

Equestrian Development:

Beyond Glamour and Illusion

Craig P. Stevens

In its most positive expression, dressage is an idealization of the teaching of the past and a sensitive exploration of the potential of an individual horse and rider. There would be few who would find difficulty in this. In most who practice this art there is a sincere desire to develop the horse through correct riding and training. But balancing the teachings of the past and daily practice can present a challenge to the most sincere aspirant of the art, and over time glamour and illusion has taken the place of the clarity of the original message.

For the student, it is very difficult to know who and what to believe. Each trainer and instructor espouses their own views and shares their individual experiences. Each book reflects its own special vision. As if to confound the rider even more, each horse presents unique issues.

This raises some important questions which need to be addressed: Is there in the sum total of the daily practice and theoretical considerations enough to make the ideal of dressage more than just wishful thinking? Is this practice dynamic and alive? Will it carry the theory into physical demonstration and truly meet the needs of the horse and the rider?

In this complex web of details, how can one most effectively sort out the wheat from the chaff? That which is true does not necessarily follow the beliefs and logic that we desire. The path does not always proceed in a direction where we are comfortable. First we must seek the true nature of the horse.

Throughout history there have been many teachers who have offered their perceptions and have applied themselves to the problems and challenges involved in the art of training the horse. These outstanding horsemen have been called masters.

Some of the masters of the past have left us their thoughts to act as guides and while they are numerous and varied in their beliefs there is simple common ground upon which a serious student can stand. Once clear on this common ground, the student may find a way to measure his experience, education and reflections of this most fascinating and wonderful art.

Common threads running through the works of the equestrian masters include:

1. ***Humility***: Most of the masters have suggested that humbleness is a quality necessary for the true student. This is because so many difficulties in equitation arise from human ambition and egocentric visions.

2. ***Lightness***. Great riders have always sought lightness. In lightness there is a way beyond the difficulties. Seeking lightness and self carriage both in the physical and psychological sense is the fundamental base which enables both the horse and rider to find the freedom to express themselves.

3. ***Simplicity***. Lightness and self carriage, wherever they manifest themselves, are always a simple state. For what greater simplicity can there be than the complete release of the aids? Anything less than this is not self carriage and in the end complexity will always find itself opposite to the true nature of the horse.

Complex systems of riding are both difficult for the rider and the horse to understand. This can lead to serious difficulties between the horse and rider.

4. **Joy.** There is nothing gained if the execution of a test or a movement succeeds if there is no joy in it for the horse or the rider. Every horse and rider are special and theory is only as good as this individuality is respected. There is a way to pass to the highest levels of the art but it is always through love of the horse and applying oneself to the discipline of the art.

It is important to understand that the masters of the past and present seek in their greatest moments to share their personal revelations. These masters sought to pass on their insights to those of their generation and the next who had sufficient sensitivity to benefit from these revelations, and we can turn to books that survive today written by masters of the past. However, put into words, these equestrian revelations lose some of their clarity. This has often created confusion and resulted in misconceptions.

Much of the revelation from the past has come along the lines of the cultural influences and, as these misconceptions have deepened and grown in time, the original simplicity (as it was conveyed by the original master) has been lost. All basic revelations are best presented in the simplest forms. Over time, as people seek to apply what has been written, things change. Accretions slip in; men make the simple teaching complex through their mental dissertations. Many great systems were built up, such as the Spanish Riding School and the French and German systems, to mention only a few. Perhaps the founders of these schools would have much difficulty in recognizing the two or three fundamental facts or truths which they sought to reveal and emphasize, so great is the mantle of confusion which has been thrown over the simplest of the movements. This has created a state in which glamour and illusion are common place.

The glamour and illusion has become so profound as to create the appearance of separate disciplines in riding. In this darkness it is as if the principles of riding or training could be thrown aside if one were to use a different saddle or select some special breed. It is not that there are not special uses for certain horses, but training is training and whether for a dressage horse or a race horse, the same basic principles govern.

To seek to advance in the art of equitation is to try and pass beyond this, and seek to shed light on this subject which has become so needlessly obscure. Fortunately we are all possessed of the tools needed to find the right course.

There are three lights which need to be brought to bear on the subject; the light of knowledge, the light of wisdom and the light of intuition. The latter light is the result of the blending of the first two.

The light of knowledge comes from the use of the mind. It is from the in-depth study of the literature and riding theory. Not all that is written is of value, nor is every theory worthy of practice, but behind every impulse to theorize is the practice of a horseman who has tried to resolve the same issues that modern riders are faced with. It is this impulse and not always the individual solution which should draw the student's attention.

The light of wisdom is the result of practice and experience. Each piece of theory needs to be measured and judged in the practice of day to day riding. When this is done a blending of wisdom and knowledge results in an awakening of the light of intuition, which will infallibly lead the rider towards a higher level of achievement.

It is important to see how this evolution in equitation is a personal matter, and that it is beyond horse shows and judges. It has nothing to do with winning or losing. It is

about the one-to-one communication with the horse which is always the place that the genuine masters have begun and ended their work.

When the flash and glamour leave the rider and when the illusion created by mass thought about the horse pass and all that is left is the genuine affection for the animal, only then can you learn to train and ride correctly. The center of it all has to be the horse. Some students of the equestrian arts see this early, some later, but if you are around the horse long enough and it truly lives in your heart you will reach a place where you doubt every thing that you ever knew as a fact about riding. This moment of emptiness when you finally let go of the glamour and illusion will come as a great relief. From here you find yourself returning to the basic messages shared by the horse masters, ideas that are consistently present in the relationship with the horse. Here as a student of dressage you will finally tear down all you know about riding and training, and start again and again until the model you have in your heart will be the one in your head, which will be the one that moves your body and touches your soul.

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