

Sylvia

Short Necks and High Marks ~ BY UWE SPENLEN

Former dressage rider Uwe Spenlen is an 'I' dressage judge who has judged at top competitions in the United States and throughout Europe. The material that follows is from a presentation he made in Summer 1997 at a riders' clinic in Aspen, Colorado.

SOME time ago, at an annual meeting for German FEI dressage judges in Warendorf, Germany, the national coach, Jo Hinermann, led a comprehensive discussion on the topic of 'short necks.' The discussion of this highly risky and touchy subject encouraged me to speak of it today. Let me point out that I speak primarily as a judge, but also as a link between riders, judges and trainers.

Sometimes, it may seem that our judges' comments and scores are wrong, but the same applies to riders who often show us that the training they are doing at home is wrong. Believe me, I don't like to sound schoolmasterish, and I admit that I, too, have been guilty of the mistake of 'forming a horse by hand.' I hope that by discussing this important problem, riders and trainers will concentrate on the basic training of their horses and stay on the correct path, which will lead to successful results.

Very often in the last two or three years, I have watched horses at national and international competitions who were 'short in the neck' during the whole test. They were too closed (in the frame), too tight and distinctly behind the vertical. And the big surprise: both the horse and the rider got high marks.

By 'closed' or 'tight' I mean that when I viewed the horse from the side, I didn't see a freely carried, nicely elevated neck with a harmonious bending from the withers up to the poll. We all know that the poll must be the highest point of the neck and the nose line must be slightly in front of the vertical at all times. Otherwise, it is a grave defect for which we are unable to give high marks.

The reasons for this 'short neck' are (1) contact (Anlehnung) that is too strong, and (2) contact is too loose. Imagine the characteristics of a horse who is moving well:

He moves forward and pushes off with active, powerful, hindquarters. The impulsion (*Schwung*) produced will be transmitted from a relaxed, swinging back, forward into a harmoniously carried and bending neck with a soft poll, into supple, waiting and calm hands. Departures from this ideal have serious consequences.

Contact between the hands and mouth that is too strong brings the nose line behind the vertical. The poll is no longer the highest point of the neck. This inevitably leads to dragging hind legs and plodding movements. The reason for this is that the rider has lost control of the horse's hind legs. He restricts the movements because he cannot engage the hind legs. The result is tense, cramped, muscles and a horse who has lost his expression because of insufficient stretching of the back and neck muscles in all paces. In walk, the horse is blocked. He loses his ability to cover ground as well as his cadence, elasticity and regularity.

In trot, the horse takes stiff and tense steps with inactive hind legs. Horses can only execute extended trot with a relaxed, swinging back and a distinctly wider frame. Contact that is too strong and brings the nose line behind the vertical results in artificial, tense, irregular steps and/or plodding movement.

In collected canter work, the strides become hasty, short and flat. A distinct uphill canter is no longer visible and the horse moves on the forehand. Contact that is too strong and heavy in collection leads to an extraordinary effect on the horse's abilities: a powerful push-off is nearly impossible.

Often it can be observed, especially in the Grand Prix during the centreline tour with pirouettes, that many horses are forced too much by hand and they are unable to perform a stately, eager, collected canter because the haunches work in the wrong direction. The result, as we often see in the canter pirouettes, is snatching hind legs. Horses lose balance and become slack and, as a result, pivot on the inside hind leg and fall out.

We can also observe the results of this serious mistake in piaffe and passage – snatching hind legs, stamping forelegs or, on the other hand a piaffe with forelegs propping up. A horse attempting piaffe without balance and correct bend of the haunches cannot execute an expressive and active piaffe. It looks laboured and high behind, and a regular, rhythmical stepping of the diagonal pairs of legs is impossible because the rider blocks the rhythm with his hands.

The second cause of the 'short neck' problem is the rein that sags and is too loose. The horse is behind the bit without any contact. He is anxious, but not willing to step forward into the bit. The result is a 'broken' neck at the third cervical vertebra. The horse is overbent, and the poll is not the highest point. Sometimes we can hear these horses grinding on the bit. The rider feels lonely and left behind in his saddle.

Contact that is too loose in combination with a short, tight neck produces similar problems to those already mentioned, because the connection from the horse's hind legs to the back and to the mouth and hands is interrupted. The hind legs are not under control any more so the contact is insecure and unsteady. These horses are often tilted at the poll.

All weak points coming from an unsure, unsteady contact have their roots in the horse's insufficient willingness to stretch the neck and follow the bit. Both faults – contact that is too strong and contact that is too loose – are grave defects in 'submission'. Such horses are not willing to respond to the rider's aids.

Submission is the quality of trust and responsiveness in the rider's aids. The horse waits and listens for all the aids, which really come 'through.' This 'throughness' is the most crucial aspect of equestrian training. A horse shows submission and throughness when he responds to the aids by going forward from behind on straight or curved lines, as well as sideways in all lateral movements; he is well balanced and free of resistance.

A last important point: The fourth mark of the 'collective marks' is given for 'seat and position,' which includes the correct position of the hands and the manner of holding the reins. Pulling, jerking, twitching or tugging moves of the hands negatively influence soft connection and contact. Flat hands or stiff wrists with hands pointing to the outside never lead to supple, flexible handling of the reins. An independent and deep seat is absolutely necessary for the development of steady contact.

Please think it over. No one among us – no judge, instructor or rider – has the right to close his eyes. There is no



An incorrect piaffe – still too often seen at major competitions. (Illustration by Maggie Raynor, from *The Balanced Horse* by Sylvia Loch: Kenilworth Press)

place for personal opinion. Our rules are clear, and we must enforce them against developments and tendencies which are leading us in the wrong direction.

We all have to work together – judges, trainers and riders – so that we will all arrive at the same understanding of dressage riding in a way that establishes the priorities of supple, uphill-going horses with good rhythm, regularity and elasticity in all paces, rather than a technically correct working 'dressage machine'

Uwe Spenlen lives and trains in Germany and travels all over the world to judge, teach and lecture. We are privileged to have him join and support The Classical Riding Club and are grateful for this timely contribution to our CRC literature.

How The Grand Prix Dressage Test Should Be Judged

PART 2 - BY THE LATE PEGGOTY HENRIQUES

THE following guidelines for judges, trainers and riders have been reproduced and edited from an interview in 1989 with the highly respected FEI Judge Nick Williams. It concerns the Grand Prix of that time and is continued from last quarter's *Tracking-up* magazine. We have included the markers only where it helps reader understanding as this Grand Prix test has been replaced.

Canter to Collected Walk with two half-pirouettes to right and left – The transition to collected walk from collected canter should show no trot steps and should be light as a feather. I would expect to observe the quarters looking lower than the withers at that moment if I was specifically looking for it. I would be disappointed in myself however, if I had to look for this sort of detail, for these are the things you assimilate into your subconscious over the years.

Spectators should be aware that Grand Prix level horses are expected to have their croup lower than their wither, due to the bending of the joints of the hind legs as the weight is taken onto them. The more demanding the movement, the more this is observed.

Another severe fault in walk is a broken rhythm. This looks as if the horse is on the verge of jogging! A good collected walk will show balance and rhythm, the legs being raised in a rounded way and placed down without taking a longer stride. The Rule Book (FEI) states that the print of the forefoot should not be over-tracked by the hind foot; a good rule of thumb.

What I am really interested in seeing, is great activity without any hint of irregularity or hurrying. Such a walk will provide the correct springboard for the half-pirouettes. This is when the horse, maintaining the correct sequence of the walk steps and bending slightly in the direction to which he is turning, turns around his inside hind leg.

What I don't like can fill volumes, but it is certainly a faulty pirouette if the bend is incorrect, there is resistance in the mouth, the hind legs cross or step outwards and most particularly the step backwards. It is acceptable if the pivoting hind leg steps a little forward on each stride.

Collected Trot, Half pass left (P-S) Collected Trot, Half pass right (R-V) Collected Trot – Realistically, I am looking for a free, elastic sideways trot that is also forwards. In fact I think forwards-sideways rather than the other way round. What I am adamant about is that there must be sufficient impulsion to keep the trot regular, that the legs must cross and that the horse must not seem to leave his quarters behind. I like to see the horse clearly looking where he is going and the quarter brought to the track to complete the movement neatly.

Also important is how the horse comes through the corner before the half-pass begins, for I do like to see that he is supple. I find it quite acceptable for the rider to position his horse with a slight feel of shoulder-in for a stride or so before the half-pass actually starts.

Now this is one of the places where spectators can have a lot of fun and spot the riders who are trying to pull a fast one by beginning the movement way before the marker, and by doing so give themselves a lot more space! Very naughty in my book! I don't mind them having a try but they shouldn't complain when they get marked down.

Store this one in your mind for marking the Rider Marks at the end!

Change rein in Extended Trot – This will be marked as in the Extended Trot last month....

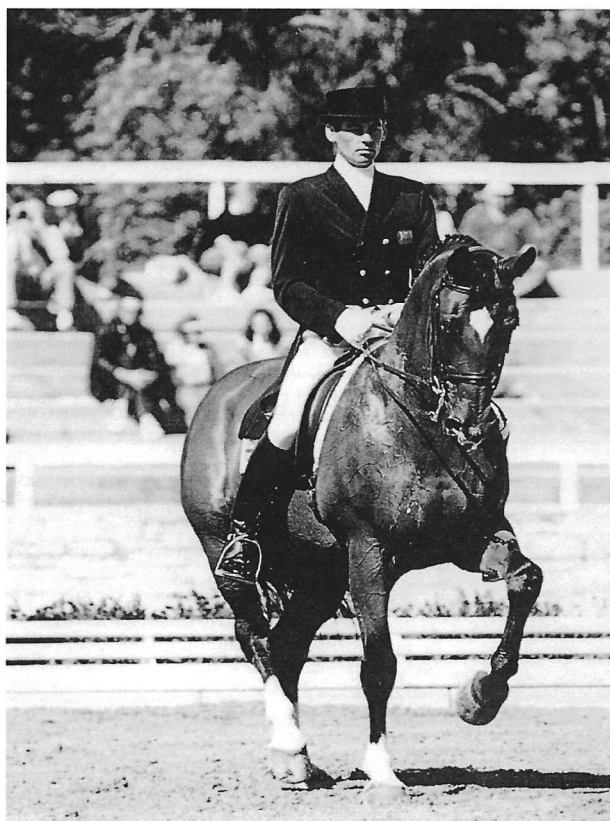
Passage (FAK) - In passage I am looking for a trot which is very much more elevated and has a prolonged moment of suspension. It looks as if the horse is trotting on springs, but not hovering. It is important that the horse continues to move positively forward, without seeming to dwell in the air. I like to see a well-rounded foreleg and the same sort of activity from the hind, though the toe of the hind leg is not so raised. The whole picture should show majestic grace and a harmonious ease of movement.

I am worried if I see tension and strain, for anything except a supple back and well-engaged hindquarters will show as lack of balance, loss of regularity, resistance or, at the worst, crookedness and swinging. It is fairly common to see eye-catching steps with the front legs and a rather modest jog-trot with the hind. That is not my sort of passage. Irregularity and a lack of understanding resulting in tension are the most common mistakes to look out for. This is one of the most beautiful movements if it is done well.

Extended Walk (KXM) – All the same criteria related to the extended walk also relate to the collected, as regards regularity of gait. This time I want to see a horse really marching, going somewhere. I like to have the feeling that he wants to get over the next brow and see if hounds are over the top! Not hurried – mark you – for I am looking for a big over-track and sense of power. I also want to see a lengthening of the frame and a sense of relaxation. I am not too pleased if the rider virtually offers his horse a long rein.

Collected Walk (MCH) – Naturally, the collected walk should be as before, but this time I keep an eye on the transition from the extended walk to the collected and see how well the horse responds to the rider's aids and just what the difference is between the two walks.

Proceed to Passage – (HSI) The transition on its own at H gets a mark and I don't want to see any trot steps in between. Once in passage (for another mark) my heart has to beat a little faster as we're now into the big stuff. Spare a thought for the horse and the rider if watching from the best place to be – the stands! This whole group of movements is known as the piaffe-passage tour, so let's look ahead and see just what has to be judged and considered.



Piaffe 12-15 steps - I

Passage – (IRBX)

Piaffe – (X)

Passage – (XEV)

See what I mean? So many marks to give in such a short space of time! The trouble is those who judge from the stands tend to remember the most brilliant bits of this 'tour' and forget the little mistakes that happen in the beginning and in all the transitions.

The judge has to remember them and give it a try too! It goes like this. Judge the first passage, now watch the transitions into the piaffe, but don't give a mark, not yet. Watch and judge the piaffe, count the steps to make sure they are the right number. Now watch the second

transition, this time out of the piaffe and give a mark for the two! You're now into the second passage and it's the same thing all over again. Getting a bit hot under the collar? I know the feeling.

The piaffe is similar to the passage, except that it must be done on the spot with absolutely no stepping backwards, loss of rhythm, or lack of balance. Now it becomes really important that the horse stays round, on the bit and lowers his croup.

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This is the ultimate in collection and I like to think of the great Portuguese rider Nuno Oliveira who described a good piaffe as being 'like a tennis ball bouncing in cream'. It must look soft, elastic, and easy. No swinging, stiffness, snatching of legs or hollowing of the back. Sometimes you see a horse creeping forward with his hindlegs while staying on the spot with his forelegs. Of course his base gets too short and he loses balance.

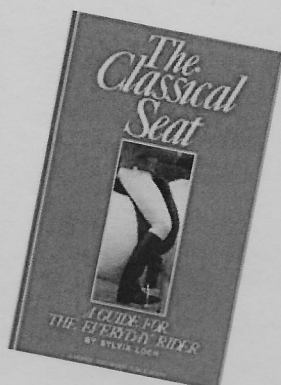
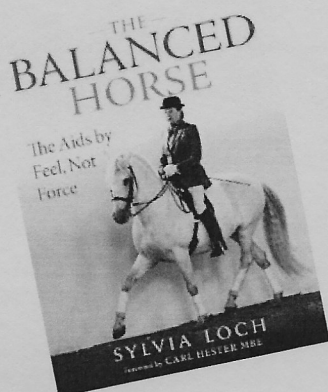
Sometimes the hindlegs have plenty of spring and lift, but the forelegs only mark time. The number of steps should be correct and it is quite easy to count when the piaffe is a good one. Not so easy though when a piaffe is of such a quality that you are not sure whether it has begun or not! As a judge I am wary of the piaffe that shows too many steps. Sometimes the horse does not obey the rider's aids to come out of it!

Now we have to think about the transitions. Out of passage into piaffe, we don't want to see transitional steps in trot, a lack of the true sequence of the trot steps or any sort of resistance. Balance of course is vital but this is often lost in the transitions out of piaffe and into passage.

Let's sum up the transitions by saying that really if you judge them like any other transitions, looking for smoothness, directness and ease, then there won't be anything that is too incorrect.

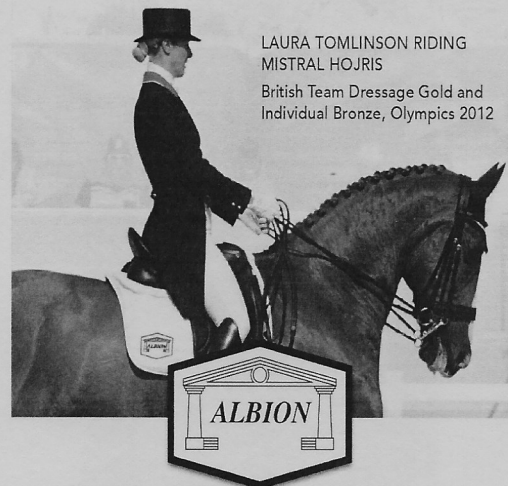
(to be concluded in the next issue)

Signed copies of Sylvia Loch's books *The Balanced Horse* and *The Classical Seat* can be obtained through the Classical Riding Club's website: www.classicalriding.co.uk



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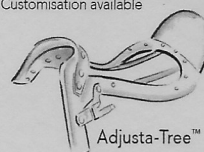
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