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Switzerland's Melanie Hofmann and GB Cazzago-ch at the WEG2014

THE ART OF CLASSICAL DRESSAGE RIDING

SUPPLENESS

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SO FAR WE HAVE ONLY TALKED ABOUT THE HORSE'S BACK AND HIND LEGS. THERE IS A TENDENCY IN MODERN CLASSICAL DRESSAGE CIRCLES TO IGNORE THE RELEVANCE OF THE HEAD AND NECK PLACEMENT AS WELL AS THE REIN AIDS, JUST AS THERE IS AN EQUALLY PRONOUNCED TENDENCY AMONG THE "SPORTS RIDERS" TO FOCUS THEIR ATTENTION EXCLUSIVELY ON THE HEAD AND NECK POSITION AND THE REIN AIDS, WHILE IGNORING THE HORSE'S BACK AND HINDQUARTERS AND THE RIDER'S SEAT AND LEG AIDS. NEITHER CAMP WILL BE ABLE TO TRULY TRAIN A HORSE. IT MAY COME AS A SURPRISE TO MANY NEO-CLASSICAL DRESSAGE RIDERS THAT THE OLD MASTERS OFTEN REMARKED THAT THE RIDER CANNOT VERY WELL GYMNASTICISE THE HINDQUARTERS UNTIL HE HAS GIVEN THE HEAD AND NECK A CERTAIN POSTURE THAT ALLOWS THE ENERGY OF THE HIND LEGS TO TRAVEL THROUGH THE SPINE ALL THE WAY INTO THE BIT, AND THAT ENABLES THE REIN AIDS TO TRAVEL INTO EACH FRONT LEG AND EACH HIND LEG.

"Motion is the element of the horse and all motion starts in the hindquarters. If therefore the flexibility of the hindquarters must be the ultimate purpose of all dressage training, this in no way means that lateral bending of poll neck, and spine are unnecessary. Rather, the flexibility of these parts must first be obtained so that it can then be used as a means for the main purpose, namely to work the hindquarters."

In order to be able to use the horse's neck effectively as a tool for gymnasticising the back and haunches, all the resistances that are situated in the neck and poll have to be removed. You can observe that many horses' necks are most flexible at their base and stiffest at the poll. In order to make them into good riding horses, we have to stabilize the neck at its base and supple its top, so that the flexibility of the neck increases from the base towards the poll. The greatest source of resistances can usually be found in the conformation of the poll, jaw, and throat latch. In fact, horses whose poll region is very resistant to flexion and bend and who seem to be difficult to ride on the bit are almost always horses whose lower jaw begins to touch the neck while the nose is still a good deal in front of the vertical. When the rider attempts to increase the longitudinal flexion, the saliva glands consequently tend to get caught between the jaw and the neck, which is painful and can lead to all kinds of negative reactions from head tossing to spinning around and even rearing. The horse's gymnastic training has to change the musculature of his neck and stretch the tissue surrounding the saliva glands so that the glands can move just enough to the outside of the jaw in order not to get pinched any more. This reshaping of the neck musculature is done in part by flexions (bending the entire neck) and (bending just the poll/throat latch area). These flexions can be done mounted or unmounted at the halt, or in motion under saddle.

"While working the poll on a straight line, but even more during flexions, the greatest enemy we encounter is the saliva gland. As long as we have not obtained the immediate contact between the jowls and neck muscles, as long as the saliva gland does not yield to the pressure of the jowl, so that the jowl presses against the saliva gland from below, the horse will resist in increased collection. He will try to fend off the effect of the bit by bracing, resisting with the lower jaw, or an unsteady head position; or he coils up behind the reins, flexes the joints of the hind legs, but remains stiff in the poll. A poorly positioned saliva gland on only one side causes the horse to resist in narrower turns in this direction; and on a straight line it is often the reason why he short-strides with one leg as if he were lame. Sometimes it is the front leg of the stiff side, or the diagonal hind leg, depending on what is more comfortable for the horse. (Horses who are high in the croup transmit this behaviour more to the hind leg). The horse does not dare to reach forward on the stiff side, because he feels pain in his poll when he approaches the bit boldly. As soon as the constriction is eradicated by appropriate flexions, the lameness is gone. The lameness was not caused by the uneven movement of the leg muscles, but by the constriction of the poll; this is supported by the fact that a regular movement is shown when these horses are ridden on a loose rein."

In bending exercises, you can isolate the exact spot where the horse is blocked. If the horse is supple, you can secure the base of the neck with one rein, while the other rein asks the horse to bend, first just at the top, so that the rim of the jowl touches the neck and pushes the saliva gland out. Then you can give a little with the outside rein, and you will see that gradually a larger portion of the neck begins to participate in the bend. The bend at the very top of the neck is often the most difficult one. Some horses will brace against the request. This resistance can sometimes be eliminated by giving more with the outside rein until the top half of the neck is included in the bend. Then, you slowly shorten the outside rein to reduce the bend again from the bottom towards the top. Sometimes you have to wait a few seconds until the horse yields and chews. When you continue with riding forward afterwards, the poll is suppler and as a result the permeability has increased.

Sometimes subtle - or not so subtle - resistances can creep in, especially on the outside during corners and turns. Resistances are more difficult to feel on the outside than on the inside. That's why it is a good idea to test the horse from time to time by feeling with the rein, positioning the horse carefully to the outside after a corner. If the horse does not yield immediately to the rein pressure, the rider can stop the horse and flex the neck and poll towards the outside until the blockage disappears. Then, he resumes the previous gait. In the middle of a turn, or in lateral movements, the rider can try to bend and position the horse more towards the inside. If the horse braces against the rein pressure, the rider stops and flexes to the inside.

It is of the utmost importance that the rider's legs keep the horse thinking forward. The calf brings the horse to the rein, so to speak. The seat and legs also keep the hips and shoulders aligned properly, so that the horse cannot become crooked. This way, the horse is still going forward, even during flexions at the halt.

Sources of the article:
Dressage Classic Training
Euro dressage