him to this day, not because he is or was the king, but out of respect for his love of the art and creating what he did in that grand hall that they still use. In doing so, they hold true to the roots of the history and show their love and respect.

That salute is performed with the right hand, holding the reins with the left, as done by our military predecessors who held their swords with the

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right and the reins with the left.

It is tradition, tradition continued through the centuries out of respect for the roots of the art.

A Test Of Throughness?

One thing that seems strange to me is the idea that we show a stretching circle in our tests at the level we do. Is it due to a lack of understanding of the sport's roots in reference to contact and lightness?

I understand the purpose of stretching in general but not the need for it in our tests at the lower levels, as it's currently used. I'd find it more interesting in our more advanced tests.

After all, what is the stretchy

circle supposed to do? Teach, train or prove—or possibly all of the above—our horses' throughness and understanding of contact?

If it's supposed to teach the horses how to stretch, do we do that through stretching, or do we do that through teaching the horses to accept contact, so when there is a slow release of contact, the horse searches for it. (In German the word contact is *anlehnen*, and it's a good one to understand, meaning "to lean on" positively as support, so in the void of something to lean on the horse searches for that support.)

If the concept is about training, do we train the horse to stretch through stretching, or do we train the horse to stretch by developing more contact?

If it's to test the concept of stretching, wouldn't we be showing the horse's understanding of stretching based on its basic acceptance of the contact?

The movement does not train the concept as shoulder-in would. The more shoulder-ins you ride, the more benefit you get, but that's not the case with the stretching circle. Granted, the more stretching you do, the more benefit, but throwing the reins at your horse for one circle at a time and then taking them back

up again doesn't teach the horse a better understanding of stretching or of contact.

The evidence of the contact is in the throughness and is shown in every transition and every stride. The stretchy circle does nothing to train the stretch as much as it does show the horse who understands to stretch. If a horse understands contact correctly, it understands to stretch without fail.

Any horse that understands contact, acceptance of the bit and is through will reach for the reins when given the opportunity to release the pressure of its topline and spine, so I feel like the stretchy circle is somewhat redundant at such

a basic level of showing. Maybe it's needed for the less trained eye, which would be sad to think is our judges.

I'd be on board with the idea if the circle was in the test for two or three circles as opposed to one—or better yet, was done in the sitting trot, where the balance of the horse would be changed less dramatically. The calmness as well as the steadiness would be challenged, and the skills of the rider would be tested far beyond that one movement.

Those tests would require better training at home. When your horse stretched, you'd have to be more methodical about the release of the rein, as any speeding up would make sitting harder. Any change of balance in the horse would require the rider to absorb and better support the horse.

Also, if the movement was two circles it would show a greater understanding of what it means to stretch slowly and deliberately. At home we wouldn't be teaching riders to fixate on how fast they can

“What is the stretchy circle supposed to do?”

get their horses to drop their heads down, get on their forehands quickly and get their noses out so that they can show off a good stretch to the judges as quickly as possible. With one circle, if you do it slowly and in balance, by the time you get the horse down, you're already needing to be bringing him up again. It would make far more sense to give riders a full circle to get there and then a full circle to show it.

If the judges want to see connection, thoroughness or acceptance of the bit, let's ask riders to put the

reins in one hand, sit the trot and ride one full 20-meter circle on the bit or do two circles in the stretched position. If you think it would be too difficult to do with training or first level horses, I rest my case.

Changing Rules

I saw a noseband on a horse the other day that had more flaps and straps than any I'd ever seen, and I had to inquire about it. The rider told me that the noseband was legal with the Fédération Equestre Internationale and USEF as it's a new comfortable noseband and has all the new technology of pressure relief.

The noseband should be working as a limiter only when the horse applies pressure to it—so why do we need pressure relief nosebands? It's not a device to strap their mouths closed. Is it because we aren't understanding the concept of thoroughness and lightness, bit acceptance and contact well enough to train it into our horses? Instead we're using new methods or gimmicks and changing the rules to allow this.

I have tightened nosebands on horses in my day, but in the end there is a far greater good to be pursued in regard to thoroughness and lightness.

When we know the history, the reasons behind what we do and why we do it, we're in a much better position to answer the questions and challenges we face as trainers every day. ☺

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