

From Stretching To Collection – The Start Of The Work

SOME EXCERPTS FROM DRESSAGE QUESTIONS ANSWERED (ARCO PUBLISHING 1984) BY CHARLES DE KUNFFY

(SELECTED BY SYLVIA LOCH WITH THE KIND PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR AND HIS PUBLISHERS)

Let us suppose that your goal includes developing collected paces but your horse is not yet ready to produce truly collected strides. You may practise many different exercises that perfect collection, but not yet ride your horse in collection...

Riders go wrong by forgetting that only that which is built from the haunches forward towards the bit and moves freely through a vibrating back succeeds. Collection cannot occur by pulling on the reins; cannot be cajoled by lifting the horse's head up, shortening his neck, or any other hand-riding method; and a horse cannot move when being held in front and pushed from behind, only when being yielded to when driven from behind. The name of the game is self-carriage! That is the goal.

Riders should remember that plus one and minus one beget zero; pulling on the horse and kicking him simultaneously create nothing but a tense, confused, alarmed horse with an open jaw, rigid back and fast and pushing but mincingly short steps. The antithesis of the elastic horse we wish to create!...

The greatest enemy of collection is the misguided belief that the horse's front end (head and neck) should be lifted high by the rider's hands (reins) in order to lighten the forehand. The simultaneous shortening of the horse's neck produces pain and consequently resistance and false carriage. When superficially perceived, a collected horse may strike some people as being distinguishable by its elegantly arched neck and high head carriage. They do not realise that this is not the cause but rather the by-product of collection. Collection takes place in the haunches because it depends upon the horse's ability to engage the joints in his quarters supplely. *The misunderstanding that by raising the horse's head one can collect the haunches is analogous to putting the cart in front of the horse. In other words, such belief is based on a confusion of cause and effect – confusing the symptomatic result with the fundamentals that caused it.*

Let us examine an analogy. You want to sweep some crumbs into a dustpan. As you sweep the crumbs with the broom toward the dustpan, you must recede with it slowly in order to gather the crumbs. The ratio of the speed of the receding dustpan to the speed of the vigorous broom is the key to the success of picking up all the crumbs efficiently. Both of your arms are working to get the crumbs collected into the dustpan. Both move the crumbs forward. One arm with the dustpan is 'tempting' the crumbs to arrive by receding from them, while the other arm with the broom is 'urging' the crumbs to go forward into the pan. This activity suggests collecting – in that it is pushed forward towards a receptacle that is not stationary but yielding. The collection occurs without anything ever stopping the motion of the crumbs forward.

Similarly, we collect the horse's energies that generate in his quarters. *We cannot shape the horse, only his energies.* We cannot collect him by shortening his neck, twisting his jaws sideways or lifting his head up; that would be reshaping the horse by force. We cannot carve or cast his body. We cannot shape him in his stall. *We can only ride the horse's energies into collection but never his bulk.* The energies are supplied by the haunches and shaped by the half-halts of the rider. The rider is the transformer of energies received from the haunches through the back. Energies absorbed (and understood) are fed back to the horse in a modified form.

To find and feel the correct ratio between driving the quarters and restraining the progression of the forehand without tensing the rein contact is the art of collecting. The half-halt is not named in vain, for half of that aid should ask for halt and when the horse is responding by gathering itself towards the halt, the other half of the half-halt sends him forward as if the rider had changed his mind. The horse cannot understand the command to collect unless at first the aids are emphasized. He should be asked to 'come back' on his haunches and when he almost halts he should be restarted by the continuation of rhythmic aids. As all half-halts are resolved by yielding, do remember that after the transition to collection is performed the horse must continue in self-carriage.

The most severe problem with collection occurs when the rider thinks it to be resident in the horse's neck and head carriage. *We are trained to manipulate by hands and verify the results by sight.* We always 'fix things' with our hands and grope to balance and steady and grasp to feel in contact with whatever we are doing. We

watch intently and visually 'feel' things happen. These acquired attributes hinder us in riding in general and collection in particular. Riders find the horse's head and neck easily accessible to the aids, for the hands through the reins maintain a physical connection with the head of the horse. The rein represents many powers through leverage and pressure that can cause pain to the horse. Through the reins the horse's head becomes a 'doer's' paradise because as soon as the hands 'do', the horse's head visibly reacts. Manipulation checks out visibly.

The haunches, on the other hand, cannot be directly touched and manipulated. We have not yet invented (and hopefully never will) a mechanical device that would lift the horse's hind hooves and enable man – through straps or something – to jerk them forward or upward. We have our seat and leg influences acting on the horse at his middle (back and sides). Those areas are distant from his haunches which are of course, behind and below the areas we directly contact with the seat and legs. There is no actual, physical connection between the rider and the horse's haunches. Yet, we must clearly communicate information to the horse that will affect the action of his haunches precisely.

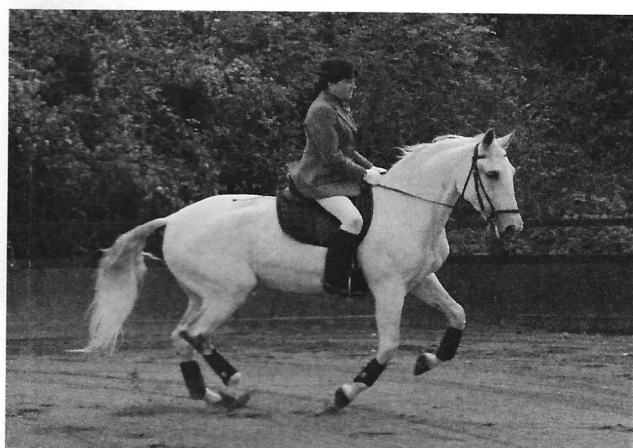
To achieve a sensitive communication process with the horse takes a long time of consistent and insistent aiding. *The horse's acceptance of the aids must be diversified and his submission to the aids well confirmed* in order to collect effectively. The driving aids of the legs and seat are vague to the horse because they are conceptual aids! Having no direct physical force acting on the areas they address, these aids will only be obeyed by the horse after he makes the conceptual leap of understanding their intentions! Thus, we must first convince the horse that when we do something with our legs to his sides, we really wish to affect the action of his hind legs, his source of motive force. To transfer sensations felt at his sides and through the saddle to mean action in his legs is a conceptual leap for an animal.

When the rider's leg actions are ignored by the horse's haunches, the conceptual leap has not occurred and the meaning should be emphasized by means of the whip. The whip is the 'spark' that jumps a thought from the rider's mind to his horse's mind (from a live battery to a dead one?). The stimulus of the whip invigorates the haunches and as instinct suggests flight, the haunches become active. The horse then begins to understand that the legs' demands must energise the haunches.

However the instinct to take flight might create a new challenge. The horse might misinterpret the driving aids (particularly when supplemented by the whip) as a wish by the rider for more speed, and turn to running. *Speed is the enemy of impulsion and engagement.* By speeding the rhythm of the footfalls, strides must become short and the motion choppy and tense. Impulsion depends on slow but ample rotation of the joints which thereby allow economically efficient strides – long, ground-gaining strides.

The horse is on the aids when he submits to the driving aids without rushing from them. Upon receiving leg aids, a well-trained horse will either engage or bend (which is based on engagement). He should never run from or jump from the legs. For only a horse with 'staying power' will lengthen or collect his strides in rhythm and bend rather than drift sideways away from the legs with a stiff body.

The half-halt is indispensable for producing these results. Therefore the half-halt is a near synonym to dressage riding.



The half-halt applied in canter clearly shows the horse engaging through the hip, stifle, hock and fetlock joints. (Sylvia Loch with Lusitano mare Queijada: photo by Nathalie Todd)

Look out for Charles de Kunffy's latest book *The Ethics And Passions Of Dressage* which has been considerably updated and re-edited since its first successful launching in 1994. This can be ordered direct from Xenophon Press (<http://shop.xenophonpress.com/The-Ethics-and-Passions-of-Dressage-by-Charles-de-Kunffy-6005.htm>)

When Lightness is a Hollow Word

PART 2

BY LISA SCAGLIONE

Encouraging a horse to trust the rider's hand and to *seek* the rider's hand is one of our first priorities in schooling the young horse. If the rider's hand is constantly shifting and moving about in dramatic fashion, the horse comes to distrust the rider's hand and will disengage from the contact. To teach the horse to trust and seek our hand we need a stable hand. Let's, for arguments sake, say a young horse has suddenly thrown himself onto his forehand leaning heavily on our hand, what do we do? It is enough to momentarily close both hands so that the horse feels the unpleasant action of the bit that he himself has caused, for him to learn that it is better to carry himself with reasonable balance – that is, in the balance appropriate for his level of schooling. A premise of all Classical dressage, including French, is that the rider's aid should never be greater than the resistance of the horse. Together with this, the action of the rider should cease the moment the horse yields. In this manner the horse is rewarded for the correct response. The aid may be repeated as often as necessary, but it is never repeated randomly, and never with more force than necessary. A young horse of average to good conformation who has been properly started should need nothing more than a momentary closing of both hands followed by an *immediate* yielding of the aid (slightly opening the fingers) in order to be encouraged to carry himself in the balance appropriate for his level of schooling. This aid will be replaced by the half halt with the outside rein as the horse is more able to bend and is ridden more with the outside rein.

Is there ever an occasion for a more dramatic action of the hands? A horse of heavy conformation (Draft cross or Cob) or one in need of re-schooling (due to having been ridden collapsed over his shoulders and on his forehand) might not respond to the above described aid and might bear down with enough strength to require a stronger aid. Again, the aid should not exceed what is necessary to obtain a proper yielding from the horse. In nearly all instances, raising the hands a couple inches and widening them slightly is sufficient to request the horse to 'pick himself up'. This lifting of both hands needs to be performed with precise timing both in the execution and in the release, and it is imperative that the contact not be disturbed (lost or altered). Otherwise, what might be a useful aid may cause the horse to distrust our hand and disturb the contact. Having described this aid, I should say that I find it rarely necessary. When using a rein aid to ask the horse to carry himself, even a very strong horse will nearly always respond to a half halt on the outside rein performed with a quick slightly upward motion (not backward) sometimes performed with a rotation of the wrist (fingers up) and then immediately released. I should point out that even this half halt is replaced in time by the mere closing and opening of the fingers, which is performed simultaneously with the seat aid.

So what about that all-important relaxation of the jaw? Is it necessary to literally lift the bit up in the horse's mouth in order to achieve a softly yielding jaw? The French refer to the softness, or mobility of the horse's jaw, as the *Mise en Main*. Baucher achieved the *Mise en Main* by first manipulating the reins from the ground until the horse literally opened his mouth – called Flexions. He followed this by doing the same from the saddle at halt, at walk and at trot. When performed by an expert hand at precisely timed moments, this was said to assist the rider in asking the horse to release muscular resistance further down the body, by first releasing tension in the muscles of his jaw. But, is this excessive manipulation of the horse's mouth profitable, or even necessary to achieve a softly yielding jaw? Let's again let General Decarpentry answer that. In the chapter devoted to the *Mise en Main* in *Academic Equitation* he writes about the effect of excessive or improperly performed Flexions (particularly when practiced by followers of Baucher, including some of Baucher's students, not just his imitators). He writes: 'The excessive use of these flexions makes the jaw become more supple than the rest of the body. It yields too quickly and too easily, before the rest of the muscular system relaxes... Because of this excess, which can be aggravated further by the trainer's lack of skill in the practice of flexions, the value of the yielding of the jaw is much diminished and can be very small indeed if produced by a pinching of the spurs... For the less experienced, even when advised by the former [the experienced], it is often too late to rectify this completely. In most cases it is therefore prudent to achieve the *Mise en Main* indirectly, by means of comprehensive gymnastics which will lead the horse to use his forces as harmoniously as possible in all the movements required of him.'¹

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¹ General Decarpentry, *Academic Equitation*, trans. Nicole Bartle, ed. J.A. Allen & Co.(London, 1977) pp.64-65

Once again, we find that if performed without absolute exact timing and feel, not only will the benefit be lost, the practice will undermine the correct schooling of the horse until it is 'too late to rectify this completely'. So how then do we achieve this softly yielding jaw? The very same way we increase the horse's ability to carry himself, 'by means of comprehensive gymnastics which lead the horse to use his forces as harmoniously as possible'. This is Classical dressage. The very same process described above to school the horse toward collection also encourages the mobility of the horse's jaw (and just as importantly of his poll). I think it also important to define just what we mean when we say the mobility of the jaw. For Baucher and his followers, the Flexions were performed until the horse literally opened his mouth. A much more traditional idea of a soft and mobile jaw is a horse who gently moves his jaws in the same manner as when he is chewing. We look for evidence of salivation as a confirmation of this. Who amongst us associates a gaping mouth with softness and lightness? And if we do wish the horse to gently 'chew' on the bit, it is the light play of the fingers which encourages this. If I feel the horse tense his jaw on one side or the other, I gently vibrate my fingers for a fraction of a second **without moving my hand** and as always, I cease this aid when the horse responds. This results in an immediate softening of the horse's jaw on this side. I can alternate or repeat this aid as necessary, and the better my timing and feel the more quickly the horse will respond, but it is never necessary to use a more forceful action. Indeed, a more forceful action may lead the horse to the excessive play of his jaws, which actually prevents this aid from acting on the rest of the horse's muscular system, the ultimate purpose of this aid. I should add here that one should never perform this action simultaneously on both reins, or the horse might respond with tension rather than relaxation.

So what about Lightness – that elusive quality that all covet? I hope it is apparent that in Classical dressage, it is the proper execution of gymnastic exercises, combined with tactful and discreet rider aids, which lead to lightness in the horse: self-carriage in collection. And what if the rider does not have very good timing or feel to achieve this? All the more reason not to use means which, questionable in themselves, depend entirely on tact and feel if they will not do harm! A rider who follows the proper gymnastic training of the horse, but lacks some tact and feel will do no harm to their horse, and they most certainly will make very real progress in time. Not only that, they will come to ride in greater harmony with the horse and this accomplishment in itself is very exciting and gratifying for nearly every rider. When a horse is truly light, he responds as if he can read his rider's mind. The rider achieves this through sensitizing the horse to ever and ever quieter aids, until the aids are so imperceptible they cannot be seen. This is what we perceive as Lightness. This will lead to greater health in the horse, as well as a horse proud and even joyful in his work, one who makes himself available to the rider out of genuine devotion. This harmony and sense of oneness in both movement and in spirit is the only true lightness. This is when lightness is not just a hollow word.

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