

# Classical Riding and the Classical Riding Club

by Sylvia Loch - Founder

The term classical riding has, of late, become something of a catch phrase. It is on the lips of the great and the good, it is also bandied about by the uninitiated.

Unfortunately, too many think it is some sort of cop out - riding around with loose reins and allowing the horse to move in any sort of outline. In fact, properly done this could not be further from reality. The truth is there is nothing new or innovative about classical riding. It is about discipline and real understanding of how the horse is put together, both morphologically and psychologically. Classical riding has been with us for hundreds of years; the only new thing is we are beginning to bring it to the attention of the general rider, instead of to the select few. It is undeniable that the term 'classical riding' has tended to remain in the domain of equestrian academia until recently.

So for those of us who have been promoting this form of riding for a few decades at the risk of ruffling a few feathers along the way - what exactly do we mean by classical riding? Do we only imply dressage, and does that dressage have to be in its highest form, eg. the High School, including the airs above the ground, ridden only on classical horses? Absolutely not! Classical riding is for every horse - many are begging for it - and anyone who is prepared to go back to school, and open their minds, can learn to ride this way. It should certainly not be exclusive, for it is as much an attitude of mind as a physical actuality. So whether we do dressage, hunt, jump, long distance ride, event or just enjoy hacking out, we can practice its principles. What it does involve is a very definite commitment upon the part of the rider, and it is this commitment which in the end denotes the classical rider. In CRC, Members sign a Charter to this end. How may we best define this?

: Classical riding often involves throwing away preconceived ideas and mentally starting from scratch again.

: For most, a re-examination of the basic aids is required. Riders have to forget about controlling the horse from the front end with over-dependence on the hands.

: Instead, they need to appreciate more fully how the horse's hindend works, how energy can only become connected through freedom of the back, understanding what

engagement of the hocks really means and how the application of weight aids in the saddle can either make the work easy or difficult for the horse.

: It must be realised that proper schooling is progressive but that all horses are different when it comes to how long each phase will take.

: Riders must be patient realising that there are no shortcuts to the art of rebalancing the horse for whatever purpose he is required.

: In short, riders have to be prepared to assume total responsibility for their actions. This means never blaming the horse when things go wrong and being prepared to re-evaluate their own work and return to basics.

: Finally, relaxation, stretching, reward and praise form an important part of training.

Having been teaching this philosophy now for over 40 years, travelling world-wide to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and all over America as well as Europe, I have found that there are remarkably few problem horses, but a great many problem riders. Unfortunately, people have to be learn to be humble to accept that they might have a problem. We have all been guilty, at some stage, of blaming the horse when things go wrong.

To understand a little of the history of classical riding we need to think ourselves back to Ancient Greece, just a few hundred years prior to the birth of Christ. Up until that point, there had been various cultures which had searched for something more aesthetic in their lives, but it was the Greeks who really elevated people's consciousness to a new dimension. Initially, the term 'classical' embraced all the different art forms, music, literature, poetry, painting and sculpture being the most obvious. Classical implied working with nature, using nature's laws to achieve a roundness, rhythm and balance to all man's pursuits and creations. Only by adhering to the natural laws was it thought that harmony and grace would flow. For this reason, painting had to be lifelike, and form and shape was to mirror what Nature herself produced. Poetry and music should sustain the natural rhythms of Nature with a pattern and a constancy to everything as typified by the seasons, the phases of the moon and the tides of the sea. Gradually as the classical ideal took hold and was seen to enhance the arts, the idea spread into other pursuits to include dancing, the martial arts and finally riding.

Under the patronage of thinking horsemen such as Simon of Athens and later Xenophon, the cavalry commander (around 400 BC) documents were written so that instructions normally passed down from father to son, could be studied by future equestrian scholars. The first book left to us in its entirety was Xenophon's Hippike, which has since become the Bible of most classical riders today. From this book it is obvious that some very barbaric practices existed in the ancient world. We know that the Scythians were wonderful equestrians but they thought little of sacrificing twenty or more horses to accompany their warrior master to his grave. But there were other matters equally abhorred by Xenophon and in his view it was pure ignorance to pull a horse in the mouth or to abuse him with whip and spur.

Some things change little in two and a half millenniums so Xenophon's advice is as modern in context today as though written yesterday. Translated into English by Morgan The Art of Horsemanship is published in this country in an easy to read modern format by J A Allen the Horseman's Bookshop. As a no-nonsense practical book it should be a must for every student of equitation wishing to familiarise themselves of the classical ideals. Basically this book is all about. It was Xenophon's advice for cross-country riding and combat that led others to quest deeper for perfecting the work he had started. The classical discipline which we now call dressage has evolved from the academic riding of the post- Renaissance masters of 16th, 17th and 18th Century Europe and was based on similar ideals. What is totally uncompromising about all the classic books is the premise that the rider is totally responsible for his horse. Not only in the matter of husbandry, diet, care of the feet etc but absolutely as regards, schooling and training and teaching him to rebalance himself with a rider on his back. What man had robbed from the horse in his natural state, he had to learn to put back again. This required above all else a knowledge of Nature's laws of gravity and symmetry as well as a real sense of self discipline. It was Xenophon who had insisted that a good riding position was essential if the horse was to remain in balance at all times. We need look no further than Hippike for our present understanding of the Classical Seat. If you took the horse out from under the rider, the rider must remain in a good, stable and upright balance with his weight centred over his feet.

- From the psychological point of view, the rider must never deal with the horse in impatience or anger, and never ever should the horse be blamed for misunderstanding. In the end it is always down to the rider to prepare the horse for the task ahead so that his aids become clear. What a pity more trainers do not instil this valid principle in their pupils' minds.

- Xenophon also underlined the necessity to make the horse gymnastic through progressive exercises. A horse cannot become supple overnight; it is the practice and perfection of the various exercises which will help the horse bend, straighten and move with impulsion.
- Finally, the psychology of persuasion and anticipation is addressed so that the horse enjoys his work. The rider cleverly places the horse in such a balance that the horse believes that each request was his idea in the first place. Light hands and light legs render light joyful horses.
- At all times the horse is encouraged through tact and gentleness. Xenophon writes: “When your horse shies at an object and is unwilling to go up to it, he should be shown that there is nothing fearful in it, least of all to a courageous horse like himself.” Why do some riders still persist in whacking a horse to go past an object - has no one ever heard of association of ideas?

It is clear that many of today’s riders have failed to take any of this advice on board. Today, we see stronger and stronger contraptions fitted to place our horses in an outline; contact is measured in terms of weight and some riders believe that strong legs or the spur is required for every stride. Yet, luckily for horses, there are many people out there who without knowing it ride classically. They may do no dressage, but lightness is seen in the showing class. Real balance and a subtle use of weight is displayed on the hunting field or over a steeplechase course. Others make long distance look easy, and amongst the pleasure riders, weekend riders, and mums exercising their daughters’ ponies, there will always be those who stand head and shoulders above the rest. For such people there is a huge pleasure to be derived just from being on horseback, from breathing the same air as their horse, listening to each hoofbeat and feeling every movement of his sensitive body under them. They may never have read Xenophon or a book about classical dressage in their life, but somehow they and their horse are. It was for those people who felt this way about their own riding, or who wanted it to be better that I started the Classical Riding Club. Carrying the message of Xenophon and the old masters, even further afield, the main aim of the Club was to underline those age-old precepts. Many people were already on the right lines, but felt isolated and alone. They wanted to know more but did not know where to find it. They needed to know there were others who felt the same. Networking, sharing advice, discussing books and videos, setting up clinics which spread the same message are all part of CRC’s remit. The Tracking Up magazine published every quarter contains a wealth of shared information.

When I started CRC, I guessed we would attract about 100 or so people. It had started with a very full mailbag, the result of books and articles I had written. What I

had not realised was that people were really hungry for more information. I have found that the more people know, the more they want to know. Far from being a club for no-hopers, our Membership List shows a very full world-wide network of highly motivated, mainly professional people. Currently we have hundreds of paid up Members, and a Facebook page of over 12,000 friends, and there are several distinguished names from the various classical academies and other walks of life. Marvellous, busy and successful people give up time to make the Club work. It is totally non-profit making and the subs fund the office and very full Newsletter. Members feel committed and often dig their hands in their own pockets. International writers offer articles free of charge, people throughout the country support and advice, and we now run our own dressage competitions.

The good thing about CRC is that everyone feels comfortable coming together as one big family to promote better riding, classical riding all round. From the modest to the highly experienced, they feel part of the whole and no one is daunted by the word 'classical'. They are now beginning to see that it is rather more than just a way of riding, it is also a way of life. Dressage is probably the greatest incentive for most. Our CRC Judges Guidelines and Mark system can be used for our own CRC tests but also normal BD or ABRS tests. The really different thing is the judging criteria. The aims are similar, we are all looking for an active, engaged and supple horse, but in CRC we are putting responsibility much more back on the rider. It is no good having a beautiful, springy, impressive-moving horse if he performs the test overbent and tense. Judged the CRC way, the horse must look at ease with his rider, the aids must be unobtrusive and the whole picture should be aesthetically pleasing.

That was how it was for the Ancient Greeks when they said art must mirror nature. There is no place in the Classical Riding Club tests for jagged edges (read pulling hands) and a lack of harmony (read tight necks). Everything must flow, and for this reason, many people are looking at things our way. British dressage is scaling new heights of achievement, but behind the scenes there are still unhappy, spoiled horses and confused riders particularly when they are told their horse is not the right type. In CRC, we welcome all breeds, sizes and types of horse. With correct training and the correct attitude, miracles can be made to happen. It will be a happy day when all riding, everywhere, becomes more classical and there is perhaps no need to run a separate organisation to promote it.

For the time being however, there is plenty of work to be done. SL.