

A QUESTION OF TERMINOLOGY?

re. Shoulder-in

During my Weight Aids Clinic at Builth Wells, Wales in April one of the participants, Sue Neville-Parker, CRC Member and classical riding teacher queried my description of the rider's inside leg position for Shoulder-in. I am in the habit of using the expression 'leg slightly back' or 'leg behind the girth' to teach the horse to move away from the leg, but Sue disagreed with this and felt she made no difference in her leg position when riding a circle or riding Shoulder-in. This set me thinking, particularly when she took the trouble to point out the difference in our height. Suddenly, our friendly difference of opinion began to make sense.

For someone like myself whose legs hang free of the horse's belly (similar to our horseman on the front cover), the idea of 'leg a little back' is the only way in which I can apply meaningful pressure to the horse's side. Sue, however is not as tall as me and although I have never seen her on a horse, it is likely her leg does not hang downward to the same extent as mine; indeed it is probably softly around the horse's barrel all of the time, even when no aid is being applied. Since Sue is around 4 ft. 10 and I am 5ft. 10, there is a whole foot between us! I believe differences of height could account for differences in the way one thinks concerning the application of the aids and therefore the terminology used.

As with all things, any form of query sets me thinking. On return to Eden Hall, I wrote to Sue and here is an edited excerpt from my letter concerning the point in question. Hopefully it may interest Members and even spark off further debate. As far as Sue is concerned, I have had a very appreciative and informative letter back. She too has had years of experience with top classical trainers, and it would seem that despite terminology, we are largely in agreement particularly over the difficulties that words can cause! Thank you Sue!

SL....."Re. the Shoulder-in, I am sorry if I expressed myself in such a way that you felt you had to take issue. As I have always said, we are talking about 'nuances'; nevertheless, I am grateful to you for bringing up the point about the leg 'back', and maybe that terminology needs to be adjusted.

You said that when you rode Shoulder-in, you thought you made no difference with your leg position. You pointed out that your leg remained on the girth whether for circling or for Shoulder-in. However perhaps you had not considered the fact that for circles you apply rather different pressures than for lateral work. I would suggest that you allow the weight (of your leg) to drop down for circle, whilst you apply weight more sideways and into the horse for Shoulder-in. There has to be a difference in feel

between asking him to move into the direction of bend as opposed to stepping away in a different direction. This was the point I was so keen to make at the Workshop.

You also spoke of the classic books and the fact that nowhere had you read that the rider's inside leg should move back to assist the stepping under of the hindlegs. Since La Guérinière's is credited with having invented the Shoulder-in (following on from Newcastle's work) my explanation of asking the horse to move away from the rider's inside leg is clearly nothing new. Guérinière writes that there are 3 benefits of Shoulder in - 1) for suppling the Shoulders 2) for putting the horse on its haunches 3) for teaching the horse 'to move away from the leg'. He also illustrates how all are inter-related, benefits and methodology.

In Guérinière's day, the horse was 'obliged to cross the legs one over the other, both fore and hind...'. Today, however we only require that the inside hind advances or steps in front of the outside hind rather than across it which involves the lowering of the inside haunch... Nevertheless this leg will still require our help. One of the biggest problems for the young horse is how to bring the inside hind more under and through.

Even on straight lines, the right hind often comes down outwith the track. To help it step more under. Dr. Klimke describes in *Basic Training of the Young Horse* how on the right rein "... the right lower leg is applied behind the girth to push the right hindleg more to the inside. There is therefore nothing new about bringing the leg to this position to help more engagement.

Unfortunately, very few writers give away as much detail as Klimke offers us. It is also interesting to find that no two authors describe the aids for shoulders-in in exactly the same way! Many skate round the exact rider position and only address what the horse is doing. Whilst all may agree on the final result, interpretations may differ.

With Oliveira, riding sensitive Lusitanos, the pressure of the inside leg is to be no more than 'a touch' and it operates 'near the girth'

With Podhajsky *Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, the inside leg is the 'driving leg' and it operates 'at the girth'

In Winnet's book (French influence) *Dressage as Art in Competition* the inside leg is 'slightly behind the girth'

In the *National German Handbook* (Advanced level) "the inside leg, close to the girth, pushes the horse forwards and sideways, causing lateral bend in the ribcage to engage the inside hind ..."

From my own perspective and in teaching shoulder-in, I first ask the horse to make a small circle. Before asking the horse to move laterally, I then ask the rider to make the first step of a new circle. This ensures that the horse's Shoulders are brought just off the track whilst still maintaining bend. All this is well described in my book *Dressage in Lightness*.

The importance of the rider's seat and upper body position to help the correct flexion and the positioning of the forehand to the inside of the track is crucial to what happens next. I then ask my pupil to support the horse to the outside (outside rein and outside leg) and to apply a nudge with the inside leg just behind the girth to ask for the first step of Shoulder-in. After that, and particularly with my own horses, the Shoulder-in will often flow forward with just the pressure of the thigh or even seatbone (ischia) alone and the inside leg can return to the girth.

The more novice the horse and rider, however, the more I will wish to clarify the different feelings between asking the horse to bend around the leg in a preparatory circle and then asking the horse to move away (whilst remaining bent) to offer lateral steps. For this reason I would expect to see the rider's inside seatbone more engaged with the leg dropping into the girth for circle work, then to move it a little back, or behind the girth to achieve a lateral effect. Some authorities ask the rider to adjust onto the outside seatbone at this stage.

It is interesting however when one begins to examine these things how the term 'leg on the girth' clearly means different things to different riders. If one is going to be really nit-picky it might be necessary to clarify a lot further.

For many, 'leg on the girth' isn't anywhere near the girth! In the average riding school lesson, there is such a rigid insistence upon pupils keeping the hip heel alignment - it is rare indeed to see the leg used on the girth correctly except perhaps in canter. **This is generally due to the fact that the rider is unable to remain in the centre of the saddle, so with hips too far back, the leg will be much too far back as well!** This is a great pity, since the support of the rider's inside leg correctly placed at the girth can make all the difference in the world to the horse's balance and general safety, particularly when turning.

It is very much due to this failing that we see so many horses on the forehand, falling in or out through the Shoulder on a corner or circle and being quite unable to bend correctly. In this context, I applaud what Anky Von Grunsven wrote on this subject in *Horse and Hound* recently. "...a lot of the time, riders are placed in an unnatural position, with the lower leg too far back. This is why many riders look stiff." She goes on to say, "I only put my leg on the horse to ask him to do something, so my lower leg normally hangs a little bit away from the horse's side." It is this which I was so keen to impress upon my students at the Weight Aids Clinic. The difference between letting go and allowing

the weight of the leg to hang down, and later placing it 'on' or 'back' to apply more weight or pressure against the horse's side for a specific reason

For me, the 'leg on the girth' indicates a leg which allows the stirrup leather to hang vertically. Personally, I like to keep my ankle joint more or less level with the girth for the more intricate bending work etc, but generally it will be the toe that is level with the girth. When I prescribe 'leg a little back' as in Shoulder-in, I want the rider to apply the leg just behind the girth so that pressure on the thorax is at that point where the horse is most likely to react by stepping sideways as well as forwards. If the leg is already back, then we obviously won't want it back any further!

It is interesting to look at pictures of modern day riders and compare their inside leg position. I notice in her book *Enlightened Equitation* that author Heather Moffet, for example, keeps her inside leg a little further back than my own, so it is not surprising she does not advocate leg 'back' for Shoulder in. On the other hand Carl Hester tends to keep his lower leg more in the vertical position, and recommends 'moving it back' for teaching the lateral steps. All this goes to show how careful we must be with words. 'Back' or 'forward' will only have meaning if the status quo is made clear. Even for reinback or piaffe where forward movement is to be rechannelled or unified to the spot, my idea of legs back will simple be the normal place for some people! For me it will be back because, like Anky I want my legs to hang as vertical as possible for most of the time, just clear of the horse's side, but for others it may be their normal position!

One of the reasons good photos and drawings are important in text books is to be able to back up the use of words with diagrams which show what one means quite conclusively. In my *Classical Seat* book (publ. 1987, now in its 7th edition) I showed an imaginary panel of buttons as a suggested guide, but pointed out ..."The area over which these imaginary buttons are spread is small. As the horse becomes better schooled and more responsive to the leg, this area will decrease until happily there will come a time when only one button need be employed."

The truth of this is further shown in photographs of several of my own horses working in Shoulder-in in *Dressage in Lightness*. The leg position from teaching the first steps to a young horse who can do no more than leg-yield at this stage, contrasts greatly as the horse supples and progresses. Leg 'back' may turn into 'leg on the girth' as a natural progression... but it would be foolish to think that the novice horse would understand if no difference was made initially.

I am sorry therefore if my description of bringing the leg a little 'back' seemed inappropriate. However, in most photos of classical riders riding Shoulder-in, I am sure you will agree the inside leg will nearly always appear slightly further back than normal - even if it is not always described so in the text!

Over the years, I have probably started off anything up to 500 horses in Shoulder-in and one learns to know what images and expressions work for most people. More than anything, lateral work is to do with timing and feel but for me the greatest challenge in teaching any type of figure work is to get people to release the leg having once applied it.

There are too many legs permanently stuck 'back' or 'on the horse' or whatever terminology you care to use. It is for this reason that so many horses become confused and blocked in their work. If unmounted workshops can pave the way to riders learning about letting go with their weight, and how to make small changes in pressure without disturbing the natural balance of the horse, then I am only too keen to continue with them.... but I shall watch my words in future. Thank you! SL