

THE ART OF CLASSICAL DRESSAGE RIDING  
SUPPLENESS (PART 1)

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SUPPLENESS, LATERAL BEND, LONGITUDINAL FLEXION,  
ELEVATION, AND PERMEABILITY  
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*“If the ridden horse has the advantage, among many others, over the unridden horse that it is able to move easily and with regularity in a small space in the gaits nature gave it, this is because of the flexibility of its entire body that dressage training has given it.”*

Lateral Bend, Longitudinal Flexion, Elevation and Permeability are closely linked and mutually interdependent. bend/flexion of the poll, the neck, the back, and the hind legs. The fully trained horse was sometimes referred to as thoroughly bent/flexed/flexible, which goes right to the heart of the matter of training.

The truly trained horse was also referred to as (ridden). In classical terms most horses today may qualify as “broken”, but they are far from being “ridden”. a good term for a trained horse is “active”. All of these old terms are aimed at quintessential elements of the horse’s training. The criterion for a trained horse was not so much how many advanced movements he could perform, but how obedient he was to the rider’s aids, how supple he was, how well he would yield to the rider’s legs and rein aids. In other words, the focus was more on quality than on quantity.

Bend, flexion, elevation, and permeability are interconnected. True permeability to the rider’s aids, nowadays commonly referred to with the neologism “thoroughness”, is the result of thorough suppleness, which in turn is achieved by bending/flexing exercises.

“After all, lateral bending work is the only means for acquiring suppleness, that is, the relaxation of all joints and muscles, and thus setting the horse straight, giving it an impulsive way of going, a swinging back, balance, and self-carriage.”

Muscles are suppld and strengthened by alternating between contracting them actively and then stretching them passively by contracting the antagonistic muscles. Bending and flexing exercises do just that. One set of muscles is contracted to flex certain joints, or to bend the horse’s neck and ribcage. The opposite set of muscles has to stretch in order to allow the bend or flexion, and vice versa.

The easiest bending exercise is the 20 meter circle, which is where the young horse’s education begins (at the longe line). The next steps are corners (rounded off at first), then serpentines, spirals, and voltes. When the horse has gained a certain amount of balance and flexibility, the lateral movements are added, which allow the rider to access deeper muscle groups and to stretch and strengthen the horse’s muscles even more. “The joints of the spine are moved by the dorsal muscles disposed above it and on its sides and by the abdominal muscles. Working of the back must initially be limited to loosening these muscles and thus making the spine flexible. This, however, can be accomplished only by lateral bending work since the rider is able to influence the horse effectively and reliably only in this direction. If the horse has thus been relaxed and loosened, the supple up and down movement of the back under the natural influence of the rider’s weight will develop automatically and is expressed in elastic swinging of the spine.”

The same thing applies in essence also to the hind legs.

Due to their design, the flexibility of the haunches is of a more longitudinal kind, whereas the back is suppld more laterally. In the course of the horse’s training, the hind legs are worked separately, individually, by shifting the combined body weight of the horse and rider into one hind leg at a time. This can be done through weight aids, through bending exercises, or a combination of both. The intention of this part of the training is to flex the joints of the hind legs more deeply, which stretches and strengthens their musculature. During the extension phase and the airborne phase of the stride, the previously flexed hind leg will “rebound”, not unlike a bouncing basketball. The more energetically the ball is pushed into the ground the higher it bounces back. Analogously, the more deeply the hind leg is flexed, the more energetically it should bounce off the ground again. In other words, increasing the collection (deeper flexion of the haunches) should also result in greater impulsion.

Any exercise that is done with a lateral bend sends the inside hind leg forward, closer to the center of gravity, which makes it possible to flex it more effectively. In the shoulder-in, the horse’s entire front end is moved around in front of the inside hind leg. This increases the share of the body mass that it has to support. In the haunches-in, the outside hind leg is moved towards the inside shoulder, closer to the center of gravity, while the inside hind leg is grounded more by the rider’s weight. In turns on the haunches, passades and pirouettes the



shoulders are moved around the inside hind leg (without letting the outside hind leg escape). Simultaneously, the back is suppld and strengthened by the same exercises. In other words, suppling the back and engaging the hind legs one at a time are inseparable. One cannot have one without the other.

When the hind legs have been sufficiently prepared and strengthened individually, the rider can start to practice exercises that flex both hind legs simultaneously. It is especially the airs above the ground that serve this purpose. You can therefore see that these two phases correspond roughly to Campagne School and High School equitation .

“Moreover, the hind legs must be made flexible individually

until they have been prepared for simultaneous bending by alternating exercises. The rider will then have to overcome mainly the resistance of one hind leg, that is, only half the resistance and the horse will be able to rest the leg that has been previously stressed more when changing from one hand to the other. This now involves lateral bending of the horse which is the only way to intensively work each hind leg individually as the inside hind leg. The more perfectly the entire spinal column is able to assume the necessary carriage and lateral flexion, the finer and more reliably will the rider be able to act on the individual leg. Work on the spine and the hind legs is so intimately related that it cannot be performed separately at all. The spine finds one of its main supports in the hind legs; the resistance which

the horse poses against lateral flexion of its body is thus usually to be found in the hind legs. If the horse bends correctly in the spine on a circle it bends the inside hind leg. An increased bend in the individual hind leg is conceivable only on a curved track and with the horse bent accordingly. Bending the spine is therefore the only means for primarily working the individual hind leg. It must unconditionally precede the uniform bending of both legs. This work on the inside hind leg by letting the horse carry itself in a bent position begins on one track on a circle and on other bent lines. From this then develops the shoulder-in with its various gradations which must be so well established that the remaining exercises on two tracks evolve correctly from it.”