



Gaited Horsemanship



with

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What is Classical Training?

By: Larry Whitesell

Classical training uses dressage movements to train the horse, but what is popularly called dressage is not always classical. Many forms of training, including some dressage, trains the horse from the “outside”. Classical training attempts to train the horse from the “inside”.

The horse has primarily muscles that create movement and muscles that support. The muscles that create movement contract and expand, with two that work antagonistic to each other, since muscles can only pull and not push. Suppleness and relaxation can only be gained by elongating muscles. Strength can only be gained by lengthening and shortening muscles, never by holding them in a frame.

The muscles of support are what determine posture. Quality of movements, or gait, is determined by these muscles. When only the first set of muscles are developed, we have movement for movements sake. Developing the muscles of posture create collection and quality of gait.

There are two ways to train these muscles of posture. One method is to train from the outside. The horse has to be continually contained by the hands and legs. This method reaches its goals by putting to work the muscles of movement doing exercises that are progressively demanding and of increasing difficulty. The hope is that the horse will develop the correct muscles of posture as a result of the exercises.

The classical approach focuses on training from balance first. Balance is key to relaxation. The classical method puts the horse in a correct posture and then asks for movement. Collection is taught in hand and at slow gaits in the beginning.

A good example is teaching a gaited horse to gait. More traditional methods would be to drive the horse into the hands with seat and leg. The rider would continue to drive the horse until the horse shows gait. Gait is therefore often found with more speed because it will take increased speed to build the impulsion needed for the horse to find gait. Disadvantages are, if the horse is not athletic or strongly bred to gait, it may take more speed than some riders are comfortable with. It may also teach the horse to push against the rider, since the horse is unaware he is being taught to gait. This results in a need for stronger bits. Maintaining impulsion with legs and hands being used concurrently is a sure fire way to make the horse pace.

In the classical school, we teach the horse to better balance himself, so that engagement can happen at first from a much slower speed. The horse can find his gait at a slower speed so that he can remain relaxed. Then, over time gait extension can be increased once the horse has been conditioned to handle it through gymnastics to build necessary musculature.

With any training method, the trainer must be aware of what balance is. Otherwise you just do movements or exercises for the sake of exercising. Collection is a result of changing balance. It involves rotating the pelvis forward, raising the withers, and flexing the hocks. In traditional methods, the horse is taught exercises hoping to build balance. In classical training the horse is put in balance to do exercises. Balance is never sacrificed for the sake of a movement. It is important to remember that emotion is directly linked to balance in a prey animal.

A horse that doesn't lean or push on the hands can be considered light but not necessarily soft. People who ride on totally loose reins consider their horse light. If however, something puts the horse on adrenaline and the horse no longer listens to the riders aids, softness was never present. Don't mistake dullness for relaxation. Dull horses are not always responsive and therefore can be unsafe. Classical training teaches a horse not to use his instinctual brain by teaching proper response to rider's aids. Time is spent clarifying communication and how the rider will ask the horse for movement under saddle. Time is not spent teaching the horse to not do things such as, spook, be buddy sour, barn sour, etc. Time is spent teaching the horse how to relax and obey the rider when he becomes afraid or worried. He learns that obedience to the aids always gets him to safety. The more it happens, the more the horse trusts the rider.

In more typical training, the horse is taught the aids (hands, legs, seat & weight) by, for example, turning right until the horse associates turning right with whatever the rider does consistently. A classical trainer will teach the aids on the ground or in very small movements to make sure the horse doesn't practice turning out of balance while learning the aids. We would not use an aid strongly to start and get lighter as the horse learns. We would teach what the light aid means and how to respond when it is lightly applied. There is no use shouting at a student who doesn't understand what you are saying.

Because softness and balance are so important, classical trainers work very hard on their own balance when riding. An unbalanced rider cannot give clear aids and will also interfere with the horse's balance. This will affect any movement or gait the horse is asked for. For me, the hardest part of horse training is trying to perfect my seat. Not just being in a correct position but being aware and correctly using my aids. It is too easy to have conflicting aids or forgetting to use one, or just be too vague so the horse is unsure of a request.

Most horses that don't turn or stop or slow down when asked, they are either confused about the request or defending themselves. If we never confront the horse with contradictory aids, it will be easy for the horse to carry out our demands. We often spend more time trying to get a horse to do something and very little time explaining how we will ask them to do it.

When I began studying classical training, I had to learn more about how the horse works biomechanically, so I could train the horse from the inside-out. I want to be sure that I never ask the horse to do something that, at his level of development, he could not comfortably do. I never ask a horse to gait before developing the muscles needed to carry a rider in that posture. Many young gaited horses are taught to gait inverted or ventro-flexed. A classical trainer would never ask for movements that would damage young joints or create tension. Classical training means you train the horse for the horse's benefit, physically and emotionally. The correct muscles have to be strengthened to develop a relaxed but enthusiastic partner.

An example is longing. I would not longe or run a horse to get the edge off, so that I can more quickly gain control on his back. I don't want the horse to lose his enthusiasm, but learn to channel it, let me guide it. Longing would be done slower at first and the horse must be in balance or I will stop and start again. If the horse learns to fall on a shoulder while longing, I will have to fix it under saddle. I don't want to teach something I will later have to correct.

Any training that educates the horse without abuse is good. There are many methods that work. In the course of my thirty some years of training I have tried many that work. For the last twenty years I have focused on the classical. I believe that I am a much truer horseman. I have a much better understanding how the things I do impact the horse physically and emotionally. My horses are more enthusiastic about doing things with me. I am a much better rider, learning non-interference. The horse's understanding of the aids and willingness to yield to the rider's demands is key to good balance. It is soft horsemanship.

The best thing that has happened since I began studying classical dressage is the change in me. I have learned to set up a correct response and let it happen instead of making things happen. I have become a calmer, more patient person, not only with horses, but people. My approach towards horses has changed my approach towards life.

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