

The Classical Riding Club

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Concerning Balance

Putting the Young Horse on the Aids – and Why Every Horse is Different

Extracts from *Riding Logic* by the late Master Horseman, Wilhelm Müsseler (died 1952)

MANY years ago, whilst still working and living in Portugal, my late husband Henry Loch encouraged me to study the great classics. He gave me a copy of Riding Logic by Müsseler to start; within five minutes of delving into this book, I was hooked. Müsseler was a member of the German Olympic team in the early 1900s and his fascination with the art of schooling was equally shared with his love of history of art which struck a chord for me – my father was an artist. Too often the German system is thought to be too rigid but for me these excerpts from Riding Logic show a very open and thoughtful approach. SL

What is meant by putting the horse to the aids?

A horse is properly put to the aids, or stands at the aids, if the following have been attained:

1. The horse is fully relaxed. There must be no tenseness or rigidity of any kind, either in the jaws, in the poll, the neck, the back or the legs, nor in any joint or muscle – nowhere.
2. The horse is properly between the legs, at the rider's back, at the reins, and in equilibrium. That means that the whole of the moving mechanism of the horse must be willingly put at the disposal of the rider. This naturally comprises also that the horse understands the influences of leg, hands, weight and back and that it is prepared and ready willingly to obey those indications.

Being put to the aids does NOT mean:

3. A certain position or carriage of the horse, or
4. That the horse can already understand and obey the aids which are composed of the various influences

At this stage the relaxed horse should willingly and with full confidence carry out the simplest things which the rider asks of him. This, at the trot and at the canter, should give the rider a feeling of harmony and coordination; at the walk and at a standstill the feeling will come much later. Thus the basis is created on which to continue the education. Without the horse's goodwill and his confidence in the rider, and without his being fully relaxed, cooperation and harmony between them is hardly conceivable. Even if only one of the above described conditions is not truly fulfilled, there will always be difficulties of some sort, which may in turn lead to a catastrophe, or will at least bring about circumstances under which the rider will not be able to carry out his intentions. All this depends on the character of the horse and the horsemanship of the rider...

What does a horse look like when put to the aids?

The question is posed here merely because riding pupils often think of the matter in that way. It cannot be answered by describing a particular bearing or carriage of the horse recognised as being the best or most desirable. **This would lead the majority of riders to lure or force their horses into that posture, a procedure which contains a great danger for every rider!* It leads to deceive not only others but himself so that later on he cannot distinguish between right and wrong. ***Carriage or bearing will always vary and must correspond to the degree of dressage and to the character and conformation of the horse.* The correct answer to the question posed above, therefore, can only be: *'As if there is perfect harmony between rider and horse.'*

The statement that harmony between man and mount should be visible indicates that a single brief glance does not suffice really to recognise it. It is necessary to observe both the horse and the rider for some time before it is

possible to say whether the horse has been put to the aids or not. And it is necessary to observe them at the halt as well as in motion, at changing the lead at the canter, going through corners, in parades, on circles and so forth....

Every movement must be quiet and harmonious and must look it. Not only must the whole carriage be harmonious, but every single movement of the horse as well as the rider must be harmonious in itself and in collaboration with the rest. The horse must give us the impression that he feels comfortable and the rider must look as if he were doing nothing at all but that everywhere, so to speak, is going by itself. This latter request, i.e. that the aids should be invisible, is of the utmost importance...

Collection and erection

Dressage proper does not begin until the [younger] horse, by having been put to the aids, is prepared to obey these aids... A clear conception of the final end of dressage is necessary; otherwise one cannot distinguish between right and wrong procedures.

The purpose of dressage is education to absolute obedience, increased efficiency and handiness. The road is a long one, but through various lessons it leads to the most perfect harmony between rider and horse in Haute Ecole. The improvement of suppleness and swing must always be the criteria as to the correctness of the procedure. The more handiness the rider demands of his horse, and the more frequent and the shorter the various turns to be executed in full harmony, the more importance must be attached to the complete control of the horse's hindquarters, which are his principal source of power.

The horse's centre of gravity is nearer to the forehand than to the hindquarters, owing to the fact that the weight of the neck and head rests on the forelegs. The front legs therefore support the greater part of the weight, but the hindlegs provide the motive power. Racehorses and steeplechasers carry the bulk of the load on their front legs, as do carriage horses, especially the heavy draught horse. This can be nicely observed with horses pulling a heavy van or plough.

The school horse, however, especially if he is to do high school work, must use his hindlegs, not so much for propulsion as for carrying purposes, and they must therefore be made to step well forward and under the centre of gravity. This is called collection, or collecting on the hindquarters...

Collection is obtained partly by special exercises serving this particular purpose, such as bending the hocks, side-stepping and shoulder-in, and partly by the whole of the training through which the horse is put, as well as by every single half-halt.

Through this kind of work, the horse will almost automatically, we might say, contract more and more from rear to front. The hindquarters become lower, the hindlegs are busier and more energetic, stepping well forward under the centre of gravity.

Not only is the horse more attentive and more prepared to make his best efforts upon the slightest indication of the rider, but he also looks more pleasant and makes a proud impression. For this reason, artists of all times have chosen to portray horses in this position when they wished to create an effect of majesty. One thinks of such immortal monuments as the Parthenon frieze and the Pergamon altar of ancient Greece, or the wonderful monument of Prince Eugene in front of the Imperial Palace at Vienna. Velasquez, the great Spanish painter, and David, Napoleon's French portraitist, invariably represented horses in the Levade.



Equestrian statue of Prince Eugene of Savoy,
Vienna

NB The italics and asterisks shown in these Excerpts are my own.

*How wise are those words. If all of today's riders took them at face value there would be no need for artificial gadgets or rollkur to force horses into certain attitudes before they are ready for them.

** This statement is also most important. One of the reasons we set up the CRC Dressage Judging system was to allow for breed differences and not to penalise a horse that was moving correctly for its breed type or frame simply because it did not have the same movement of some other breeds or 'dressage types'.

The underlying message of this paragraph is Harmony in Horsemanship – the CRC Message. SL

'Head In The Vertical' – 90° Angle

Misconceptions And Clarification

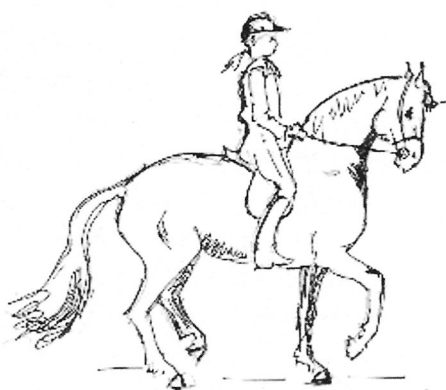
by Sylvia Loch

I have always maintained that if you are not regularly riding and training, you should not be writing articles or books. Why? – because so much of our understanding comes from feel. Feel is the writer's principal link to the horse's mind, body and soul. Without an understanding of feel, how can you possibly instruct? – either by being there in the ring, or putting it down on paper.



*horse extending into long rein
with an even more open angle
ie. beyond 90°
but head has appears BTV*

Having explained that – on the contrary – I would have given a 7 or 8 for the movement, it occurred to me that many riders might make this mistake not only when they are watching others, but worse, perhaps – riding. Are they also aware that if the horse's head is too much ahead of the vertical on the long rein, they might in some instances be doing more harm than good? Let me enlarge.



*Collected horse on the bit
"Classic", correct angle. 90°*

I was reminded of this recently, when a trainee judge was watching beside me when a student I was teaching began her walk on the long rein. This, incidentally was not just for the dressage test we had been practising – but I always request this giving of the rein and allowing the horse to stretch forward into the hand several times – within a normal lesson. Not only is it an important part of the flex and stretch process, it does of course provides a frequent check on the horse's balance and his obedience to the aids.

On this occasion, it became quickly apparent that my (watching) student was labouring under a false impression. She is quite an advanced rider – working her own horse towards Prix St Georges – so I was little shocked at her lack of understanding on this important subject. "Oh dear!" she remarked, "I would only give her a 4 for that. Her horse's head was behind the vertical – perhaps she's been practising rollkur!"

First, it's important to understand the angle of the accepted ideal head position in the dressage horse. If the poll is the highest point and the horse is more or less in full collection, the head should be roughly vertical and the angle of head to axis will be approximately 90 degrees. Personally, I have always preferred that the horse's head is a fraction in front of the vertical so that the angle opens up to say 95 degrees. The more novice the horse, obviously the more opening should be allowed.

Problems creep in when the head comes behind the vertical, known as BTV. This happens when riders try to fix the head and shorten the rein with the idea that 'outline' comes from the front end. We see a lot of this in competition and it is a fault which, unfortunately for the horse, has turned into a fashion.

When the horse is 'pulled together by the rein' in an attempt by the rider to ride deep and round, he has no escape other than to overbend and shorten the neck so that the crest or even lower down the neck – becomes the highest point. This is the sight we have become accustomed to in Rollkur and as all CRC Members will know, is frankly

unacceptable.

However, riders must understand that the work on the long rein is visually different. Once the horse moves out of collection and is encouraged to stretch his neck more forward, out and down until he adopts a long and low frame throughout – the poll can no longer form the highest point. Nevertheless, a horse that is happy in the mouth, both

novice and advanced should still continue to seek the bit. However long and extended his neck, he should actively seek the contact of the rider's hand. Well and good!

What seems to confuse many people is that the well-educated or advanced horse will naturally feel quite comfortable in maintaining the 90 degree angle at the poll even with his head near the floor! Contrary to people's understanding or rather, lack of it – there is absolutely nothing wrong and possibly everything right about this. Lowering the head has to mean that a correctly flexed head will appear to move behind the vertical BTV. But in fact the head has not moved one iota, it is just the neck that carries it! *So the fact is – the angle at the poll has not changed at all!*

There are of course those who just fling the reins at the horse when asked for the long rein – so the angle is completely lost. The point is – and this is where our sense of 'feel' comes in – if the horse is no longer flexing from the poll on the long rein, no longer seeking our hand and chewing on the bit, he will lose connection behind. The walk on the long rein may then deteriorate into a nose-poking exercise, where the horse drops his back and leaves his hindlegs trailing. Since this is an abnegation of all those principles we have been working so hard to achieve in all our work to date it is not a good idea. Sadly, there are still some ignorant trainers out there who applaud it and give themselves a pat on the back because their horse's head is not BTV. How ignorant is this?



horse hollowing away from contact – no longer seeking bit head at very open angle but in front of vertical – unconnected.

For years, I have been able to demonstrate these points by showing people on the ground with a model horse as the principle is quite simply. However, it was heartening in Karin Blignault's excellent book – *Equine Biomechanics For Riders* (J. A. Allen 2009) to see the same issue being addressed by a Master of Biomechanics. If you

have a copy of this excellent book and it is well worth buying for any trainer, judge or dressage rider, you will find all this well discussed on pages 38 and 39 and again 'from a Judges point of view' on page 95.

With Karin and her publisher's permission, I will now quote from the relevant paragraphs...

The horse's head can nod and it can also swivel/rotate. The joint between the head and the first vertebra, the atlas, allows the horse to nod his head and also allows a small degree of rotation. There is a restriction to the nodding and this is the limit of the 'on the bit' position. The limit is usually when the horse's nose is on a vertical line when the poll is the highest point... therefore in the 'on the bit' position. The head is at a 90 degree angle to the poll.

This is important when considering the 'long and low' position or even the slightly lower novice outline. In these positions the horse's head will thus be behind the vertical [BTV], but still flexing within the parameters of 90 degree angle, when it is yielding to the rein.

Further on we read:

'A clear distinction should be drawn between the BTV head carriage of a horse who is in the correct position and horse who is evading the bit because of an inconsistent or too strong contact.' Hear, hear!

As Karin goes on to explain, by yielding more with the rein and asking for a little more from behind with effective leg aids, we may of course open up the angle – which is definitely what I, as a trainer, would encourage with the novice horse and rider. The important thing must be that that the horse continues to chew *as he lengthens his neck forward and down to meet our hands*. Remember that the rule, 'nose at or just in front of the vertical' needs to be interpreted according to the frame of the horse at any particular time. In full collection, it is easy to make the correct judgement. Simply look for a nice straight profile. But for those who are teaching or helping young horses to carry themselves correctly in the stretch or in LDR – long, deep and round – do not be deceived by appearances. The rounding does not mean shortening and the horse will tell you all this through your heightened senses of *FEEL!*

Thank you Karin for backing up something which I was lucky enough to have clarified for me many years ago in Portugal by my late husband, Henry Loch to whom I owe so much – as well as numerous trainers including the late great Nuno Oliveira. As all the great masters have been at pains to point out, you cannot argue against science. SL