

AT A GLANCE

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“DRESSAGE, AN ART THAT IS NEBULOUS TO THOSE WHO DO NOT PRACTICE IT, A CHALLENGE TO THOSE WHO DO AND AN ECSTASY TO THOSE WHO MASTER IT.”

WITH ALL THE FRENCH TERMINOLOGY USED IN DRESSAGE, DID THE FRENCH INVENT IT? NO, ACTUALLY THE HORSES DID. THE MOVEMENTS OF DRESSAGE ARE NATURAL TO THE HORSE AND ARE SEEN PERFORMED BY WILD HORSES IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT. THE CHALLENGE IN DRESSAGE IS TO HAVE THE HORSE WILLINGLY PERFORM THESE MOVEMENTS UNDER THE RIDER'S WEIGHT AND ON COMMAND.



The Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) rules for dressage events states, “The object of dressage is the harmonious development of the physique and ability of the horse. As a result it makes the horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with his rider.”

However, this concept is not new, for as far back as 2,300 years ago, the Greek Xenophon, friend and follower of Socrates, stated in his book ‘The Art of Horsemanship’ that, “what the horse does under compulsion,

is done without understanding, and there is no beauty in it either, any more than if one should whip and spur a dancer. There would be a great deal more un-gracefulness than beauty in either a horse or a man that was so treated. No, he should show off all his finest and most brilliant performances willingly and at a mere sign”. Xenophon also set rules for choosing, caring and riding horses. He stressed the importance of teaching the groom the proper way to treat the horse. Xenophon’s teachings remain valid to this day. His philosophy of “the art of riding is based on rewards and punishments” is still strictly followed

by most classical riders while keeping in mind that punishment can just be a cessation of reward and should not be through means of inflicting pain upon the horse.

This humanitarian approach to horsemanship was also reflected in the relation between Alexander the Great of Macedonia (356-323 BC) and his fiery stallion Bucephalus. For eighteen years, Bucephalus was Alexander’s constant companion. When Bucephalus died, Alexander founded in his honour the city of Alexandria Bucephalia (East of the Indus River in India).

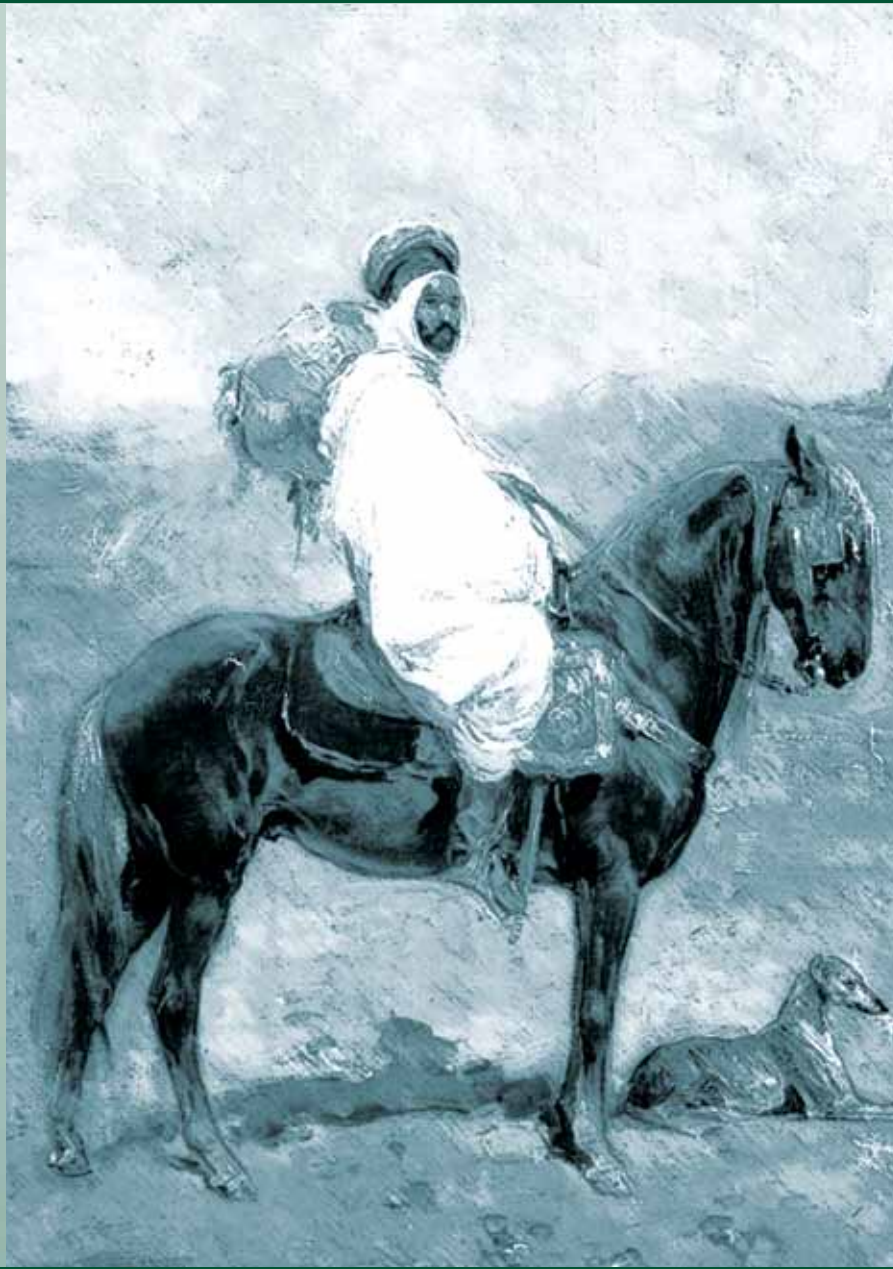
In North Africa and in the Arabian Peninsula, tribes and Arabs (who were extremely talented natural horsemen) trained their horses with lots of compassion and love as they were their pride and their loyal companions. They rode their horses without bridles using small switches (thin, flexible sticks). They bred their horses carefully, keeping the breed pure and enhancing

the main features of the Arabian horse namely: speed, stamina, endurance, flexibility, intelligence, loyalty and beauty.

On the other side of the globe, in America, from the seventeenth century on, Native Americans were able to catch wild mustangs, using leather lassos and a great deal of skill. They showed extraordinary

talent in breaking in these mustangs, right after capture, and often within an hour they were able to lead the animals quietly away, submissive and obedient. They rode securely either bareback or on a blanket which was firmly tied on. They preferred coloured horses and chose to breed the ones with definite spotted patterns, while not neglecting the horse's hardiness,





▲ *The Berber horse of North Africa*

speed, stamina, beauty and character which are characteristics of the Appaloosa breed.

Throughout history, horses have been used in war and peace. The ancients mostly used chariots pulled by one, two or three horses. The chariot of the sun and the chariot of Ramses II are two well known examples. At that time, the horse tack was composed of a rug that did not give the rider a secure seat in combat on horseback. In addition to that, the simple snaffle or the rope around the neck of the horse did not allow good contact and submission. It was only under

the reign of Charlemagne (King of France and Emperor of the West 742 - 814 AD) that the saddle and stirrups, were imported from China through the Arabs. Moreover, using mouthpieces with long cheek and curb chains, and the iron shoe with nails (studs) gave the rider both better control and a more secure seat which allowed him better manoeuvrability in war.

In Europe, the Middle Ages witnessed the breeding of light draft horses that were able to carry the rider (knight) and his heavy armoured outfit weighing as much as 180 Kilograms.

The invention of gun powder, rifles and hand guns changed the tactics of war and rendered the armoured outfits obsolete. As a result light draft horses were no longer bred to be used in combat and the need for lighter, more manageable mounts arose.

During the Italian Renaissance (mid XIV, XV and XVI century), Federico Grisone started the first equitation academy which attracted noblemen from all Europe. He introduced trot exercises into his training programs. However, his teaching aids were so brutal and violent they drove away many followers. On the other hand, in France, Antoine de Pluvinel employed a much more humane approach and never advocated the use of force. During training de Pluvinel preferred working the horses thoroughly by hand, often while they were tied between two posts, known as “the pillars”, the use of which was his own invention. He also included in his lessons “airs above the ground” which are still performed today at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna.

Following the Pluvinel, was Francois Robichon de la Gueriniere (1687-1751). He wrote two books “Ecole de Cavalerie” in 1735 and “Elements de Cavalerie” in 1740. The first book was translated into German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. It laid the path to the true classical school. No wonder Robichon de la Gueriniere is considered a milestone on the path to modern dressage riding and to a large degree the modern sport is based on his teachings.

Classical dressage flourished amid the splendour of the Baroque age (1580 – 1750). Performers dressed in elaborate costumes, rode superbly collected horses. This type of horse was bred in Andalusia using Berber horses as a basis then cross-bred with ancient Spanish and Arab breeds. Although compact and strong this breed still managed to look very elegant. Its body was rounded, its head long and striking and the profile of its nose slightly convex. It carried its

strong neck high, had a broad chest and a rounded powerful croup, rather short but strong, well defined legs and small hooves.

Classical dressage movements, like many other equestrian sports had their origins in military exercises. Figure riding (circles etc.) was a part of military training which taught riders how to manoeuvre and how to move as a group in an orderly fashion. The routine contained a brief outline of all the formations and movements which the cavalry would have to use in the field and in battle, so that cavalymen gained confidence and obtained a feeling for tempo, intervals and distances; they learnt how to wheel about and to stay together and how to maintain spacing and distance between each rider. With little room to spare in the arena, the rider must be able to estimate distance and tempo correctly, training for both instinct and eyesight. All these advantages have been retained in figure riding to the present day.

Classical dressage is still honoured in the two best known schools of dressage today, namely the School of Cavalry in Saumur (France) and the Spanish Riding School in Vienna (Austria). The late Franz Mairinger (1915 - 1978), a former Bereiter of the Spanish Riding School wrote, "If you want to know how a horse should be ridden, see how he moves by himself when free. How he walks, trots and canters. Have a close look and see the beauty, the rhythm and harmony of his movements.... Preserve his natural gaits. Preserve his personality; preserve his instinct to go forward. Do this and you must be successful because you are respecting nature's wisdom. Give him back his natural balance, with your additional weight on his back. That is the essence of schooling, training or dressage....."

Dressage was first included in an Olympic programme in the Stockholm games in 1912. The rider was to enter at the gallop, show collection and extension in all 3 gaits (walk, trot and canter), rein-

back, turn on the hocks, perform four flying changes on a straight line and finally jump five obstacles (ranging from 5 cm to 110 cms) the last of which was a barrel being rolled towards the horse. The object was to test courage, calmness and obedience of the cavalry horse. It encouraged general purpose riding on a general purpose horse.

The Olympic Games were interrupted from their initially six, later four, years cycle by the war and only much later in 1932 when the venue was Los Angeles were the Piaffe and Passage introduced to Grand Prix Dressage (instead of the jumps). By 1936 Olympics, staged in pre-war Germany, all the movements of the Grand Prix known today were included.

With evolution of technology in anatomy, photography and motion analysis better understanding of the horse muscles and their motion was achieved. Some movement aids and training techniques have been altered accordingly. Breeding horses especially suited for dressage took the sport to a new height. And so did the evolution of veterinary medicine.

So what is Dressage? In French it means to train a horse. Also the verb "dresser" (from which dressage is derived) means "to make something stand up". Rising of the head and neck of the horse cannot take place naturally until the horse is trained to collection which is the essence of dressage.

Mueseler, a brilliant all-round rider and teacher, director of the Beerman Riding Institute in Berlin explained, "The classical art of riding can best be defined as the method that aims at obtaining perfect harmony between rider and horse in a natural way and in full consideration of the psychology of the horse..." and THAT says it all. 🍷

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