

Club Caballo

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



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CLASSICAL & COMPETITION



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Abstract

For me Classical and Competition dressage are not mutually exclusive. My belief is that training the horse through a series of progressive training methods using a kindness and reward scheme that dates back even to the time of Xenophon (c. 430 – 354 BC) can realise the horse's potential as a riding horse and also develop empathy between horse and rider that is a joy to watch. Showing off or celebrating the horse's progress through his training by way of competition or exhibition is a natural extension.

Modern competition dressage has its roots firmly in the classical which in turn has its roots in cavalry training where the horse was trained for the battlefield. These facts are at times forgotten as the classical style is often seen as alien in competition terms: the high-stepping leaping about style versus the technically accurate, rigidly applied type. The 2 'styles' being seen as requiring different training techniques to achieve different end results. This article attempts to put both classical and competition into perspective to show how equitation has developed and should be seen as a celebration of the horse: as an art to display a lightness and harmony between the horse and his rider that inspires yet is also able to show movement with the technical precision that a competition demands, without that same sight resembling an automaton.

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The Basics



Figure 1 : Meshippus - an ancestor of the modern horse

As riders and trainers, what are we trying to achieve: what are we trying to emulate? Fundamentally, dressage, whether classical or competition means training the horse; building on his natural ability and movement in the wild. Today, most would agree that dressage means presenting the horse under saddle showing the suppleness and control of a gymnast, the grace and lightness of a ballet dancer.

What better goal than that of the tantalising concept of the perfect performance? This achievement may be rare, but as riders how

wonderful is the feeling that for a moment the penny has dropped and your horse is working in harmony with you: moves off your leg into that smooth transition, tries his utmost stretching for that wonderful extension, springs powerfully with each step of passage, or compresses his body to jump nimbly round in a pirouette. When you experience this, then dressage is a source of immense pleasure and wonderful memories.

Horses naturally use the concept of collection when playing, fighting, competing and courting with each other. When trying to impress other horses they make themselves look bigger, just as other animals do. They achieve this by pumping up the chest, raising the neck and making it bigger by flexing the poll, while at the same time transforming their gaits to emphasize more upwards movement. When fighting, the horse will collect because in collection he can produce lightning speed reactions for kicking, rearing, spinning, striking with the front feet, bucking and jumping. This natural ability to collect is visible in every horse of any breed, and probably inspired early trainers to reproduce that kind of behaviour in more controlled circumstances. It is also perhaps why, according to most Classical dressage trainers, every healthy horse, regardless its breed, can perform classical dressage movements.

Origins

Our modern way of living and working with our horses has a more brutal history. From a food source, to beasts of burden to war horse the alliance between horse and man has had more to do with survival than pleasure, yet even in the earliest times there is evidence that being less brutal and showing more kindness affords a more willing horse.

The fun of training a horse is not new. It is very likely that rudimentary training started very early on in the history of man and horse.

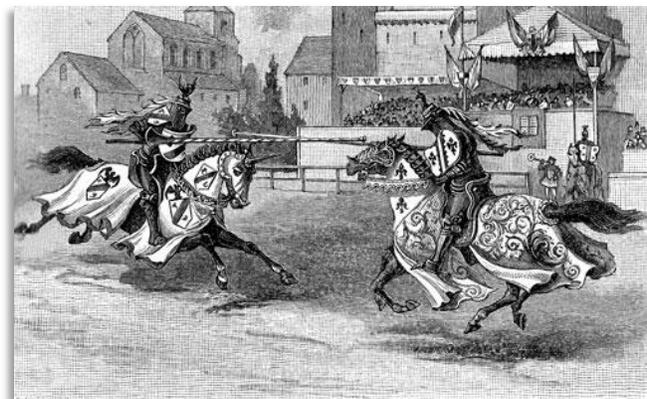


Figure 2 : Medieval Knights Jousting

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Just as a horse would impress other horses, horsemen would impress their peers by showing off their riding skill and the athleticism and grace of their horses.



Figure 3 - Ancient Egyptian Chariot & Archers

The earliest evidence that horses were ridden in warfare dates from Eurasia between 4000 and 3000 BC. By 1600 BC, improved harness and chariot designs made chariot warfare common throughout the Ancient Near East, and the earliest written training manual for war horses was a guide for training chariot horses written about 1350 BC. As formal cavalry tactics replaced the chariot, so did new training methods, and by 360 BC, the Greek cavalry officer Xenophon had written an extensive treatise on horsemanship.

By this time, the Greeks had become great dressage riders. Proof of this can be seen in the Parthenon frieze, which shows horses performing complicated movements. The Romans by contrast did not find the discipline of dressage to their liking, preferring instead the more basic pleasure of chariot racing. It is true to say that for centuries, up to the Renaissance period, the general view was of simple control: the horse needed to stop, go and turn quickly.

The effectiveness of horses in battle was also revolutionised by improvements in technology, including the invention of the saddle, the stirrup, and later, the horse collar. Whether horses were trained to pull chariots, to be ridden as light or heavy cavalry, or to carry the armoured knight, much training was required to overcome the horse's natural instinct to flee from noise, the smell of blood, and the confusion of combat. They also learned to accept any sudden or unusual movements of humans while using a weapon or avoiding one. Horses used in close combat may have been taught, or at least permitted, to kick, strike, and even bite, thus becoming weapons themselves for the warriors they carried.

In most cultures, a war horse used as a riding animal was trained to be controlled with limited use of reins, responding primarily to the rider's legs and weight, leaving the rider's arms and hands free to protect him with shield and fight with sword, rather than for controlling his steed. The mounted soldier also needed to be flexible and manoeuvrable. The horse became accustomed to any necessary tack and protective armour placed upon it, and learned to balance under a rider who would also be laden with weapons and armour.

Developing the balance and agility of the horse was crucial. The origins of the discipline of dressage came from the need to train horses to be both obedient and manoeuvrable. The *Haute Ecole* or "High School" movements of classical dressage taught today have their roots in manoeuvres designed for the battlefield. However, it is not certain that the *airs above the ground* would have been used in actual combat, as most would have exposed the unprotected underbelly of the horse to the weapons of foot soldiers.

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Classical

Living as we do in our modern age of innovation and attention to animal and in particular, horse welfare it may come as a surprise to learn that this is far from being new. In his book *On Horsemanship* (written c. 350 BC) Xenophon writes extensively on the selection, care and training of horses both for military and general use. In the section on “Creating a Showy Horse and Advice on Biting” he emphasizes, rather ahead of his time, that the rider should not pull on the bit nor spur or whip the horse, as this type of riding causes the opposite effect, simply distracting and frightening the animal and causing him to dislike being ridden. Instead, Xenophon urges, the horse must enjoy himself. He should be trained to be ridden on a loose rein, to hold his head high, arch his neck, and paw with his front legs, taking pleasure in being ridden. Without perhaps the pawing of the front legs, this advice is still very relevant over 2000 years later.

As the use of the horse was developed for warfare some of the training methods used were probably not in the best interests of the horse’s welfare. Much like today, not everyone would have followed Xenophon’s advice – a job had to be done and sometimes not enough time, skill or experience with which to do it. During the Renaissance (14th – 17th centuries) there was an enlightened approach to riding as a general cultivation of the arts. Certainly by the 15th century training the horse by brute force was being replaced by a more enlightened way with a resurgence of artistry in riding.



Figure 4 - Spanish Riding School 1783

Whilst the piaffe was originally developed as a method to keep the horse focused, warm, and moving, ready to move forward into battle, during this time we see the development of the shoulder-in, flying change and the counter-canter; movements accredited to Gueriniere (1688 – 1751). Techniques and theories were developed and discussed through the writings and teachings of men such as Antoine de Pluvinel, Francois Robichon de la Gueriniere, Francois Baucher and more recently, Alois Podhajsky, Nuno Oliveira, Udo Burger. As these movements were developed a sequential training system was established that has changed little over the centuries.

By the time we get to the 19th century, indoor riding had become quite a sophisticated art with both horse and rider training for many years. During the 19th century however, there is a shift towards the more ‘modern’ style we see today. From the fixed outline of the Renaissance horse to one which sees more extension with the horse’s frame moving longer and shorter in keeping with the demands of the movement. It is perhaps at this time that we see a gradual move towards the longer backed warmblood as more emphasis is placed on extended movements. We also have great differences between the masters of the day. Steinbrecht for example was opposed to what he considered to be the unnatural school of Baucher - and to his disciples like James Fillis. Steinbrecht certainly saw his horsemanship as being natural horsemanship as opposed to the artificiality of the French school of Baucher.

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Airs above the Ground

The most striking difference between classical and competition dressage is that the Haut Ecole or High School jumps are not required modern competition dressage. More popularly known as *Airs above the Ground* these are a series of manoeuvres where the horse leaves the ground. There are 7 in all:

- Pesade
- Levade
- Capriole
- Croupade
- Ballotade
- Courbette
- Mezair

Horses are usually taught each air on the long rein without a rider, which is less strenuous for the animal. However, each movement is meant to eventually be performed under a rider. The pesade and levade are the first airs taught to the High School horse, and it is from these that all other airs are taught. Many horses are not capable of performing these manoeuvres. These movements require precise control, excellent balance, and a great deal of strength, and the product of correct training, rather than resistance from the horse and more suited to the Baroque horse.



Figure 5 - historical image of a Baroque horse

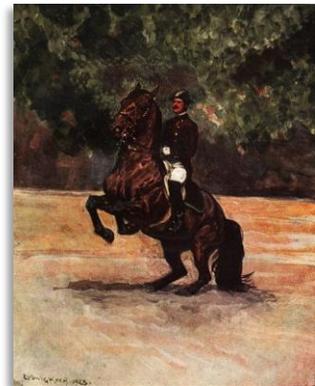


Figure 4 - The Levade

These are the agile strong-bodied descendants of horses from the Middle

Ages (such as the destrier, Neopolitan horse and the Spanish Jennet) and tend to be shorter in the back and leg than the more popular warmbloods seen in modern dressage. The modern breeds include the Andalusian, Lipizzan, Lusitano and Friesian; their powerfully-conformed hindquarters allowing them the strength to perform these difficult movements.

Today the only remaining large schools of classical dressage are: the Cadre Noir, the Spanish Riding School, and the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art and the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art in Lisbon. There are a small number of independent classical dressage trainers who also endeavor to keep this branch of the art alive.

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Competition

Early European aristocrats displayed their horses' training in equestrian pageants. Indeed during the 19th century one of the most popular outlets for dressage training was the circus. The methods of training may not have changed very much, but the outlets certainly have. Rather than being used in public displays, modern dressage training has an end-product in dressage competition. Successful training at the various levels is demonstrated through the performance of "tests" of prescribed series of movements within a standard arena. Judges evaluate each movement on the basis of an objective standard appropriate to the level of the test and assign each movement a score from zero to ten - zero being "not executed" and 10 being "excellent". A score of 9 is considered "very good" and is considered a particularly high mark, while a competitor achieving all 6s (or 60% overall) should be considering moving on to the next level.

All riding horses can benefit from use of dressage principles and training techniques. However, the most common breed of horse seen today, especially at the international level of competition, is the warmblood. Dressage is an egalitarian competition in which all breeds are given an opportunity to compete successfully. Therefore, many other breeds are seen at various levels of competition.

Dressage competitions may begin in local communities with *introductory level* classes where riders need only walk and trot. Horses and riders advance through a graduated series of levels, with tests of increasing difficulty at each level, until the most accomplished

horse and rider teams compete at the Grand Prix levels and international competition, such as the Olympic games. Dressage tests are the formalized sequence of a number of dressage movements used in competition. Although horses and riders are competing against each other, tests are completed by one horse and rider combination at a time, and horses and riders are judged against a common standard, rather than having their performance scored relative to the other competitors.



Figure 6 - Andalusian performing at a dressage competition

Classical versus Competition

If classical dressage is still considered to be the basis of modern trained dressage, then why is there so much debate over which is right and which is wrong? Is the classical style elitist and attainable only by the few that can afford it or is the modern competition way better for the horse and more cost-effective for the everyday rider? Neither is right, neither is wrong. The two are inextricably linked, different only in what is perceived as being important.

In theory, competitive dressage should follow the same principles as classical dressage. However, there has been criticism by some riders for the trend, especially at the lower levels, for "quick fixes" and incorrect training that makes the horse *appear* correct, but that is in fact neglecting the basics. These

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short-cuts usually catch up to the rider as they move up the levels and need to be correct to perform certain movements. This is of course, a debatable proposition, as others argue that modern methods, such as the highly controversial rollkur technique, produce winning animals.

It is also believed by some that competitive dressage does not always reward the most correctly trained horse and rider, especially at the lower levels. For example, some riders who consider themselves to be training classically would not ask their horse to hold his head near-vertical when he first began training, and this would be penalized at the lower levels of competitive dressage, marked down because the horse is not considered to be correctly on the bit. Other riders, who also would consider themselves classically trained, would disagree, saying that if a horse is not ready to travel in a correct outline (*on the bit*) he is not ready for competition, and this is the reason such horses would be marked down.

The purest form of classical riding, as well as dressage, High School dressage, or Haute Ecole, takes years for both the horse and rider to master. When a horse is advanced in its training, it can perform not only Grand Prix dressage movements such as collected and extended gaits, passage and piaffe, but some can also perform certain "Airs Above the Ground," although usually a horse will only be trained in one air, and only if they are particularly able.

Christine Hall
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