

Club Caballo

from classical to competition
from work to pure pleasure ...
dressage is for everyone!



2009 – 2010 COMPETITION SERIES

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WHY RIDING – WHY HORSES?



Figure 1: Black Friesian Stallion

Abstract

Where to start ...

It is question I have asked myself many times over recent years as I strive to become a competent rider. Moments of deep despair have been intertwined with fleeting moments of wonderment and joy as bit by bit I gain my horse's trust and we start to work together and begin to ride in harmony.

My fascination with the horse is life-long: there is something about the horse that touches your very soul and perhaps therein lays the reason for the deep bond that has developed between horse and man over the millennia. Horses appear in many human myths, legends, and religions, and numerous works of art around the world depict the horse, from ancient cave paintings to Roman statues.

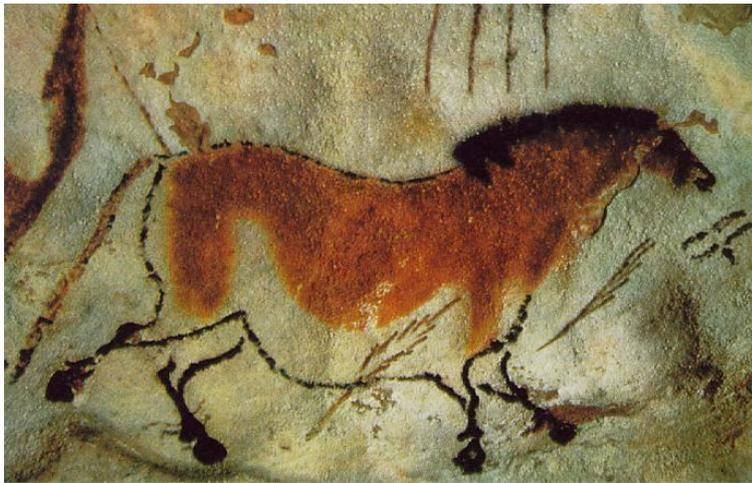
Exploring the question of why we ride and why we ride horses even is going to take me into the realms of fact and fantasy. The question will never be answered but I hope you will be inspired by my findings and random jottings!

WHY RIDING – WHY HORSES?

What is a Horse?

The horse is an animal with a long history. Horses have been closely intertwined with humans for thousands of years, and while they are not as widely used as they once were, they are unlikely to vanish from human society altogether.

Many people are familiar with the horse, as the animals are a ubiquitous part of many societies. Horses have hooves, which makes them ungulates, and they are classified as “odd toed” because each leg has a single toe. They have also developed lengthy manes and tails made from stiff, coarse hair which is used for a number of things, including paintbrushes and bows for musical instruments. Horses come in a range of sizes and colours, and they have a few distinct shapes as well, with some horses being muscular and compact while others are fine boned and lanky.



The formal name for the horse is *Equus caballus*, placing it in the same family as zebras, donkeys, and onagers. These animals represent the survivors of a once much larger and more diverse group of animals; over the centuries, horses and their relatives developed unique adaptations to survive in the environments where they roamed.

Figure 2: Cave Painting - circa 15,000 to 10,000 BC Lascaux, France

The horse is designed for life on the open plains; the animals have several anatomical features which allow them to run extremely quickly, and they are adapted to eat grasses and other plant forage.

Archaeological evidence suggests that many early humans ate horses and used by-products such as hides for shelter and garments. The shift from wild to domesticated horse is a bit difficult to pin down. Some archaeologists believe that the horse was domesticated around 4500 BCE somewhere in Asia, perhaps by tribes in Russia. The domestication of early horses was the first step in thousands of years of coexistence, and it marked a distinct shift in the evolution of the horse, as people started to deliberately select specific traits through crossbreeding, causing distinct breeds of horse to emerge.

Hundreds of horse breeds have been developed all over the world. Some have been bred for strength so that they can work pulling carts and agricultural implements. Others were bred for speed and endurance, so that they could hunt, while some horses have been bred to be extremely intelligent, assisting their owners with tasks ranging from herding cattle to searching for people who are lost. The horse-owning community have developed a very specific language to discuss horses, with terms for everything from the colour of a horse's coat to the shape of its ears. Many horse breeds are quite

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ancient, and some biologists believe that modern horses may be descended from several distinct wild horse populations.

Humans have used horses for work animals in a wide range of applications. Horses pull farm implements; carry riders, transport people and goods in carts, and help to herd other animals. Over time, the horse has become a beloved and iconic figure in many human societies, with people prizing well bred horses and using horses for sport and leisure as well as work. Some modern horses are pets, treated more like members of the family than work animals, while others are shown in competition to showcase their skills or physical attributes.

Timeline

There is a fascinating timeline account of the development of the horse by Beverley Davis, which I would love to summarize here, but it's really for another time: I find the development and history of the horse so fascinating it's far too easy for me to go off-piste as it were! Suffice to say that early ancestors of the horse were roaming the planet around 75 million years ago ... the

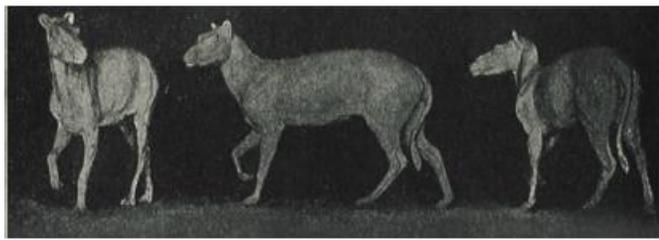


Figure 3: Eohippus from Prague, Czechoslovakia

Equus family appeared around 5 million years ago and continues to the present day. Research shows that the various families of *Equus* split off in the following order: mountain zebra (*E. hippotigris*) first, then the asses, the Damara and Grant zebras, Grevy zebras (*Dolichohippus*), the hemiones, and, lastly, the horse, *E. Caballus* and Przewalski. Plains zebras are *E. burchelli* and *E. quagga*.

By the time we get to 6000 to 4000 BC the horse has become domesticated in southern Russia: the first horsemen being the Indo-Iranians and Celts. Archaeological evidence suggests that the first bits were made of wood.

But enough of the science bit! The question is why riding, why horses? Before we can attempt to answer the first, we have to look at the second: the horse – WHY?

Why Horses?

The horse became an integral part of mans' survival thousands of years ago, way before it was domesticated. It helped keep him alive and it is probably true that some ancestral strands have become extinct due to over hunting. Other factors of course played their part, such as climate change and natural disasters such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Whatever it was that led man to domesticate the horse, I would have loved to have been there when horse and man first looked into each other's eye and made a connection. A connection that has bound the 2 together ever since.

We are very world-weary these days: too much information, too much technology, too much angst: but back in pre-history when life was just as complicated, but different, it appears that mankind was a lot more aware of the world and life around him. Being able to communicate with another living being, not human would have been truly remarkable. We know how loyal and true our horses are to us, even when

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we don't deserve their friendship, and we take this for granted but when this characteristic was first discovered it must have been quite awesome. Humans being what they are have ruthlessly exploited this ever since but whole cultures and ways of life have developed and evolved over the millennia because of the horse: a creature who was prepared to ally itself to humankind in exchange for food, shelter and safe keeping. In short the horse has helped man conquer the world!

Boys' toys these days are fast and furious machines. Consider though the thrill of being able to ride on the back of a horse, wind in your face, racing, and jumping, twisting, turning: showing off to your mates – competition to be the best horseman around and have the best horse was inevitable! The sensation of raw power that is not 100% controllable is still unbeatable. After all the capacity of the modern car is measured in horse-power!

Faith & Fantasy

Back in the mists of time I believe that we were a lot more spiritual than we are today. Numerous myths and legends surround the horse and date back to the earliest times.



Figure 4: Freedom

“When God created the horse he said to the magnificent creature: I have made thee as no other. All the treasures of the earth lie between thy eyes. Thou shalt carry my friends upon thy back. Thy saddle shall be the seat of prayers to me. And thou shalt fly without wings, and conquer
- The Koran

According to Bedouin legend, Allah created the horse from the four winds. He endowed the animal with spirit from the North, strength from the South, speed from the East, and intelligence from the West. In other versions of the story, the horse was derived from the South wind. Some give credit to a great-grandson of Noah for domesticating the Arab. Others say that Ishmael, son of Abraham, was given the horse by Allah. The angel Gabriel descended from heaven and awakened Ishmael with a whirling storm cloud. At a command from the angel, the mist and dust solidified into the first Arabian horse, the stallion Kuhaylah, "Drinker of the Wind".

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King Solomon of Israel is another candidate for the honour of originating the breed. When she visited him, the Queen of Sheba presented Solomon with the mare Safanad, "the pure", who became the founding mother of Arabians. In another story, Solomon gave his stallion Zad el-Raheb, "Gift to the Rider" to the Arabs. This stallion was so fast that every hunt with him was successful, and he became the founding sire of all Arabian horses.

Legends immortalize the five strains of Arabian blood: Koheilah, Obeyah, Dhahma, Shuwaimeh, and Saqlawieh. These descended from five foundation mares selected either by an ancient Arabian King, or the prophet Mohammed himself. After acquiring a herd of prime horses, he trained them to come to him when he blew his horn. After keeping them away from water for a long time, he released them so that they could drink from a pond. When the parched horses were almost at the water, he blew his horn. Five mares obeyed, and were enshrined in legend.

For the ancient Indians horses were primarily sacrificial animals. Horses also represented the sun because the horse was the avatar of the sun God, Surya, who was a form of Vishnu. Surya is said to have been drawn in a chariot pulled by seven red mares called Harrits. The horses names were: Bronte (thunder), Eos (day break), Ethiops (flashing), Ethon (fiery), Erythreios (red producer), Philogen (earth loving), and Pyrois (fiery).

For the Hindus, the horse is a very spiritual animal that is very close to the Gods. In fact, it has even been suggested that the horse might be related to the Gods. When sacrificed in the ceremony known as Aswamedha, the spirit of the horse is acknowledged and it is believed that it returns home to the Gods from which it came. The Hindu's believe that the horse's parents were heaven and earth and that horses belonged to the same race "devajata" as the Gods. In the post Vedic civilization it was believed that if a horse were to be sacrificed with a golden knife the person performing the sacrifice would go to heaven.



Figure 5: Modern Akhal-Teke

In Buddhism the horse is one of the 12 animals in the Asian 60 year cycle. The last year of the horse was 2002 and was considered a very fortunate year. The twelve animals go through each of the five elements, which in china are Earth, fire, water, wood, and metal. These animals also rotate through the two sexes, male and female. Unfortunately, females born in the fire horse year were often killed for fear that they would be wild and uncontrollable. (KhandroNet)

In the Buddhist religion the horse symbolizes energy, and the energetic pursuit of Buddha's teachings. (KhandroNet) According to a poem written by the Tibetan poet Jetsun Milarepa, the horse can also be a symbol for the human mind. The mind, like the horse, is strong, wild,

and free but can be controlled by its master and used to achieve his/her greatest aspirations. A translated quote from this poem, states "The horse which is my mind flies like the wind. He gallops on the plains of great bliss. If he persists, he will attain the rank of a victorious Buddha." (KhandroNet)

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The Buddha's horse was called Kamthaka. This horse is supposed to remind us of Karma, give us a sense of duty, and make us more sensitive to those living in the animal realm. Buddha's horse was probably an Akhal-Teke. The Akhal-Teke is a very unusual breed of horse. It has a very thin and seemingly weak build, but in reality, is one of the toughest and strongest breeds. (KhandroNet) The most attractive thing about this particular breed of horse is that it has very thin hair, which makes its coats appear to be metallic. This is especially stunning on a golden or copper coloured horse.

There is a lovely story which shows just how significant the horse was to ancient Chinese culture, about Good Luck-Bad Luck horse, which goes on a bit and I will save for another time, but it is perhaps why the year of the horse is considered to be lucky. For all that the horse is used in war, work, rest and play it's attachment to humans has a magical quality and as others believe, I believe the horse to be a very spiritual and magical being.

How else do you explain Pegasus and the Unicorn?



Figure 6: Pegasus

In Greek mythology, Pegasus is a winged horse, son of Poseidon and Medusa (a monstrous female on whom when gazed upon would turn onlookers into stone). Pegasus is associated originally for carrying thunderbolts for Zeus. He is generally pictured in white, sometimes in golden wings. Pegasus was a great flyer. He was not immortal however, but because of his faithful service, Zeus rewarded him with a constellation and when he died, transformed him into the Pegasus constellation.

Unicorns have been with us, in one form or another, since the dawn of history. It's believed they were first described by the Chinese as a miraculous creature called the Ch'i lin (or K'i lin), a "great unicorn," that radiated exquisite colours, had a voice like a thousand wind chimes, avoided fighting at all costs, lived for a thousand years, and had a horn twelve feet long. It was said that Ch'i lin walked so softly its hooves made no sound. Some believed this was because it was so soft-hearted it did not want to crush the blades of grass beneath its feet.

Ch'i lin was very special to the Chinese. It was a creature of great power and wisdom, and would show itself at special times. Its appearance was always considered a sign of good fortune. When a ruler was just and kind and the times peaceful and prosperous, the unicorn would appear in a glade. It would also appear when a great leader was about to die or be born.



Figure 7: A Unicorn

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The earliest recorded appearance of the Ch'i lin was to a legendary Chinese sovereign called Fu Hsi c. 2900 BC. As the story is told, Fu Hsi was sitting on the bank of the Yellow River one day near the end of his life. He was thinking about mortality and trying to think of a way he could record his thoughts for following generations (writing had not yet been invented). Suddenly a Ch'i lin rose out of the river and came toward him. On its back it carried certain magical sigils from which Fu Hsi was able to devise the first written Chinese language. Over time the script has evolved so naturally that today's readers of modern Chinese are still able to understand something written 2,000 years ago.

Why Riding?

Phew! I do seem to have gone on a bit about horses. I suspect that you already know the answer by now, if you've managed to stay with me so far! I don't think humans could help themselves – horse riding was an inevitable development in the domestication of the horse. Riding a horse gives you a sense of freedom like nothing else does or can. Of course, not everyone likes horses or can bring themselves to go near one let alone get on one, but for those of us who do: once a horse looks at you, he has your heart forever.

Yes, the horse has been and is still used as a tool to help man to wage wars, travel, carry burdens, work the land, but he also gives man great pleasure and when all is said and done, just to ride quietly thinking of nothing in particular; or to train you and your horse to work together in harmony gives one an inner sense of well-being.



Figure 8: Galloping on a beach in Spain - what could be better than this?!

We always strive to adapt things to suit ourselves and so the development of the riding horse was always going to happen. Leaving aside all the politics of dressage, eventing, show jumping et al, for me the horse is a part of me, myself. According to Buddhism, I was born in the year of the horse, so it's not all surprising that working with and riding my horse Faldero is an intense part of my life that brings me immeasurable pleasure.

Why Riding? Why Ever Not?!

Thanks for reading!

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