

Craig Stevens on the French and German Schools

The persistent question defining the differences between the French and German school in Europe today is almost without validity. Perhaps now, in modern times we should ask about differences between academic and competitive equitation.

There is no longer a pure French or German school. The French and German equestrian cultures are so enmeshed that the lines blur between them. At the upper levels, the French are very influenced by “German” ideas and the Germans, by the “French”. In spite of this, the question lingers, especially in North America, where it is a “hot” issue.

This is a complex issue, and to clearly understand it entails an understanding of not only the technical aspects, but also of the nature of the cultures involved, and the history of equitation. Obviously, a very in-depth exploration is impossible in this kind of forum, but we can give an insight into some of the broader issues.

Both schools have a common root in the work of the eighteenth century master La Guérinière, who was a principle mentor of what we call “classical equitation” today. Both schools can be traced back to eighteenth century France and the School of Versailles, although La Guérinière himself never actually taught at Versailles. La Guérinière is considered to be the “inventor” of the shoulder-in. He was very concerned with lightness, and emphasized the technique of riding in release of the aids, which he called “decent of the aids.” These ideas are still very prevalent today, and in fact, the writings of La Guérinière are the foundation of the Spanish Riding School. Therefore, France is the common root and source for all modern equestrian culture.

Each school, whether French, German or any other is an expression of equestrian culture. These schools embody a philosophy based on temperament and form a mechanism for acquiring and passing on knowledge. Each school forms a body of doctrine whose focus tends to be more towards passing on than acquiring knowledge. This tendency towards conservatism forms the dogma of the school, which in turn shapes the acquisition of knowledge.

In equitation, the nature of the horse is the dynamic factor which either supports this conservatism, or offers problems. The horse does not subscribe to an equestrian culture, but is reactive to it according to his temperament. The two “schools” evolved differently from dealing with horses of two different temperaments; the hot horse, generally the light breeds, and the cold horse, generally the draft breeds. These differences in temperament had their root in regional geography. The French school developed while working with the hotter light breeds from southern Europe, while the German school worked with a horse of colder temperament from northern Europe.

Not only has the type of horse been a factor in the development of these schools, but the nature of human understanding has left its mark. The development of any body of knowledge, including riding, can be classified into two categories: empirical and rational. The empirical category can be further divided into two additional subcategories:

instinctive empiricism and methodical empiricism. These three approaches form the background of the history of equitation.

Empiricism, the view that experience, especially of the senses, is the only source of knowledge, is the oldest and still the widest practiced approach to riding. The rider accepts as valid only what he's observed or found through his own experimentation. This was how most people learned to ride or train prior to the nineteenth century. Empiricism can then be divided into two types; instinctive and methodical. Between instinctive empiricism and methodical empiricism, instinctive is the most common. This is the learn-by-doing school. It is the easiest to practice as it is very simple. The rider learns by riding as much as possible, and over time, develops his own methods of coping with problems. These methods may be very hard on the horse, and horses that are trained this way often work in a state of constant and sometimes violent contraction. This method is the least effective with hotter types of horses, as the physical and psychological stress can ruin the horse or injure the rider. For the less than talented rider, it results in the use of excessive force, which at best is crude, and is very often brutal to the horse. Only the very talented rider can reach even a medium level of training this way, which is insufficient to reach the advanced levels required for competitive riding.

Methodical empiricism is a procedure which progresses from the simple to the complex, to achieve a goal of submission and maneuverability in the horse. The start of methodical empiricism traces itself to the Renaissance in Italy. Numerous systems have come and gone, but the most successful is the German method. This method was described by General Baron von Holzing-Berstedt (1867-1936), president of the FEI and a German equestrian authority, as "the physical education of the horse by means of a gymnastic program related to a systematic progression." This definition is supported in the earlier work of the German master, Gustave Steinbrecht, called "Gymnasium of the Horse".

The difficulty with this method is that it cannot be applied universally. It requires an aptitude and a willingness for both the horse and rider to adapt to this approach. Success with this approach is the result of the patient, obstinate and hard-working application of the method. It requires a real penchant for discipline coupled with a firm conviction that strict discipline is the best way to destroy resistance in the horse. This method is usually readily accepted by the colder blooded horse, and has therefore been used successfully for generations. However, many hot blooded horses object to these methods. This is why it is often said that Arabian and Thoroughbred horses are not good in Dressage, and that warm bloods are preferable. Not all horses or all riders are comfortable with this approach, and so for some, "systematic mechanization" is doomed to fail.

The old German "methodical empiricism" does not provide the answers for many riders. Its success is very dependent on the talent of the practitioner, and on knowing the 'why' and 'how'. Any method's success is a matter of how its method is applied. Talent aside, knowing the how and why moves the method from methodical empiricism to rational equitation.

Rational equitation not only uses procedures grouped in a method, it also has a body of principles which enable intelligent and effective application of the method. The father of

rational and modern equitation was Francois Baucher, as Baucher was the first master to focus on the causes of difficulties encountered, and the first to convey the 'how' and 'whys' to his students.

Baucher was the first to produce flying changes at every stride, and his conception of the seat has formed the base of the modern show seat. Baucher's conceptions did not prevail in his time and he offended many influential people with his attacks on tradition.

Baucher's influence formed the base of the schism between the French and German schools. The 'French' school was influenced by Baucher and moved towards rational equitation, while the 'German' school retained its methodical empiricism. While both schools have a common historical root, their way of approaching the problem of resistances in the horse can be completely opposite.

The German school pushes the whole horse forward into the various classical schooling figures, which it uses to destroy resistances by a constant forward engagement and the use of transitions. There is an underlying philosophy of suppling the whole horse.

In the French school resistance is destroyed by the disassociation of resistance from forward movement. The horse is halted and flexions are used at the point of the resistance to eliminate the resistance. The horse is not permitted contracted forward movement. The philosophy is to destroy each resistance when and where it happens, in order to prevent resistance in the whole horse.

Both ways work. In the old 'German' method, repeated riding of the schooling figures, in a progressive order, simple to complex, overcomes the resistance. If the rider is applying the schooling figures just like they're presented in the 'Dressage Tests', with no understanding of 'why', then you have a methodical empirical approach. The more the rider understands, however, the more the two schools overlap, and the less important the order is. In the 'French' method, the underlying principle is that allowing contracted movement trains contracted movement, and allowing only relaxed movement trains the horse for relaxed movement. Underlying the 'German' method is the fact that the schooling figures are being employed in order to break up the resistances of the horse, and if the rider applying methodical schooling figures knows this, than the 'German' approach can be just as rational as the 'French' approach, and the difference between the methods is simply one of philosophy and applied technique.

The divisions between methodical empirical equitation, instinctive empirical equitation, and rational equitation are not rigid, which is why we say that drawing a difference between the schools is out of date. Not all people in the French school are rational riders, nor are all students of the German school strictly empirical in their approach. The real question is more about how the method is applied. Is the rider or school focused on a sporting discipline, or on the attainment of the highest harmony possible between the horse and rider ensemble?

If the focus is on the harmony of the horse and rider, the goals are artistic or academic equitation, and if the focus is on a sport, then we are considering competitive equitation.

Unfortunately at this time, the practice of academic equitation in North America is almost nonexistent, and it is also practiced very little in Europe. The French school contains the true foundation for understanding riding as an art, for it is the source of all equestrian culture, as the school of Versailles was the root of all cultured riding.

Unfortunately, pure French equitation no longer exists. The last great teacher of this style of riding was the late horse master, Nuno Oliveira. His style and influence is still felt throughout the horse world. This master was not only a brilliant rider and trainer, but also a genius of academic equitation. He embodied equestrian culture in a time when artistic equitation was on the brink of extinction. His greatest contribution to equitation is the synthesis of the teachings of the eighteenth century school of Versailles with the nineteenth century work done by Baucher.

Artistic equitation is rooted in the union of the two schools, and for the true horseman the art will always be the first concern, and sport will always be second. Only to the rider who considers the horse first, can the secret of equitation be revealed. The key to the secret is in the compassionate understanding of the horse and this is hidden in the heart of the horse. The elimination of resistance in the horse can only be achieved when the horse has no will except that of his rider. This takes complete trust. This kind of trust can come only to the rider who has proven himself worthy of the horse's confidence through respect and mutual affection.

In this article we over-simplified many ideas in equitation. More than general differences between the French and the German school, there are differences in the details and aspects of position and seat which are related to whose version of the school we are studying, and/or what point in history we are examining. In an age of internationalism, these nationalistic questions progressively lose meaning. Schools of equitation will always resolve into one horse and one rider, and the quality of that individual relationship. The higher the quality of the relationship, the more likely the higher individual qualities can come forth, and the greater the mutual satisfaction will be.