



► BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

JEREMY STEINBERG

Keeping It Simple And Real

Our columnist wants the sport to stay true to its roots and its participants to stay true to the sport.

My tastes—whether for clothes, conversation, music or horses—are uncomplicated. I steer away from flash and am drawn toward clean lines, clear language, simple style, calm horses and even-keeled people.

I'm a hopeless romantic and a kind of artist I guess, which makes me temperamental but kind, with a huge love for life, yet an inner brooder who can be quiet and reflective. I love art and conversation and people who can think on their feet, tell a story and who are erudite, whether learned through academics or life.

My upbringing around horses is not the path that most people take. It has left me in a strange limbo, and I'm beginning to believe I'm becoming an outdated model. That's hard to admit to at 40 years old as I have no desire to change my profession or involvement

with horses, but it feels like my education keeps pushing me further and further away from the mainstream—and is making me more vocal about what I know to be right or wrong.

I keep seeing trends I don't like, horses I don't always believe are correct, and judging that doesn't always seem to take into account the whole picture of art and sport. I'm critical of the judges, as I see the sway of trends come and go and a quiet, subversive attitude toward a *Rule Book* that should be governing the sport to keep the art pure. I believe it's possible to hold true to a structured rule of law and judge accordingly.

As I said in my column, "Teach Your Children Well" (April 7, 2014, p. 22), I don't know who's to blame when I see us deviating from what the art should dictate. I look toward the Fédération Equestre Internationale and the judges since they are making the rules and

implementing the practices. All the movements we practice are intended to improve the horse's overall wellbeing and way of going, both physically and mentally, and also bring the horses into more collection, but I often wonder if that concept is really understood. Our whole goal in dressage riding and what separates dressage from all other sports is just that, but that gets overlooked more often than not. The basis of what we do is collection of the horse, and it seems to be continually neglected.

I had an argument with a peer a few months ago about her distaste for a certain riding style and horse-rider combo I showed her. Her favorite rider is a medal winner, and the one I was using as an example was not. Our argument came to a quick end when I asked her if she had ever read the *Rule Book*. I stopped arguing when I knew she had not. Why argue with someone on a

“The basis of what we do is collection of the horse, and it seems to be continually neglected,” says Jeremy Steinberg. DON JOHNSON FOR ARND BRONKHORST PHOTO



“If you ask 200 people who ride dressage why we piaffe, the answers you get will be all over the board.”

go to court to argue a case with the Supreme Court without knowledge of the law, case studies, past examples and a very well planned discussion.

The Principle Behind The Movements

If you ask 200 people who ride dressage why we piaffe, the answers you get will be all over the board. It's funny to me that so many people train it, but they don't know where it came from or why it was “invented.” As any historian of the craft will tell you, it is the precursor movement to the airs above the ground.

Those airs above the ground are all based on the horse's ability to shift the majority of its weight onto its hind legs through swing of the hind legs moving forward and under the horse's center of gravity and forehand raising and lifting.

Passage was invented years later and was originally more of a forward creeping piaffe with the hind legs staying well underneath or at least toward that same center of gravity. Why is it that more and more we see piaffes, or passages for that matter, that do not load weight on the hind legs getting scores of excellent when the requirements of the actual movements are not being fulfilled? Why is the rhythmic, “trot”-like piaffe scored high even though the horse's body remains horizontal to the ground or even slightly out behind or high in the croup when the *Rule Book* is clear as to the principles of the movement? It seems strange to me that we'd score a movement high, when its purpose is to create a levade, when the horses have shifted no weight onto their hind legs. I see it time and time again at high levels of competition, and it makes me scratch my head.

I see horses piaffe swaying back and forth in a balancé type movement, horses piaffing in a total pedestaling shape, and horses who can for all

intents and purposes literally trot in place with no lowering of the hind-quarters. The wording in the rule book is clear and says, “The aim of piaffe is to demonstrate the highest degree of collection while giving the impression of remaining in place.”

Wouldn't that mean that a piaffe that does not sit or carry weight correctly on the hind legs is not fulfilling the aim of the movement? Why then are the scores not reflecting this?

More Than One Wrong Way To Piaffe

I've heard younger generations of trainers and Olympic-medal winning riders talk about the way they train piaffe and teach the horses to “bounce,” which saddens me. The trot should not bounce; it should clearly swing, and the limbs of the hind legs should not spring up and down off the ground with more upward force than pendulum-like oscillation under the body. This bouncing piaffe idea creates a cantilever effect of driving the horses onto the forehand and holding the croup in the air by keeping the neck low, when instead they should be swinging the hind legs under the body moving toward the center of gravity, lowering the croup, and in turn raising the forehand.

The latter is not done by repeatedly tapping the horse on the top of the croup hoping it will start bouncing up and down into the whip, but by teaching the horse to engage the hind leg underneath the body and rock back onto its hind legs, using the swing action of the trot as a pendulum to help create the weight shift. When I see horses whose hind feet are lifted higher than their front feet in a piaffe, I scratch my head. When I see them scored as good, very good or excellent, I question the judges' comprehension of the movement.

The pedestaling piaffe as well

subject that they're not fully informed on? How can we have a conversation about what is correct or not, good or bad, based on preference instead of education on a form of art that is historically based?

A huge amount of personal taste is brought into the equation, and it's an equation involving human bias, which is part of what makes what we do an art. Some will like it more than others; some will like one type of horse more than the next, but there is still a correct and an incorrect, a “good” and a “bad” as it does have a certain rule structure. There is a “sufficient” and an “insufficient,” which are all based on a rule structure adopted by the FEI from writings that are thousands of years old and adapted for modern competition. So why would you argue what is right or wrong without the knowledge of these rules that govern your art and sport? No lawyer would

is not one we should keep rewarding as correct or awe-inspiring, as it is a piaffe that is weighted on the forehand. The key to seeing what is mechanically happening is to envision no legs on a piaffing horse and to look where the horse's center of mass is. Usually it's somewhere around the back of the rider's knee. Now put the legs of the piaffing horse back on and see which set of hooves are nearer that center of mass. In a pedestaling piaffe, it's the front hooves. When the front legs move further under the body toward that center of mass they are doing the weight-bearing work, and the horse is leaning its body forward, off its hind legs in order to lower its croup much like a jack rabbit leaning forward onto its front legs in order to pull its hind legs far underneath itself for forward propulsion.

Yes, the croup is low, but the weight is not being carried by the hind legs, which is proven time and time again with a horse's inability to seamlessly blend a passage in or out of a pedestaling piaffe since in this piaffe the forehand is not free. With the balancé like swaying the horse is using the shoulders and front legs to create an upward thrusting motion to project the forehand into the air instead of the forehand being in the air because the hind legs have swung under the body and are carrying the weight of the forehand. If we have horses that sway, pedestal, horizontally "trot" in place or bounce their hind feet higher in the air than their front feet, why are we not scoring them as insufficient? Remember: The aim of piaffe is to demonstrate the highest degree of collection.

It's strange to me when I go horse shopping for clients or see advertisements for horses that say the horse is schooling flying changes, half passes and passage, but make no mention of a piaffe. Without fail, when I see the videos of these horses they are out behind and incorrect in their mechanical and gymnastic understanding of how the trot should function, and the riders and trainers are out of touch with what is a correct foundation. Hollow backs, low polls, hind legs that seem to be in another country, but huge front leg movement and elasticity like one of

those sticky spider toys made of rubber you used to throw at a wall and watch crawl down.

It doesn't take a trained eye to see that a horse like that will never piaffe when it's trained so poorly, but it's sold with the intention, because of its movement, that it will be a Grand Prix star. Do people buying just not know, or do the people selling believe everyone is naive? Is it the fault of the market because horses with big floating trots sell for obscene amounts of money, or is it the fault of the trainers who train this into the horses so young and produce horses at Grand Prix who do the work incorrectly? Is it the fault of the judges who score the movements based on flash versus correct simplicity? The problem seems to be spreading without a cure in sight.

Open A Discussion

I want to see the correct movement with the correct score. I know it's possible, and it's what I strive for when I teach and train. We might not always get there, and not every horse is capable, but can we at least be honest and straightforward with what is really correct and what isn't? Can we keep it simple and have dialogue, or is anyone who points out the obvious going to be chastised for saying so?

Why would it be bad to be able to talk about things that are wrong with our top horses as a means of continuing to educate instead of being afraid to speak up, follow along with the masses, and just wait for the next trend to sweep us up? As a general public, we seem to go along with what we are told is good or bad, and we are made to feel inferior when we don't agree. Every few years or so bring us different horses, and as soon as the new "it" horse comes along, the previous horse starts to get criticized.

It's not until there is a new star in the making that the judges seem to be ready to point out the obvious or the incorrect on the previous horse or horses. Take Salinero or Parzival as examples. Their scores started coming down when there were better horses than them in competition, yet their performances didn't change that much; Salinero in fact got better. There was talk about why the scores were coming down, which was correct, but those problems

always existed in those horses and were overlooked or swept under the rug until there were new horses to take their places. The judges pointed out that Parzival looked too strong in the contact at the 2012 Olympic Games when compared to Valegro, when in fact the horse has always looked like that in the contact. It was not a new way of going for the horse, but there was a better horse on the scene that looked more the "happy athlete," and once pointed out and discussed, the scores have never been the same. Why did the judges choose to ignore that quality in Parzival until that day and only start a discussion after there was a horse to take his place at the top?

Keep It Honest

One famous trainer and rider told me recently that taking the time to be correct wasn't worth the money. I appreciated the honesty for a change instead of what seems to be one of the sport's biggest coverups. Can we all just start to be honest—whether judging or riding, teaching or training? Do we have to get caught up in trends because we're told it's good by a peer?

We should be freely sharing our thoughts and feelings and be able to express a like or dislike for what we find to be the artistic, but we should be guided by the principles of the correct when criticizing or admiring, condemning or condoning. Art of any medium has a form to follow. I can't claim something is from the Impressionism movement when it's clearly Cubism. Each form has a certain style that represents its qualities and defines what it is.

Dressage has clear, definitive points that define what it is and are outlined in writings and teachings of proprietors of the art, which in turn have been overseen and hopefully studied by the FEI to create a modern sport, with clear rules that keep it within the guidelines of what defines it as competitive dressage. If we compared competitive dressage to that of the Spanish Riding School, we'd be comparing Modernism to Cubism.

That being said, the competitive dressage rules seem to change sometimes without deliberate thought, in turn bending the lines of what the rules are

that shape the movement. If the lines are going to be bent, the rules have to change to accommodate that trend, otherwise we can't continue to call what is often done "dressage" as the FEI defines it. It's often a different medium, bending the rules in order to be included in the movement instead of calling it what it is, a different movement entirely.

I'm beginning to feel like an outdated model in the dressage industry, which I am both proud to say and embarrassed to admit. I still ride my horses in snaffle bridles regardless of their level and romantically stick to my guns that I don't continue to train on if I need a stronger bit. I try to work within the rules of the movement and the lines of the form, but struggle like anyone else.

I think endlessly about the sport, and I'm proud to talk honestly about it. I'm proud of my own education and ashamed at the lack of it that is infecting the industry. I admire my friends who quietly work and sculpt and find a way to bring the art into the sport and do so without fanfare or fuss and seem to keep the romance alive. I admire the people who speak up in a way that is not accusatory or derogative, yet point out the truth. I'm embarrassed by the people who push and the people who drive the sport without thought to the future or understanding of the medium and movement. 🐾

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Jeremy Steinberg was the U.S. Equestrian Federation Youth Coach from 2010-2014. He's a well-known rider, trainer and competitor based out of Del Mar, Calif. He's also a selector for the Developing Horse Program and one of five clinicians who works with the U.S Dressage Federation in its Platinum

Performance/USDF junior and young rider clinic series. He worked with long-time friend and mentor Dietrich von Hopfgarten extensively until his passing in 2004. Jeremy has trained and shown many horses up through the Grand Prix level. He now runs a small "boutique"-type training business and travels the country giving clinics. More information can be found at steinbergdressage.com.



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