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Dressage in Lightness For All Horses

BORDERS FESTIVAL OF THE HORSE, 2012

BY LESLEY SKIPPER

On Thursday 24th May, as part of the BHS Borders Festival of the Horse, Sylvia and the Classical Riding Club put on an evening of Dressage in Lightness for All Horses. Since I have been attending Sylvia's annual demos in Kelso since the BHS first started this initiative, I was looking forward once more to visiting Ladykirk where last year's Demo was held. Being held on a Bank Holiday, this had attracted around 300 people. The superb indoor riding school at Ladykirk, near Berwick-upon-Tweed has only recently been restored. Built in 1850 for an ancestor of the present owner, Mr Henry Askew, the stables, clock tower and riding school are built in the grand classic style and the *manège* is over 70 metres long. With the original stud and paddocks close by, racing was the prime reason for these gorgeous premises and from here the winner of the Derby in 1840, a horse called Little Wonder, was bred and trained.

In previous years Sylvia has given a demonstration of classical riding to music. However this year she opened the evening with a demonstration of the use of the aids – the main theme of the evening – using her schoolmaster Lusitano stallion Prazer. This beautiful, majestic horse is perfect for such demonstrations because he is so light and responsive and shows how the correct aids, properly given, help the horse to do all that the rider asks. She was at pains to point out, as she rode, that these aids are not peculiar to her or her horses but worked on all horses, of whatever size, breed or shape - as she would demonstrate with her pupils.

It was also explained that the aids were worked out and refined over centuries by men who depended on their horses for their lives. In battle, especially in single combat, a cavalryman needed to be sure that his horse would understand immediately otherwise the result could be disastrous. With Prazer, she demonstrated how a well-trained horse can respond instantly to an aid correctly given, and how the rider can make it easy for the horse to respond. As well as showing lateral work, counter canter, changes, and passage, she even asked for levade - performed with one hand as she adjusted her microphone!

Following her demonstration, Sylvia gave instruction to four riders and their horses who had been invited to act as 'guinea-pigs' to show that even with totally unknown horses, the same principles would work. She had gone out of her way to find 4 different breeds at 4 different levels of training which made it all the more fascinating.

The first horse to participate was Bingham, a five-year-old, 16.1hh Dutch Warmblood gelding. He has been at Ladykirk since October 2011 for showjumping schooling with Lucy Simpson, who runs Ladykirk Equestrian Centre, and Sylvia had only met him once.

Bingham is very nicely balanced, especially for such a young horse. Having watched Lucy ride him, and corrected Lucy's position so that she continued to sit lightly as appropriate for a young horse, Sylvia then rode him herself - as she would do with every horse during the evening. This enables her to get a real 'feel' for what needs to be done to improve the horse's way of going and she explained what she was feeling on the mike as she rode. Sylvia then gave Lucy ideas for exercises to strengthen the horse behind, for example quarter-turns on the hocks in walk, constant changes of rein, circles, spiralling in and out on circles (but not making the circles too small), and a few steps of shoulder-fore on a circle. Sylvia also pointed out how important the outside rein is in helping to keep the horse straight.

Next was Porridge, a delightful 15.1hh. coloured cob. His owner/rider Amanda Brumwell describes him as 'heavy in my hands, though pretty forward going' (in fact, he has been known to tank off with her in quite unpleasant circumstances). His history is basically unknown, but it was evident that he had had little real schooling. Amanda

herself had had only one dressage lesson prior to that evening, but she rode Porridge so nicely that Sylvia remarked how much she had improved since the first time they had met.

When Sylvia came to ride Porridge, she weighted her stirrups, which helps to steady a horse who tends to want to rush. She then suggested to Amanda that she try lots of transitions to make Porridge listen to her, especially walk to halt and trot to walk etc and even some rein-back - something Porridge had apparently not done before. She also got Amanda to make him stand quietly and not rush off, asking him politely to yield to the bit prior to taking a step forward; Sylvia showed Amanda how to do this using a very good position and soft, feeling hands.

After an interval, the next horse to take part was Freckles, a pre-novice event horse owned and ridden by Denise Playfair, who is a well-known animal artist. Freckles is a very handsome, ten-year-old Appaloosa/TB gelding. He is a big horse - 17.1 hh - and powerful with it. When Denise bought him two years ago, he had done very little, having been broken late because he simply kept on growing.

Freckles has huge movement but it is quite downhill; he pushes off with his hind legs trailing behind. He has got into the habit of rushing as this is easier for him than working properly. When Sylvia got on him he immediately wanted to rush away from her leg; however, she kept him on a 15 metre circle till he started to bend correctly and listen. His balance did change and he started to engage his hind legs more.

Both before and after Sylvia rode Freckles, she got Denise to work on her position, to make her aware of how the way she sat was actually encouraging Freckles to rush. She pointed out that using the spur at every stride was counter-productive; instead she wanted Denise to learn to steady him by sitting correctly and using her upper body to get him in a better balance.

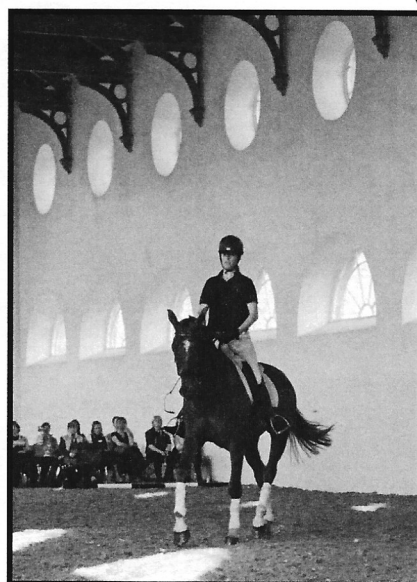
The final horse of the evening was Haneef, a handsome pure-bred Arab gelding rising eight, owned and ridden by Alison Ainsley, who has had him for five years. Like many Arabs, Haneef is extremely sensitive, especially in his mouth, and Alison has found biting him a challenge; he has a tendency to avoid the bit by curling back with his neck. He loves to jump and in addition to doing some *garrocha* work (work with a long pole as practised by Portuguese and Spanish riders) Alison is now taking him on long distance endurance rides. She brought him to Ladykirk to improve straightness, balance and collection.

After watching Alison ride him, Sylvia felt that Haneef was quite weak behind, so when she came to ride him she did plenty of lateral work in walk, rather than in trot, as the slower gait gives the horse a chance to step under and transfer weight behind. Haneef did some very nice work in shoulder-in, travers and half-pass; Sylvia explained to Alison that this would strengthen and help him into a better balance. Having started the lesson looking rather tense, Haneef started to relax and did some very nice canter work, the lateral work having helped him to engage and come up off his forehand.

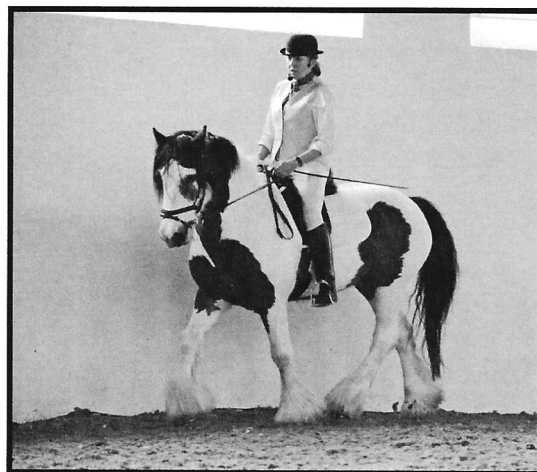
Alison finished the session by doing some classical in-hand work with Haneef.

After a further interval, Lucy Simpson, who is an accredited Monty Roberts instructor, gave a demonstration of round pen work. Unfortunately we, like a number of other people, were unable to stay for this, as we had a 100-mile journey home and it was already after 10 o'clock.

Altogether it was a most enjoyable and instructive evening, and very well worth making such a long journey for. Thanks to Angela of CRC for all her support in the wings, to the Simpsons and particularly to the Askew family for such a stunning venue and the beautiful park in which to leave our cars.



Lucy Simpson with Bingham in the beautiful riding school at Ladykirk. (Photo: Lesley Skipper)



Sylvia riding Porridge. Through correct use of the aids, she has got him to pay attention to her and take a soft, polite contact. (Photo: Lesley Skipper)

Straightening The Horse Part 1

BY MICHAEL STEVENS

The following is an extract from Michael Stevens's book A Classical Riding Notebook (Kenilworth Press) now sadly out of print. We thank Michael for permission to reproduce this valuable section.

Crookedness in the horse has been recognised as a serious fault for hundreds of years. Back in the seventeenth century the Duke of Newcastle wrote:

I take it to be a great vice, when a horse does not go as well to one hand as to the other; and I have seen very few that do so; but if you punctually follow my method, your horses will go to perfection, and as well to one hand as the other, so that you will never see any difference.

There are three important considerations relating to straightness:

In single track work the hind feet must follow directly in the tracks of the fore feet rather than stepping to one side to avoid the discomfort of carrying and propelling the weight.

When moving on a circular track the horse must bend himself in a continuous curve towards the direction in which he is moving; the tighter the circle the tighter the bend required. This involves curving the neck, turning the shoulders, and engaging the inside hind leg. With the exception of the neck and tail the spine of the horse is relatively rigid, and is capable of very little lateral flexion.

The horse must not lean towards one shoulder or one hip so that one limb bears more weight than its neighbour.

All horses by nature tend to be crooked to some extent, and if proper attention is not given to these matters then the musculature will develop asymmetrically and the problem will become chronic. A horse is chronically crooked if any part of his body is stiffer or weaker than the corresponding part on the other side. In this case a longer period of time devoted to appropriate remedial gymnastic exercises will be needed before straightness can be established.

When the horse is equally easy to ride on either rein then he is straight. The straight horse turns right and left with equal facility, his hind limbs are equally well developed in their powers of flexion, weight support, and propulsion, and he takes an even contact with the bit on both sides of his mouth. Crookedness will be more marked at times when the horse is fresh or excited.

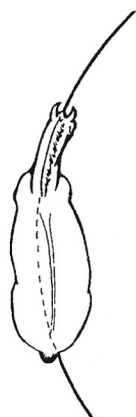
One-sidedness reveals itself to the rider in a number of different ways, not the least of which is that the contact with the bit feels firmer on the stiff side, so much so that the rider may pull the bit out of the mouth on that side by as much as two inches. Consequently many riders imagine that the seat of crookedness lies in the mouth; some very eminent riders have been misguided in this way. It is easy to prove that the problem is not confined to the mouth. Fix the reins to cavesson rings instead of to the bit, and the contact will feel just as uneven as it did before!

Causes of Crookedness

- Congenital asymmetry.
- Because of a natural right or left handedness, the horse has a tendency to favour certain limbs.
- When moving alongside a wall the horse may lean towards it with his shoulders so that the hip and shoulder nearest the wall are equidistant from it.
- When working on small circles the horse may lean towards the inside shoulder to avoid bending his body.
- The horse soon discovers that he does not have to work so hard if he goes crookedly, so he tries to do so as an evasion.
- Always leading in hand from the same side. Always mounting from the same side.
- Allowing the horse to choose his favourite leading leg at canter regardless of the aids.
- Always rising to the trot on the same diagonal.
- Rider sitting crookedly.

Signs of Crookedness

- The horse takes a strong contact on one side of his mouth, and a light contact on the other.
- The horse flexes in one direction more easily than the other. On the stiff side his neck muscles are firm, whilst those on the hollow side are slack and less well developed.
- When going large around the arena the horse cuts the corners to avoid flexing or carrying weight on the inside hind leg. This can happen on either the stiff side or the hollow side.
- When riding circles on the hollow side the horse is reluctant to carry any weight on the inside hind leg. Some horses will fall in towards the inside shoulder and execute a very small circle or a pirouette; some will take too much weight on their outside shoulder and carry too little with their inside hind leg, and their haunches will turn slightly inwards. Other horses will try to whip round and turn away in the other direction.
- When riding circles on the stiff side the horse has difficulty in flexing his inside hind leg. Some horses will try to execute a larger circle than the rider requires. If the rider were to let go the reins the horse would cease the circle and turn away in the other direction. Other horses will remain counter-flexed and lean into the circle taking the weight on the inside shoulder.
- When riding on a circular track the horse may bend himself in a discontinuous curve. Usually part of the neck is bent in the wrong direction and the head is brought into line by means of a kink just before the faulty curve, often at the withers. Sometimes both the neck and the body have an incorrect bend but the rider may be fooled because of the angle at the withers.
- When riding in straight lines, the quarters fall in towards the hollow side, and the horse drifts diagonally forwards towards the shoulder on the stiff side.
- On the hollow side the hind leg takes long low strides, whilst on the stiff side the stride is shorter but the hock rises higher.



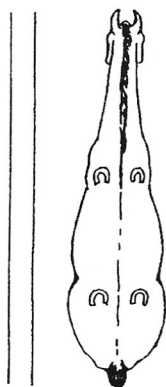
This horse is circling to the right. He is crooked because his body is bent to the left. It is easy to be fooled when the head and neck are correctly positioned.

- The horse strikes off into canter more easily on the side whose shoulder carries the lesser weight.
- At shoulder-in on the hollow side the horse will lean onto his outside shoulder, take too little weight on his inside hind leg, and he will bring the neck in rather than the shoulder.
- At shoulder-in on the stiff side the horse will not engage the inside hind leg sufficiently, and the ply of his body will be insufficient.
- At haunches-in on the hollow side the horse will bring his haunches in at too great an angle. He will keep his body too straight and avoid taking weight on the inside hind leg.
- At haunches-in on the stiff side the horse will not bring the haunches in sufficiently, and he will have difficulty bending his body and engaging the inside hind leg.
- At half pass towards the hollow side the horse will move freely but the crossing of the outside hind leg will be insufficient.
- At half pass towards the stiff side the horse will not move very freely. The outside hind leg will cross over but he will try to counter flex his body and leg-yield instead.
- After dismounting the rider may notice the marks on the saddle show that the horse has succeeded in carrying him more to one side than the other.

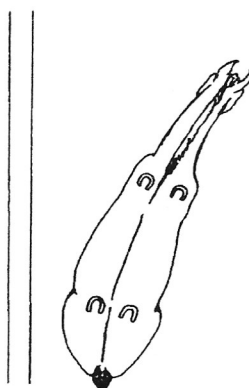
Summary of Requirements

- Keep the horse's shoulders upright and directly in front of his haunches.
- Increase the ply of the horse's body to the stiff side.
- Relax the neck muscles on the stiff side, and build up the neck muscles on the hollow side.
- Increase the engagement of the hind leg on the stiff side, and the weight bearing capacity of the hind leg on the hollow side.
- Encourage the horse to take a firmer contact with the bit on the hollow side, and to stop leaning on the bit on the stiff side.

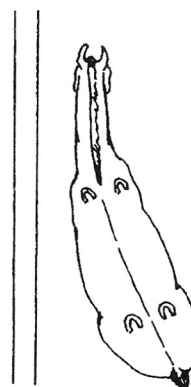
Correct positioning



On a single track

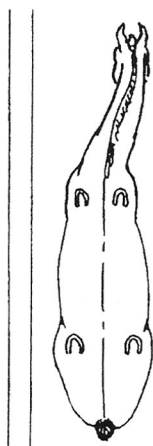


At shoulder-in

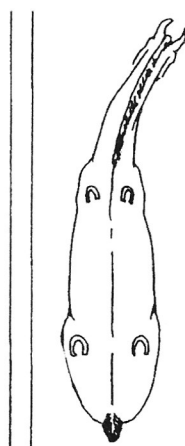


At haunches-in

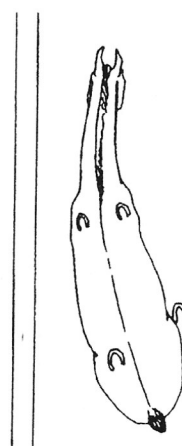
Positional faults



Incorrect neck bending



Bringing the neck in to evade the shoulder-in



Crooked horse in single track with disengaged right hind leg

In part 2 of Straightening the Horse in the next issue of Tracking-up, Michael Stevens discusses techniques for straightening the horse.