

The Classical Riding Club

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Dear Members,

As if you didn't know – Classical Riding is alive and kicking! Very much so, judging by the attendance and the exuberant caprioles of the noble Lipizzaners at Wembley last week! Seriously, despite the sheer energy of the crowds – up to 7,000 at the weekend – you could have heard a pin drop! The beauty and talent of the horses shone out and the dedication and discipline of the riders was all too obvious. Universal Music & Entertainment and Live Nation who organised the event reported fantastic feedback and it seemed to me that people were spellbound and deeply moved by the whole experience.

The show started with an 'upbeat' theme introduced by a celeb presenter. If truth be told, my heart sank slightly at the thundering pop music which seemed an unusual way of heralding in such an august establishment as the Spanish Riding School of Vienna. Gone was the tradition of previous visits with an escort from the Household Cavalry and the calming presence of the royal Drum Horse. Instead, the elegant Carl Hester – and our amazing para world champion Lee Pearson – would open the show with their charming horses. If the strident bass beat of Move Like Jagger was designed to dispel any hint that dressage was stuffy, it certainly paved the way for the Mozart which followed which came as light relief. I had been lucky enough to enjoy a chat with Carl and other Olympians at a private reception earlier in the evening, and he too felt much the same about the music... 'embarrassing' I think, was the word used!

As for the School itself – that was as traditional, dignified, unhurried and timeless as it's ever been. The white stallions (one does not say 'grey' at Vienna) sparkled under the lights and the riders sat in time honoured perfect position. Quiet, totally vertical, centred or centaured and right up to the pommel, their legs hung down effortlessly with only a whisper of the spur occasionally applied, but most of the time guiding their horses through the pressure of a knee a thigh, an invisible weight aid and quiet, steady hands.

As we have come to expect – there was no pulling back with the hand – no sign of a horse being put under pressure; instead, polls were high, necks full and arched and every horse could see where he was going. Here was roundness – personified. Hocks tucked under, quarters engaged, flexibility and suppleness all working together to present a beautiful whole. Being the first night, Thursday, there were a couple of spooks – mainly at the presenter's rather unwise choice of sparkly top – and some of the airs above the ground got off to a slow start. But, in general everything worked harmoniously and beautifully and it was a pleasure to see the horses enjoying their expected reward – hand in a tail coat pocket to extract a much welcomed sugar lump after a special levade, courbette or piaffe in hand. Who was it who said it's bad to deal in rewards? ... how else, are we expected to make our pleasure at a task well executed, very well known to our horse?

All of which brings me to another big Diary date which we enjoyed this November.

On the 12th and 13th I was demonstrating at Your Horse Live and again, every seat in the Dodson & Horrell arena was occupied. There is a huge thirst out there for classical training and I truly believe the public are hungry for help and information. I would like to thank my two guinea-pig riders enthusiastically for their co-operation, not only having turned out themselves and their horses to a very high standard, but also giving me the privilege to sit on them after their own lesson. Sarah Enwhistle and Susie Jennings, you did us proud and it was a great pleasure to use your lovely Spanish horses to show the crowd how lightness, balance and roundness can be achieved purely through using the quietest of aids and without harsh bits or gadgets.

Later, I stood at the Albion stand signing books and DVDs and the sheer volume of people who came up to ask questions on training, schooling and how to ride correctly was staggering. It seems there are many confused people

out there and some spoke shockingly of being led up the garden path by their various 'trainers'. Without being negative, I can't understand how this state of affairs can exist in a country where the governing body, the BHS, promotes a Manual of Horsemanship which concurs totally with anything you might find at Vienna. Could it be – as both Sue McBane and Anne Wilson have indicated in the past – that we have so many gurus and 'personalities' out there all determined to be 'different' – that they have strayed from Nature's laws? I can only put it down to a few greedy people wanting short cuts with their horses and not being prepared to put the time in. Unfortunately, this has led to the perception that you should be able to attain something instantly and perfectly without preparation. The visit of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna provided a timely reminder that this attitude cannot succeed.

Before I sign off, spare a thought for the Club which has worked so hard over the last 15 years to keep Classical Riding alive in the public psyche. CRC takes up a lot of time and dedication and we are constantly in need of funds to put more on the website plus secretarial time. The recession has hit us hard, as it has everyone, but if we are to do more next year – I am very keen to give our Training Tests better exposure all over the country as well as train more judges to judge the Classical way – we need funds. Please support us; donations – earning you a place on Friends of CRC – are badly needed and every penny counts. Please also help us to enrol more Members. Without you, this thirst for Classical Riding may fade away. A very Happy Christmas and New Year to you all and thank you *Tracking-up!*

Why not give a close horsy friend or relation a subscription to CRC this christmas?

Just go on line and key in membership. Apart from current news, being a member gives you access to thousands of 'classical' articles on-line, either as separate entities or part of our huge library of newsletters that have gone before.

As one member from the USA has just written: what a treasure trove of information you provide! CRC has given the ordinary rider the work of the masters!

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Roundness: Misconceptions And Clarifications

by Sylvia Loch

It worries me these days when people trot out the same old phrase – ‘he’s not round’ – or worse perhaps, ‘he’s lovely and round’ – when actually he’s not. Do they really know what they mean? Do they really know what they’re looking at? Do they really know what they should be looking for? Clearly, many don’t and what is worrying – it’s often the so called ‘experts’ who get it wrong. So first, let me tell you what roundness should be.

REAL ROUNDNESS indicates a horse with the following easy-to-detect features in his way of going:

- Hocks bending – hindlegs stepping well under the body mass – i.e. engaged
- Croup supple and in the more collected work – slightly lowered
- Back soft and rounded – able to flex and stretch – with a swinging tail
- Forehand rising up proudly – withers higher than quarters
- Poll the highest point; head just in front of or on the vertical
- Forelegs moving freely forward from the shoulder with light, fluid steps
- A feeling of contained power and lift under saddle

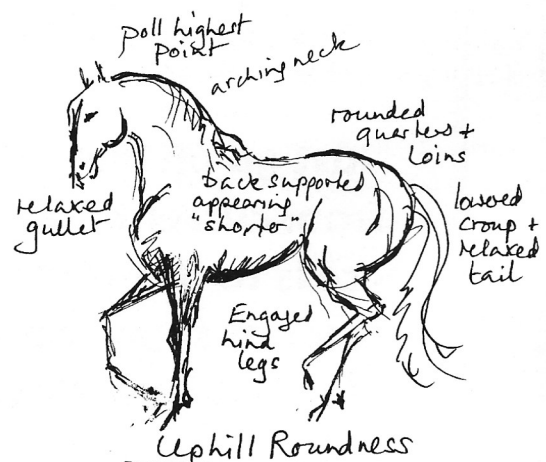
In other words the horse is **ROUND** from behind. The bullet-points above merely indicate the biomechanical effects of a horse that has been nicely schooled over a period of time. Obviously, the less schooled or younger horse cannot possibly offer the degree of roundness described above until he reaches a certain level of education. He has to be strong enough and supple enough to transfer weight onto the hindlimb joints and this may take several years to perfect. The deeper the quarters the more the head and neck will rise up – something which is insufficiently recognised by judges and trainers alike today.

The ultimate and most important effect of roundness is that it should lead to **LIGHTNESS**. In trot for example, the horse has both to flex and extend his spine to allow the natural rise and fall of the movement to take place. The back muscles and the abdominal muscles therefore play an important part in controlling this natural rounding and dipping and it follows that any harsh repositioning of the horse’s head will impede this natural process. Unless the horse is able to flex or yield through the poll and jaw, there can be no real ‘giving’ through the rest of his body. Try setting your own neck and jaw and you will see what I mean. The key to establishing a correct contact is a balanced seat, effective legs and most important – stable but sensitive hands which – in the words of Oliveira – know how to ‘fix, ask and give’.

Since the average rider today is often not taught the meaning of an educated hand or indeed an educated leg or seat, it now seems that roundness is totally misunderstood. Too many dressage judges simply look for roundness at the front end and this has led to a proliferation of schooling aids to lower the forehand and bring the horse’s nose towards his chest by habit or force. The result is often a ‘broken’ neck and a back held so rigidly in tension it no longer has the ability to rise and fall naturally. This will deny the rider of feeling united with his horse. Instead of the movement being absorbed easily and effortlessly – the gaits will feel pounding and harsh which over time may lead to breakdown and lameness in the horse.

FALSE ROUNDNESS

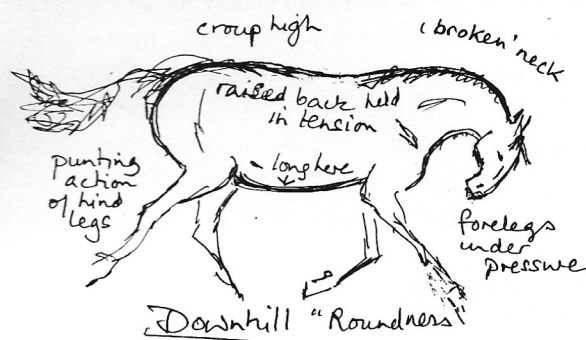
- Hindlegs which ‘punt’ or trail behind; insufficient bend or flexion through the hocks
- Back hollow or held artificially high – often accompanied by a stiffly held tail
- Forehand lower than the quarters – often described as ‘deep’
- Horse’s head reliant on a contact that places it behind the vertical, the highest point of neck being behind the 2nd or 3rd vertebra



– or worse

- Forelegs hitting the ground forcefully, bigger strides in front than behind
- Hard to sit to – a feeling of power escaping out of the shoulders

I believe the fashion for incorrect roundness came about as riders tried to correct the tendency of some horses to hollow. An artificially high head carriage is generally the result of weakness in the back caused by rushed training, a faulty seat or weakness in the hindlegs. The rider makes unreasonable requests for which the horse has not been prepared and the horse's best means of defence is to resist. This may result in an excessive poking of the nose and a high neck carriage which relies on the support of the brachiocephalic muscle underneath the gullet.

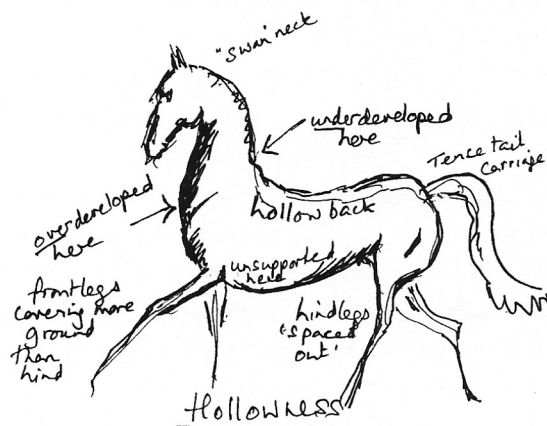


Sadly, the more the rider pulls back on the rein in the mistaken idea of correcting the problem, the more the brachiocephalic comes into play. This merely blocks the connection from hind-end to forehand and the result is not pretty. The neck now appears 'upside down' and all proper rein effects are lost. With the horse now carrying his head artificially high, the muscles which should provide a nice 'topline' will be forced into extensor mode – unable to flex and stretch as appropriate.

A QUICK-FIX

Many riders try to get over this problem by going too far in the opposite direction – which can be equally damaging. They fix the head in a deep position which cramps the natural 'play' of the spinal processes so again the topline muscles are locked into one mode. A permanent flexor position will lead to fatigue and resistance and the horse's back will ultimately lose its elasticity and become 'set' and rigid. Over time those delicate structures which connect the horse's neck to his back – around the trapezius area – can become permanently damaged; they may even cause lameness.

Yet, the solution to correct an over-high head carriage is staring us in the face. And it is comparatively easy! Instead of battling with the reins, the best way to build topline muscle – the key to real roundness – is simply to let go! Well almost – but that doesn't mean losing contact. The work on the long rein is a gradual feeding out of the rein – started in walk, but later introduced in trot and canter. For the horse that is used to being held it, he now has to take responsibility for his own balance by stepping under more. It is important the rider continues to ask for flexion in the poll and jaw as he lengthens the rein, but this is not difficult with gentle, feeling, asking fingers. By lowering the hand and keeping the wrists steady we encourage the horse to draw out the rein from an active, asking leg which supports the forehand at the girth. Once he is no longer leaning on the contact, the horse can now release the brachiocephalic. Once this is soft, he has a chance to stretch the entire frame which helps build the muscles of the neck, back, loins and those all-important quarters.



Ultimately, we are looking to work the muscles of the horse both ways. Flex and stretch is what all body-builders and athletes do in the gym every day of their lives.

So be brave, be patient and take time to work your horse both ways. Real roundness may take time to achieve but it will provide an everlasting treasure. The correctly rounded horse will be more magnificent, more athletic, more balanced and more comfortable by far. SL

Please note: In our next edition of Tu, we will examine more closely the positioning of the horse's head both in the long and low position (i.e. stretch) and when he is fully collected and engaged (i.e. correctly round and light). Appearances can be deceiving.

Concerning Biting, Good And Bad Hands And Why The Double Bridle Was Introduced

By the late Master Horseman Udo Bürger (died 1985)

Not everyone is familiar with Bürger's great book The Way to Perfect Horsemanship (Robert Hale/J A Allen publishers) and when I was struggling to write my history of classical dressage, it occurred to me how few people in today's modern dressage world seem familiar with his work. Udo was one of Germany's finest equine veterinarians, he was also a great horseman and judge and his understanding of the horse shines out from his work which, thankfully, is shortly to be republished.

'To return to the subject of bits, it should first be realised that their design is only relatively important. A good rider will manage a horse as in one bit as another.

Asked how many bits he knows, a knowledgeable horseman will only think of two: soft or hard. This, of course, is the correct answer, assuming the rider has tactful hands.

More explicitly, there are unbroken mouthpieces with a precise action, and jointed mouthpieces that can move in the mouth, producing a less precise and less powerful effect. A curb bit, properly fitted is not necessarily a severe bit; the severity is inherent in the rider's hand and not in the construction of the bit. Normally, it is carried on the tongue and there is practically no pressure on the bars.

In the hands of a good rider, who can feel exactly in milligrammes, the degree of pressure of the mouthpiece on the lower jaw, when he (the rider, not the horse) yields, or acts or merely resists, then the curb, despite its unjointed mouthpiece is the finest bit imaginable. No other one can give a rider so perfect a feel of the movement of the tongue of the horse when he quietly chews the bit.

The jointed mouthpiece, in contrast, can form a wedge in the mouth, clamp the lower jaw, press on the outside edges of the bars and slide on them, because it is not equipped with a curb chain which prevents it from being displaced. With a jointed mouthpiece, in the presence of resistance, the rider has to use cunning or strength. So, contrary to common belief, the so-called 'severe' curb bit with its curb chain is the most gentle and effective instrument of all ... IN THE RIGHT HANDS.

Conversely, the jointed mouthpiece, usually called a soft bit, can induce the rider to use more strength than necessary. However, curb bits are for riders with sensitive fingers; snaffles are for riders with fists. No one without a perfect seat and hand educated to yield should ever attempt to ride on the curb; its action is too immediate

Francois de la Guérinière (1732) is usually credited with the idea of using a bridoon with a curb, although Grisone (1552) is represented in a portrait showing him on a horse with a double bridle. Seydlitz introduced it to the Prussian cavalry in the middle of the 19th century, at a period in history when horsemanship had ceased to be the exclusive privilege of noblemen and was losing its image as a sublime art requiring total dedication. The headlong charges of modern cavalry necessitated a kind of mouthpiece that could be utilised by troopers with fists, strong arms and strong backs. The bridoon was such an instrument ... If the rough trooper of modern history had been equipped with only one rein attached to a curb, his horse would have thrown himself over backward rather than move a step forward. He was therefore provided with a bridoon for the purpose of steering and a curb to stop the horse promptly instead of galloping through the ranks of the enemy. So, the bridoon was a concession to the clumsiness of the average recruit

Reluctance to use the double bridle at this stage shows to what extent the art of horsemanship has regressed in this century. Most of the old masters have left this world; even if they are still alive, their services might not be in great demand, because so many people believe that anybody with natural talent can succeed without having first to learn to ride.'

A truer word was never said! SL