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The Reason d'Etre Of Classical Training

by Sylvia Loch

'WHY "CLASSICAL"?' members of the public want to know, as they gather together at the beginning of a classical training demonstration. 'What is going to be different about this and why?'

'Wait and see!' responds the organiser, with the air of one who knows and has seen the light, but is eager to share it with others.

People are not stupid and after three or four sessions with three or four different horse and rider combinations they, too, are beginning to see the light. For many, the answer comes as a revelation – this way of riding contrasts sharply from the accepted standards seen in all too many schools, arenas and yards nowadays. For others, however, there may be no difference since they are already on the same track.

The main object of classical training (under whatever term or guise) is that the horse shows improvement, the rider shows improvement and that all has been accomplished in a disciplined way but without pressure. It is the watchers themselves who confirm that it is not so 'different', merely of a higher standard and more harmonious.

There is also a certain purity, a lightness and consistency of style about the methods used.

In fact, it is hard to see exactly what is being done since good classical schooling works on the same principles as those which can be applied to any sport, from gymnastics and golf, to swordsmanship and skating. It is all about the subtle use of weight and gravity (weight aids) to bring about a cause and effect – in this case on the physiology of the horse. For this to be successful, the trainer needs a sound knowledge of the anatomy, central nervous system and reflex points of both horse and rider. One simply cannot work in balance without the equal participation of the other.

Nevertheless, all this should be achieved in such a succinct and sympathetic way that few, even the horse, realise what is happening. In fact the horses look pleasantly calm.

So what is the proof of the pudding? Spectacular piaffes, flying changes or collection? These may be appropriate at a certain level but are only of merit if achieved without force. Nevertheless, classical riding can be practised at any stage and ideally should start from day one. Thus, from novice to advanced level, the ground rules of the chosen discipline should remain the same. To the classical rider, this precept is carved in stone – nothing learned should have to be unlearned. Training is progressive and the foundation building blocks must remain firmly in place.

It is flawed thinking to believe that classical riding is restricted to dressage. A good jumping or event horse can be classically trained and often is by people who would not necessarily describe themselves as 'classical'. You could say the same about certain cutting horses or polo ponies, although, sadly, these seem to be in the minority. Yet it should be an obvious fact to all that the best horses in life and those who last the longest and stay the soundest will be those who have learned to come into balance through correct training. Exercises will have been introduced to build up the right muscles and mobilise the correct joints in a way which allows the horse to work in confidence and happiness. Muscles simply do not function correctly if a horse is tense or nervous. As with humans, the muscle fibres become taut, over-tense and finally block, and then all manner of physical problems leading to injury may develop. It is the horse who has emerged mentally relaxed and happy from the schooling process who will give us his athletic and physical best. The horse who has learned to trust and respond not because it is demanded of him but because we make it possible for him will repay us with the most fulfilling partnership.

To help the reader determine what distinguishes the classical from the non-classical rider, teacher or trainer, let us now look at some obvious differences in style and method. You may well recognise people you know here in both contexts and perhaps you are already working with someone who is an out-and-out classicist, even although they do not describe themselves as such. If this is the case, stick to them like glue! On the other hand, there are those who call themselves classical and who prance about practising a vague parody of High School with limp reins and unconnected horses, who are equally quite *unclassical*. Avoid them like the plague ... owning a classical horse is not the same as teaching the classical method!

Here are some aspects which will help you to judge for yourself:

1. Throughout each training session, **the classical trainer** will be looking to build on the previous lesson. He will seek freedom of movement coming through from behind and under the saddle. He will wish to see the impulsion flowing forward through a liberated forehand, but never at the expense of balance. He will also desire an absence of tension in the equine body and one of the first requirements will be for the horse to bend more through the girth. The horse will be asked to yield softly through the poll and jaw, not by shortening his neck, tilting his head or dropping behind the vertical but by relaxation in these areas. The degree to which this is asked will only be commensurate with the horse's level of training. Figurework will be introduced from an early age with large circles, loops and turns requested to encourage bending and stretching on both reins, and in the early days this will be done in walk. He will particularly wish to see the horse's neck freely stretching forward and away from the wither in all movements so that the poll remains the highest point (except in short sessions of deep work which is done on soft reins and with an open jowl and never with the use of contraptions.) There will be many periods of walk on a long rein. The result of this type of training will be a horse who increases the musculing over the entire topline and particularly in the back and loin area.

The non-classical trainer will want to see the horse working in a fixed outline between hand and leg irrespective of the horse's age. A shortened neck where the poll is not always the highest point is the hallmark of bad training. This tends to drop the horse onto his shoulders since the flow of energy from behind is fractured. Too much attention is paid to work on straight lines often with the horse going faster and faster in the pursuit of mistaken impulsion. Most of the lesson will be taken up with trot and scant attention will be paid to balancing the horse in walk. Deep work will be done on taut reins and often with the use of some form of draw or running rein to 'help a little'. The result of this form of schooling will eventually hollow the equine back and build up resistance in the neck which may be over-muscled under the gullet and in the scalenus area.

2. **The classical trainer** wants the rider to sit taller, more centrally and quieter thereby encouraging the horse to come confidently into balance. The pupil is taught how to flex through the back whilst the pelvis remains vertical and centrally balanced over a wide base of support in the deepest part of the saddle. The seat should scarcely appear to move and certainly not to tilt to and fro. The rider sits over his stirrups so that gravity flows through him in an unconstricted way. It is the controlled projection of the energy through the rider's waist which frees the horse up through the back (see Nuno Oliveira's 'waist to hands' concept in his book *Reflections on Equestrian Art*).

The non-classical trainer mistakenly confuses thrust and power in the horse with thrust and power in the rider. (Little wonder small lady riders often feel themselves to be totally inadequate when working with such a person and often suffer back pain.) The words 'drive the horse on' are prevalent in this lesson and the rider is encouraged to sit behind the vertical which may hollow the horse and create tail swishing. It also discourages the hind legs from wanting to step underneath. Riders who lean back too much will sag through the upper body which encourages head nodding. This continual displacement of the rider's weight distracts the horse, makes it harder for him to remain in balance and blurs the other aids, for example, the legs.

3. **The classical trainer** encourages the pupil to minimise the aids so that the horse will concentrate and learn to move from a featherlight request of the hand and the 'breath of the boot'. (After all, if horse can feel a fly on his back, why not a succinct human aid?) The rider is taught to feel with the fingers from a hand which remains quiet, never pulls back but remains forward and in place. The rider is shown exactly where and how to apply his legs and to know the difference between an impulsion-giving request (generally a swift tap) and a leg which says 'stop' or 'sideways' (generally a mild squeeze or a push; although the horse is expected to know the difference, it appears many riders do not!) The rider is encouraged to work with open hips allowing the legs to remain toned and in contact around the horse but without tension. It is this unconstricted cladding of the legs which allows the horse to move more 'through', straight and off the leg from behind.

The non-classical trainer advocates stronger and stronger leg aids, bigger and sharper spurs and so many pounds of weight in the hand. The hand often moves backward and sometimes to and fro to bend the horse's neck from side to side. This damages the trapezius muscles at the base of the neck. Often the rider is told to open the knees and turn in the calves and 'kick on'. Such action, generally involving a lot of movement and much displacement of the rider's weight, is disastrous to the balance of both horse and rider. In addition, squeezing and kicking tend to block the horse in every stride.

4. **The classical trainer** encourages the rider to 'lead the dance' so that the horse follows him into each and every movement. A quiet position allows the horse to balance under his weight – not the other way round. The validity of weighting the seatbones, weighting a stirrup etc. is explained whilst all the time encouraging an upright, proud and open upper body. The rider learns to adopt a commanding position with the feeling that he is closer to standing in the saddle with bent knees

(read Xenophon), rather than reclining backwards.

The non-classical trainer always talks about 'following the horse' in every movement which generally manifests itself in a nodding skull, busy hands, busy seat and busy legs – an altogether different sight. He is not particularly concerned about the rider's posture, altogether missing the point that horses generally mirror their riders down to the finest tiny detail.

5. ***The classical trainer** concentrates on correcting the rider and not the horse, on the premise that when the rider is correct the horse will have a chance.*

The non-classical trainer will be quick to pinpoint the horse's weaknesses and tell the rider to correct them, often without pointing out what deficiency in the rider is actually causing these problems.

6. ***The classical trainer** will stop and reward the horse after completing a difficult task and will not automatically ask for it again in the same session so that horse and rider do not risk ending on a bad note.*

The non-classical trainer becomes greedy for success and will often demand that the same task is repeated again and again. Often horse and rider get tired and so the lesson ends with a bad memory for the horse. Rewards tend to be frowned on.

One could go on and on. Suffice to say there are many more differences between the classical and non-classical and some are less obvious than others although generally the horse will tell you what he thinks.

If all this sounds very pie-in-the-sky, I can only say 'come and watch'. The proof of the pudding has to be in the eating and I have gone through several doubting phases in my own life before being totally convinced that what I have learned with my own horses worked with all horses. In the early days, being naturally suspicious, particularly when it came to received truths from the past, I often doubted what I was doing and with some trepidation put myself at the mercy of the four winds of the earth. Perversely, it was the success of the foreign clinics, particularly in the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and France that seemed to attract the home crowd. The books too of course, but more than anything the experience of working on so many different riders – whatever their horse – proved that the age old principles and the fine-tuning of the aids studied over so many years – really did work and provided all the answers.

If this sounds arrogant, this truly is not the case. I watch many trainers train and always hope to acquire something new and have more doors opened which sometimes happens and sometimes does not. I certainly do not regard myself as the only proponent of classical riding and have many like-minded colleagues worldwide, but it was a lovely endorsement when I was made an Instructor of Portugal by the Portuguese National Federation a few years ago. To help put pupils and instructors together and provide a forum for this way of riding, I continue to run the Classical Riding Club which has now been going almost 17 years. As an Independent Partner of the British Horse Society this should be self-sufficient, but the reality is it costs us dear in terms of time, money and energy. I know that our ethos and Charter has changed attitudes to riding and dressage worldwide but without the support of more Members it is getting increasingly hard to keep going. So tell your friends!

So where does classical fit into the modern world? I think the London Olympics give the clue. There was a sea change in the top riders, led I am proud to say by our British team and their happy horses. And it was about time! There was CRC, promoting something as old as the hills, yet as appropriate today as the winning Grand Prix at Greenwich – and finally, finally people were seeing the difference. It should go without saying that the age-old and traditional principles have always been available; but it has taken rather a long time for the world to wake up to them. But at least it is happening – and that is what matters.

For me, it's been a journey of conviction. There are still riders out there who need help, and this will continue for a very long time. While the top dressage riders can access good training, the grass roots need more help than ever before. Yet all they need to do is look! The classical message was actually presented in very simple language in my old Pony Club Manual but I had to go to Portugal to have it explained! Too often we overlook what should be plain to see – the reason why those solid golden rules were written down in the first place.

Looking around today there are too many horses struggling between uncertain guidelines. Gadgets are on the increase and so are resistances. Sore backs are the most common modern ailment of all and to me there is a very obvious link. Ironically perhaps, it is the horses that go cross-country and hunt who often look the happiest since at least their riders get off their backs and allow them to go forward. I might add that I have seen some of the quietest pairs of hands in the hunting field although I will probably get shouted at for generalising. Nevertheless, for those who truly care about their horse, perhaps the time has come to think classical.

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Straightening The Horse Part 2

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.

Techniques for Straightening the Horse

Establishing straightness in the horse can be a slow process taking months or even years. This is because the horse has to get into the habit of carrying himself properly, and he has to build up the muscles that will enable him to do so.

Generally it is not a good idea to work more on the stiff side than the hollow side. Both sides of the horse have problems which need attention.

Rein Contact

One of the most effective strategies is never to take a firm contact on the rein of the stiff side.

Some horses take such an uneven contact on the bit that it is almost impossible to get a contact at all on the hollow side. The remedy is to walk the horse, holding only the rein of the hollow side. He will eventually tire of turning his head to avoid the contact, and will stretch his neck and find the bit. This should be rewarded by yielding and by stroking his neck.

When circling towards the stiff side the rider will be tempted to take a firm contact on the inside rein to make the horse bend in the correct direction and to make him turn onto a small enough circle. When circling towards the hollow side the temptation will be to take a firm contact on the outside rein to prevent the horse from falling in.

If the rider does take up this contact on the stiff side then it will give the horse something to lean on. He will continue to move crookedly and one side of his mouth will become deadened into the bargain. In time the horse will get even more one-sided. Instead the rider should use a stronger inside leg and more inside seat pressure combined with a contact on the rein of the hollow side. This will encourage the horse to use his hind limbs more evenly.

The straight horse can be ridden between the inside leg and the outside rein; but this does not apply to the crooked horse. The rider should always encourage the horse to take a contact on the soft side.

A Common Problem

Perhaps the most common instance of crookedness is seen when the horse allows his quarters to fall in. This usually occurs at canter. When the horse leans towards the wall with his shoulders in this way he should be straightened by bringing his shoulders in with both reins, supported by pressure from the outside leg - the aids are similar to those that would be used for a step or two of a turn on the haunches at walk. The rider must not use his inside leg behind the girth to push the haunches out to the shoulders. This would not make the inside hind leg engage properly or carry its full share of weight, and the horse would remain crooked.

The counter canter is a good exercise to practise with the horse whose quarters fall in at canter. At counter canter there is usually no evasion.

The haunches are more likely to fall in when working towards the rein of the hollow side. This is due to weakness in the inside hind leg. Transitions into canter with the stiff side leading will help to strengthen this weakness because then it is the weaker leg that is obliged to propel the horse forwards into canter.

Use of Lateral Work

In addition to encouraging engagement and suppling the shoulders, the shoulder-in is also marvelous for its effectiveness in straightening the horse. When practised towards the hollow side it helps the horse to angulate his body in the direction opposite to the one he prefers, and it obliges him to carry weight on his inside hind leg.

If when working on circles the horse crosses his inside hind leg over the outside one, the exercise of shoulder-out on the same circle will be beneficial.

To straighten the horse who leans onto his inside shoulder when circling towards the stiff side, work on larger circles in slight shoulder-in, or "shoulder-fore" position. To prevent counter flexion, temporarily fix the inside hand on the saddle or the thigh, and release the pressure on the outside rein until the shoulders straighten up again. The horse should then be encouraged to take a contact on the outside rein. If this method is unsuccessful take a contact on the outside rein, and combined with pressure from the inside leg on the girth, take and give gently with the inside rein in the direction of the

(read Xenophon), rather than reclining backwards.

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outside breast. When the shoulders have been made upright they will from time to time tend to lean in again. This can be nipped in the bud by raising the inside hand so that the rein acts, without pulling, in the direction of the rider's outside breast, and by simultaneously increasing the pressure of the inside leg. It is often easier to straighten the horse if his head and neck are first given a lower position.

When working in the direction of the stiff side, shoulder-in helps to improve the lateral bending, encourages the horse to take a contact with the bit on the hollow side, and counteracts his tendency to drift towards the shoulder of the stiff side. Haunches-in to the stiff side is a particularly effective exercise because it encourages angulation and lateral bending which are opposite to those preferred by the horse.

When working in the direction of the hollow side the rider must take care in haunches-in that the horse bends correctly and carries enough weight on the inside hind leg. If the horse moves along at an angle without bending his body or loading the inside hind leg then the exercise is best avoided as it will only encourage crookedness. At shoulder-in the rider must be careful that the horse does not over-bend his neck towards the hollow side, lean towards his outside shoulder, and take too firm a contact on the outside rein. Sometimes this fault is easier to correct by interrupting the shoulder-in, riding a volte, and then proceeding with a new shoulder-in.

When riding half passes towards the stiff side, first position the horse as for a shoulder-in. This will discourage the horse from leaning on the inside shoulder and counter flexing. A half pass ridden at an energetic rising trot will increase the horse's facility in moving towards the stiff side.

When riding half passes towards the hollow side ride them at a steep angle so they are more like a full pass. This will increase the crossing of the outside hind leg. Starting from a haunches-in position can also increase the crossing of the outside hind leg. After practising lateral exercises such as these it is important to ride the horse actively forwards again to restore his impulsion and regularity.

Additional Hints for the Rider

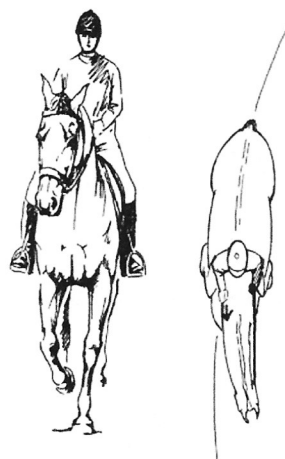
Horses can be remarkably cunning at avoiding the rider's efforts to straighten them. Often it can be an advantage to carry two schooling whips.

The rider must always be aware of how evenly his horse is distributing the weight and how symmetrically he moves. Only by becoming more sensitive to the imperfections can the rider hope to correct them. At first, while performing the easier exercises the rider may not be aware of any crookedness, but as he progresses to more advanced work he will begin to notice that the horse carries himself quite differently when working on the opposite rein. Then if the rider returns to the easier exercises he will be able to feel that the crookedness does in fact manifest itself at that level: the rider will have become more sensitive and will be better able to straighten his horse.



Quarters falling in at canter

Correct by bringing shoulders in with both reins, supported by pressure from the outside leg



Correcting the horse who leans towards the stiff side

To prevent counter flexion, temporarily fix inside hand on saddle or thigh

To correct, ride shoulder-fore.