

# **Our Proud Horses - Our Heritage - Time to Act**

**By Mike Robertshaw**

Horses all over the world are suffering. Shockingly, I refer to the current plight of the ridden horse. There are two threads to his story.

Firstly, there has been an overall general decline in practical understanding, treatment and training of horses, particularly at higher levels; similarly, the teaching of riders over the last hundred years or so has been affected.

On the positive side, there have been enormous leaps in veterinary science, the understanding of bio-mechanics and animal behaviour but comparatively little has filtered through to the way people manage their training. This has been seen and noted by several masters of the art over the years. We must examine the driving force behind a sinister escalation in the divergence from known and recorded best practice towards the cruelty and abuse of riding horses particularly increasing over the last fifteen to twenty years.

There are two bodies that one should be able to look to as bastions of excellence that one would expect to stand irrevocably solid in their protection of the well-being of the horse. These are the Federation Equestre Internationale, the single controlling body for all major horse related sports worldwide and the historic Spanish Riding School of Vienna.

The defining rules, governing the judging of traditional equestrian sport come almost word for word from the pen of one of the greatest horsemen throughout history; Francois Robichon de la Guerinere in 1729. His work is still deemed the yardstick by which followers of Classical Horsemanship, including Vienna, judge training and presentation. Why is it that today, in competition, these practical and protective rules are often totally ignored both in the training and in the judging of what is a world-wide multi-million, if not billion pound industry?

Unfortunately, the very nature of competition drives mankind to look for any advantage they feel they can gain over their rivals; especially when the stakes get as high as they are in International Dressage. This is true of any sport, the rules get warped, at first, a little,,, but go too far and we expect the governing bodies to step in and actively block such things from happening again. Not so in equestrian sport. Yet here we have a living, breathing and desperately sensitive but ridiculously compliant animal involved. Surely our duty must be to protect ? Unfortunately, when the rules get bent, the poor horse gets bent, literally and that hurts him.

The rules are there to protect the horse as well as to set guidelines and criteria for judging, so why, oh why, are the rules not being adhered to or enforced?

Almost every day there are further appalling video leaks and exposes on the social media revealing desperately abusive, even life threatening attempts to subdue or overcome the spirit or self-protective resistance to painful procedures of the horse. These are often violently executed in the name of training. Only in the very most extreme cases is anything done, when it is far too late to protect or ameliorate the suffering.

Even out in the open, the painful and unquestionably damaging practice of hyperflexion of the neck, known as “Rolkur” is freely practiced in the collecting ring in preparation for a class at top level International competition. Yet what do the august governing body do about it? Despite the fact that this practice is completely and categorically at odds with their own rules, they condone or ignore it.

Knowing that it is unnatural, uncomfortable (at the very least) and bio-mechanically unsound for the horse’s head to be pulled back behind the vertical, what do we see in the higher levels of competition? - a good fifty per cent or more ridden in this abusive way. Conversely, because it is less seen, the horse that is ridden naturally (ie not overbent in this way) rarely gains high marks in the results - although there have been some exceptions. Generally however, It appears that the whole system is corrupt and has become totally perverted. In the past everyone looked to Vienna for guidance; not any more.

Even back in the 1950’s, the director of the Spanish Riding School, Col. Alois Podhajsky, voiced his concerns over the potentially destructive nature of competitive Dressage if not minutely controlled. He feared also, the possible negative effect on the School's standards by allowing riders to coach outside the school. So fiercely dedicated to the horse and the School's purity of tradition as a repository for equestrian knowledge and excellence, it's past leaders were therefore fiercely protective.

What do we see now, creeping into the work and training within the Spanish Riding School, a unique, historic treasury of equestrian knowledge and art? We see the “Rolkur” being used in training and preparation for performance in order to subdue the horses rather than employing the time honoured patience, understanding and delicate care so important to the horse's wellbeing. Today, in performance, the stallions are decidedly less at ease, less accurate or consistent than fifteen or twenty years ago. We see much less refined riding and horses are often reprimanded during performance where near perfection used to be the norm.

Why? Privatisation of an internationally recognised treasure, the Austrian Government have thrown it to the wolves of commercialism in 2004 and into the management of someone only interested in profit at any cost.

Since then, the workload, the number of horses in training and frequency of performance have nearly doubled, the staff have been radically reduced as has the period of training in which a horse is expected to reach performance level. This is not what the staff signed up for and we are told that morale is at an all time low. That is sad, considering the historical status of the School, but the real losers, again, are the poor horses, the renowned Lipizzaners, the proud, dashing white horses of Vienna. One also worries about this historic breed, whose future is under the same management and financial pressures, what will become of the great studs and breeding programme?

Surely the SRS is of sufficient worldwide importance as a uniquely historical treasure and repository of knowledge and culture to warrant autonomy with International funding and the help of such a body as UNESCO. The public may not understand equitation, but they understand beauty and something totally unique. The dancing white horses draw people to Vienna in vast numbers which in turn draws them to the hotels, restaurants and all the wonderful centres of culture the city has to offer. The Spanish Riding School truly represents the jewel in the crown. It would be a tragedy if this erosion of standards were not halted and turned around now. Thankfully there are still living horse masters from the time of

Podhajsky, Handler, Albrecht et al, who could reignite the passion for learning and understanding that makes these horses thrive in their task. For the next generation, it will require immovable safeguards to eradicate any chance of a similar decay ever happening again. The Austrian State, the horses and their public deserve better. There must be a serious review to ensure a replacement of the original tried and tested impeccable and humane standards. Young men must be taught by older men who know the secrets of technique and who can guide them to higher skills. Then Vienna will have her proud horses back again.