

## Exploring the Romanic School

### Part II

**Sylvia Loch discusses the importance of position – first published in Dressage Magazine May 1994.**

Last month's article explored the principles of lightness, collection, flexion and roundness. This month we deal with the relevance of rider position to achieve these ends.

To the classical riders of Portugal, Spain and France position is everything! From day one, riders are taught to accept that equitation is not only an art but a science.

The first precept is to understand the laws of gravity relevant to locomotion and how a horse in motion will always try to step under the weight of the rider. This necessitates the need for a stable, balanced seat so that unity of balance between horse and rider may be attained. Only then will the aids (which involve small changes in weight) become truly effective.

Iberian riders are distinctive in their riding posture; they display an upright pelvis, a proud, open chest, the waist is carried forward but the shoulders back, and there is a distinctive inward flexion of the lower back – similar to the stance of a flamenco dancer, or poised gymnast. This posture directs weight through the strongest part of the horse's back and allows him to free up the loins.

The late Nuno Oliveira spoke of an 'inflated torso' and 'riding from the waist'. These teachings emanate from an 18<sup>th</sup> Master of the Horse, the Portuguese Marquess of Marialva, an adherent of La Gueriniere of France.

Marialva wrote: “The rider should keep his face high, always looking between the ears of the horse whether going straight or turning. The Master should recommend his pupil to keep his shoulders down and to put them backwards, firm and straight, since the shoulders control the movements of the breast, kidneys and waist. The rider should carry his breast forwards, although not exaggerated and the kidneys (loins) should also be carried forward since this will achieve the best equilibrium.”

Riding in this way allows the weight aids to be used naturally and efficiently provided that the rider allow looks and turns with his horse - “when the horse is bent the rider must turn the same way”. This differs from what some competition trainers teach in the execution of shoulder-in for example. Looking into the school (Romanic) as opposed to looking along the school (usual German method), improves the quality of the movement out of all recognition.

Romanic trainers want their horses sharp off the leg. Impulsion is an absolute must for bullfighting but direction comes from the rider's upper body. Since the shoulders carry the elbows and the elbows the hands, it is vital that the shoulders compliment those of the horse. Only then can the hands remain always in position at the wither, so that the horse moves as one under the rider as though on invisible aids.

Looking around today's training yards, I find that the importance of a good seat and a stable upper body is rarely mentioned. Since most faults in the horse emanate from a faulty seat, why are so many trainers obsessed with improving the horse? Inaccurately ridden corners, circles, turns and misaligned lateral movements are the result of incorrect weight aids often caused by moving hands and tensed legs. Yet, without a word of correction of rider correction, the horse is made to repeat an exercise ad infinitum as though it is his fault. This is as short-sighted as blaming the car and not the driver, when it fails to negotiate a bend.

Competition places tough demands on both horses and riders. I hugely admire those who do it well and work with their horse. Only through perfect balance can a horse be expected to perform an accurate canter pirouette or even a walk turn on the hocks. Yet, despite excellent examples of riding

from people like Emile Faurie, Richard Davidson, John Lassetter and Carl Hester, we still see far too many examples of round shoulders, nodding heads, rag doll bodies and heaving hips. Such disturbing movements are simply not allowed in the Romanic School – stillness achieved via suppleness is the hallmark of their equitation.

The advancing of the rider's waist and toned inward flexion of the loins brings about a three point contact of the seat. I first wrote about this in 1984, inspired by my studies in Portugal, only to be ridiculed in England. I stuck with the principle for my pupils, knowing it worked with all horses and ponies (one of the latter went recently to the Pony European Championships); several now teach internationally. In an interview with General Albrecht, former Director of the Spanish Riding School, he smiled and said there was no other way to ride accurately and in lightness and indicated that this is the base for all positions. His book *Principles of Dressage* (J A Allen) states: “The upper part of the body of the rider (head, neck, shoulders and chest) has to be properly balanced above the pelvis and the three points of support. Perfect alignment of each of these parts is essential to stability; additionally it allows the rider to control the shifts of his weight which constitute seat aids.”

Thus the more difficult airs such as piaffe and passage can be aided by the finest, forward inclination of the top of the pelvis which eases the weight off the horse's rounding back. In the same way, an imperceptible inclination backwards, encourages the horse to come more 'through' with the hindlegs in extension. It is a question of educating the rider to become more aware of his own centre of gravity and how this can affect the horse.

This is where it becomes so important to have access to schoolmaster horses. Too much or too little often achieves an effect quite the opposite of that required. Until we educate young riders on horses which have been sensitively and correctly schooled to advanced levels of equitation, it will be hard to convey just how fine the aids should be to achieve lasting results. Today, most people override. Horses switch off to heavy aids; I believe they even switch off to pain; how else could they cope with the torture rendered by hand and spur seen in all too many spheres of riding world-wide?

In the centres of excellence of Portugal, France, Spain, Vienna, old horses are revered and lead a useful life. A properly trained horse should never break down before 17. He should be at his best mentally and physically. These horses, once retired, can give a pupil a feel for balance. A sensitive schoolmaster will not tolerate anything other than a still, balanced and supple seat and the aids must be correctly applied. A little too much weight here, a loss of tone there and the horse runs rings around the rider. Yet within just a few lessons, a willing student of dressage can be honed and refined so that he compliments the horse instead of hindering him.

As one pupil said to me after riding my old Portuguese stallion, 21, who could still offer piaffe, passage, pirouette and two-time changes on immediate request, despite been ridden by different riders every day of the week, “only when you ride a properly schooled horse can you appreciate how still one should sit, how little one needs to do and how to let the horse hear you.”

Having extolled the virtues of a balanced seat, it must be emphasised that the rider should only sit full-seated when the horse's back is strong enough to take this position. Prior to that, more weight is taken on the stirrups, whilst retaining a perpendicular posture. In Portugal, a great deal of work will have been accomplished in hand to prepare the horse's back for the rider by helping him to engage from behind. Piaffe is generally first taught in hand. A rough seat can ruin a horse's back. Whilst the British say 'no hoof, no horse', in Portugal it is 'no back, no horse'.

The Romanic School places much importance on the use of the rider's inside leg. Nuno Oliveira wrote that as the horse becomes more schooled, the inside leg plays a greater part than the outside leg. His advice for half-pass was: 'finish the half-pass with more inside leg than outside, this proves the impulsion.'

Subtlety is the name of the game, the emphasis is on lightness of the forehand, engagement of the hind end and all accomplished with invisible aids. The result of a discerning seat is a proud, happy

horse, light on the rein and strongly muscled through the topline. Whatever the breed, a properly schooled and collected horse should look like a Baroque horse!

People worry about the different schools of riding being poles apart. Dressage is not yet the spectator sport the sponsors and promoters would like. This will come about when judges are as much concerned with quality of riding as the accuracy of tests. Lightness should be looked for at much lower levels.

The non-riding public flock to Vienna, to Lisbon and to Andalusia. There must be a lesson to be learned from the Romanic School; After all this is where it all began.

For further reading: *Dressage in Lightness* and *Invisible Riding* by the Author