

► BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

JEREMY STEINBERG

The Power Of Knowledge

Our columnist believes riders should seek to understand the history, rules, people, ideals and mechanics behind their sport.

Last month I got to re-watch an old video called “The Horse In Sport: Dressage,” which was produced by the BBC in the 1980s. It’s a series of hour-long segments of different disciplines—including dressage, rodeo, polo, eventing, driving and show jumping—giving an overview of the history and basic principles of each sport and following top riders through an Olympic, World Championship or other international games cycle.

The show jumping takes us to the 1986 World Championships where Gail Greenough became the first woman, first North American and youngest rider to take the title. (France’s Pierre Durand, who is now running for the Fédération Equestre Internationale presidency, finished fourth.) The eventing segment introduces us to Mark Todd and shows him earning his second Olympic gold medal in the 1988 Games in Seoul, Korea. The dressage episode covers the inception of the World Cup and one of its pioneering forces, Gabriela Grillo, along with Reiner Klimke, Christopher Bartle and Anne Grethe Jensen. Jaap Pot makes a few appearances to discuss the judging and educate the audience about the sport.

I always find videos like this interesting. I study the quality of horses, the style of riding, and the way the riders talk to the audience verbally and also nonverbally in their riding. So much can be learned from watching, reading and listening. The ideas we work with and the tools we use have been around for hundreds of years. We are not reinventing the wheel. Yes, the horses have changed quite a bit over time, but that doesn’t mean the riding we do should change as well. Standards are stan-



“The ideas we work with and the tools we use have been around for hundreds of years,” said Jeremy Steinberg after watching a video that showed legends of the sport like Christopher Bartle and Wily Trout. “We are not reinventing the wheel. Yes, the horses have changed quite a bit over time, but that doesn’t mean the riding we do should change as well. Standards are standards, and good riding is good riding.” FINDLAY DAVIDSON PHOTO

dards, and good riding is good riding. The ideal has not changed, although we seem to be getting closer to it.

I found myself mesmerized by Christopher Bartle’s harmony and stillness. His seat is one to be admired, and he had a style that could be used as a standard to strive for today. Not only that, he was sitting that brilliantly on

Thoroughbreds, which, if you’ve ridden a Thoroughbred, you understand is not easy. He combined the necessity of being quiet with the effectiveness of the craft and made the work look effortless.

At one point, the video cuts to Reiner Klimke saying, “The best rider is the rider with invisible aids. When you sit in the rhythm with the horse so that it

is one unit. To be able to sit quiet is not easy. It means a lot of concentration, energy and a little bit of power, to make your muscles swing and be loose and not stiff.”

Klimke was a master at loose, effective power.

The horse quality in this video was definitely of a somewhat lesser quality than we see today, although some of the movements performed by some of these horses are still competitive and outclassing some of the more modern horses in competition. You have to look beyond the actual flesh of the horse, read the FEI definition of the movements, and then look to the mechanics and ease with which some of the horses performed. Then you can see it.

I was struck by how heavy, somewhat clunky and cumbersome Grillo's horses appeared. The video shows her on two or three different horses, all a similar style. Who would bother with a horse like that today? Most of us would say they were too lazy, out behind, heavy or whatever adjective you'd like to use. Most of us would end up pushing and shoving them around to make them work, and in the end, we'd always be disappointed by how lazy or dull they were. Grillo seemed to make the horses look easy to ride, as well as fun, and in the end, she got them to the Grand Prix to an international standard.

I know times have changed. Horses have more flashy movement, are built better, are hotter and easier to ride overall, but I wonder what riders like these could have done with the horses of our generation—the newer, more modern horse that we say is superior to those of previous generations. Those guys could take horses, which we now describe as difficult or impossible, and train them to Grand Prix—and make it look easy. Reiner Klimke's Ahlerich, Margit Otto Crepin's Corlandus, Christine Stückelberger's Granat, and Bartle's Wily Trout were all described by their riders as temperamentally difficult.

In fact, all the riders on the tape were riding their horses at home with snaffle bridles and making it look easy. The horse quality may have been lower in those days, but part of me thinks their equitation, training and horseman-

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ship standards were higher. How was it possible to take a lesser-conformed horse, with lesser movement and a more difficult temperament, and make it look lighter and easier than a horse of greater quality? It has to be in the training and the standards set around it.

Know Your History And Theory

At a clinic a few months ago, I asked a group of riders, “Who invented the personal computer?” The names Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak all came up. No one name was exactly right; it was really a combination of guys, but those three were the prime suspects that we think of, so everyone had the answer more or less right. I then asked them who invented the shoulder-in. It's something we all use every day, much like our computers, so you'd think most people would know. The room filled with blank faces. Like the personal computer, there was more than one person who can be connected to the invention of the shoulder-in in different capacities. Antoine de Pluvinel, William Cavendish, the Duke of Newcastle, and François Robichon de la Guérinière all played a part.

You should know the people responsible for inventing something you use on that intimate of a level every day. I find it funny that most of us could work, live, breathe and train a sport and art that we know so little about. I asked why people knew more about their computers than the history of their sport or art, and no one really had a good answer. As riders, we are all educators, to horse or human, and we owe it to ourselves and our horses to know these things.

I watch a lot of dressage, and I mean a *lot* of dressage. I teach clinics every

weekend all around the world and see all types of forms and levels. I go to a lot of shows and watch a lot on video. I watch the mechanics of the horses' movements and how their riders interact with them. I look for the art in the mechanics and the blur as to where and when the mechanical becomes the gymnastic. I wonder sometimes if most of the riders know the difference.

When reading through the likes of Cavendish, Guérinière, Nuno Oliveira, François Boucher or any other school of riding, you see many differences in the approach to various problems or ideas. You see many contradictions not just between schools, but also within some of their own writings. You see different horse types playing a role in each training system. However, one continual thread you see through all schools of equitation is how the movements affect the horses' way of going and how those movements are used to better the horse.

Different schools of thought that are working for slightly different outcomes are going to apply those movements at different times and with varying degrees of success, but if you read deeply and between the lines, you see a bond between all the schools that each movement we ride affects the horses' way of working. We don't train the horses to do the movements per se; we use the movements to better the horses. Each movement has a different set of benefits: to loosen, strengthen, tighten, elongate, contract, and/or build the horses' body and musculature.

Each movement affects the stretch of the tendons, strength of the muscles, depth of joint bend, all in an effort to improve two overall things: the natural movement of the horse and its degree of collection. One is done



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COURTENAY FRASER PHOTO

with the other, and one is reliant on the other. The more collection, the lighter the forehand. The lighter the forehand, the more freedom and expression the gait can attain. The more freedom and expression we work into the gait, the looser and stronger we make the horse, which makes for an easier, stronger shift into the collection. If we don't train that symbiosis, we aren't doing good dressage training. Collection must strengthen, and extension must loosen. Combining the two is the litmus test of either.

Developing Power

I asked another group of people at a clinic where power came from. It seems like a simple question, but again it elicited no immediate or correct response. When we talk about gait improvement and development we have to talk about the specific attributes that a gait has that inherently define its quality. A walk “marches,” a trot “swings,” and a canter “jumps.”

If we talk about power development

and where it comes from within a movement or within the horse, the root of it has to be the attribute that defines that gait. As a side note, we can say the walk in and of itself has no real power as we say the walk has no impulsion. The impulsion is the ability to thrust the body forward and upward, and the walk has no such thrust or time where all four feet are off the ground showing that thrust. Regardless, the quality of the walk is still a definable attribute. If a walk ceases to march during a walk pirouette, for example, all is lost. A marching walk is one with power relative to the walk. When it comes to the trot and canter, we look at both the swing and the jump as the defining attributes that point toward the power.

When we talk about that thrusting power in the trot in regard to extensions through the training of our horses, we need to define the difference between extension or medium gaits and lengthenings. The lengthening is the elongating of the body and stretch of the topline pulling a longer stride through the horse, while a medium or extension is the power of the hind leg thrust pushing the stride bigger, which in turn drives the topline long. One is pulling through the horse's body, and the other is thrusting through the horse's body. In the lengthening, the topline pulls the stride, and in the medium or extensions the stride pushes the topline. A lengthening is where we teach the horse to use its topline to create length of stride, and the medium and extension is where we show that over time the horse has developed sufficient strength and understanding that the topline arches longer because of the thrust. Without the arch of the topline propelling longer in the extension, we end up with horses that throw their legs out big in front and are trailing or out behind. We see it

often in still photos where the limb and angles of the hind legs differ from that of the front leg. The topline and spine work as a type of transmission to get the forehand of the horse working in unison with the back end.

Without that clear communication system in place, we have a poor transmission of energy, and we tend to create more tension in the body than looseness. In that case we are left with a horse that has movement through tension or holding in the back, versus movement that is developed from the looseness of the body and gait. We develop power through looseness, so a horse that works in tension is not actually a powerful moving horse. Basically, it doesn't count. Power though tension is a power that doesn't correlate to long-term betterment of the horse's body.

Mastering—Then Transcending—The Basics

I find myself watching some of these older tapes and videos and asking myself if people 20 or 30 years ago had a better understanding of this since the horses weren't such extravagant movers, and so the training had to be more thorough in order to create what limited extensions they could. Rather than relying on good genetics, they had to have some of the basic principles more correct in order to produce what they did, however limited the end result. I sometimes look around and think the quality of horses in this day and age is dumbing down the quality of riding. Disheartening and saddening, but somewhat true.

Mechanical versus gymnastic work is a concept that separates great dressage from the rest. Mechanically correct horses are good, but it's not until the horses learn to work gymnas-

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► A Brilliant Moment

I would encourage everyone to watch the victory lap of Reiner Klimke on Ahlerich from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics if you have not done so in recent years. He does 60-something one-time changes with the reins in one hand, relaxed and waving at the audience. The changes are fantastic. Uphill, swinging, loose yet powerful, huge and still calm. It was a brilliant moment and one never reproduced. I wonder how many of the top competition horses right now could do the same and make it look so effortless?

tically that we really start to see the art or history of the sport. Contrary to a famous medal-winning rider, “gymnastically superior dressage work” does not mean riding a horse’s nose between its knees and saying it’s “top sport.” Gymnastically superior dressage is seeing Kyra Kyrkland riding a six-strided canter zigzag with the reins in one hand in the FEI World Cup Final and making it look easy and fluid. *That* is gymnastically superior.

The mechanical work starts right from the beginning of training, but the gymnastic takes years to develop. The first day under saddle horses are learning mechanical responses and uses of their body. The gymnastic work starts when we use the movements to affect the horse’s body in a way where they become better movers and are working toward collection. If the collection doesn’t create more movement, or the movements we ride do not create a greater ease for collection, it is wrong.

If we mechanically chase a horse up to a medium trot with his legs flying out and his neck short, we do not create a horse with a greater aptitude for collection. If the horse’s topline doesn’t expand, there is nothing to contract. If we teach a horse to stand in place, disconnect from the bit and stomp its feet up and down, we are not using the piaffe for greater strength and flexibility.

Range of movement equates to more movement, and strength equates to sustainability of power. Greater movement with the ability to sustain the balance in an exercise equates to good gymnastic dressage training—never pushing for too much and never holding for too long or we lose the gymnastic benefit.

Gymnastic training means the horse’s body works like a giant accordion. It expands and contracts, bends and straightens. In good gymnastic training, in every movement we ride we are making all other movements better. We are teaching to the idea that each and every movement in our repertoire is connected and related. We aren’t individualizing or compartmentalizing movements or problems.

There are very few movement-specific problems. Most problems in training arise within the gait outside of the

movement, but we aren’t always aware of that. The more aware we become of this connection, the easier the movements become to train. Basically, when we start to use the movements as tests, strength builders, muscle memory recorders, coordination exercises and looseness developers we start to gymnastically train. When we train the movements for what they are purely and only for a pattern or sequence we are training the mechanical.

Mechanical training has its place in dressage. Question and response to aids is purely mechanical at first, as is the introduction of most movements. The horses need to simply understand how to manipulate their bodies into certain postures or ways of traveling so that later that way of moving can be used to generate strength or looseness, more movement or collection. It’s not until the riders start to use the movements in the capacity for which they were invented that we start to really ride and understand dressage and it becomes gymnastic.

Keep Learning

What was the last educational dressage book you read or video you watched? Regardless of your school of thought, background or upbringing, are you understanding the application of why you ride each movement or exercise, or are you just riding the movement? Would you be able to train a lesser quality horse of the ’70s or ’80s or earlier to the same level and quality the riders of that time did? Would we have the patience or wherewithal to do it?

There is plenty of bad with the good in those old videos, but there is plenty of the same today. I watch those videos and think, according to the FEI rules,

some of those horses are not even on the bit, but then I remind myself that many of our current horses and Olympic medal winners, according to those same rules, do not meet the criteria or ideal of being there either—for different reasons.

It’s important to know the history of your sport, the rules, the people, the ideals and the mechanics of it all. Who invented what, and where did things originate? From the purpose of salutes you do to the way you carry your reins, all these things play a part in how our horses are produced.

Knowledge and education are very powerful, as is discussion and debate over such knowledge. The riders of 100 years ago have had the same debates and controversies you have. They’ve had the same discussions and same ideas. When you watch old videos, read old books or work with the horse(wo)men, you’re drawing on not only their experience, but also the experience of their educators and their educators’ educators. I find comfort in studying and learning from these riders of old and know they still have knowledge to give. 🐾

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