

# An Exploration of the Classical Work in Hand

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## The Work in Hand

It is difficult to write a useful article on the work in hand largely because there is an incredible amount of detail necessary to do it well and it is so fundamental to the development of a good relationship with the horse.

Just defining the term *work in hand* is quite an undertaking because its broadest meaning embraces all ground work including long lining and longe work. It also can be applied to training a young horse in how to lead, and when applied to advanced training the work in hand includes all of the airs above the ground of the high school.

Given that the term can cover anything from halter breaking a foal to practicing the high airs, any article on the subject is going to be very limited. When we teach

the work in hand the beginning course consists of two full days of work with eight hours of theory and discussion, and another eight of practice and observation. The end result of this is just a basic understanding from which one can begin to practice. Given that 16 hours of intense study and practice result in only transmitting the most basic ideas of the method, how much harder to get across in a few paragraphs enough information to inform the reader.

So, where do we start? Let us begin with the fundamentals. Everyone agrees that to improve performance in riding is to focus on the basics, but, what are the basics?

There are two ideas which are most fundamental to effective horsemanship; the seat and the aids. The development of the seat involves adapting the human body to the movement of the horse. This physical skill results from the cultivation of suppleness and balance.

In riding, the seat and the aids are unavoidably related. Without a correct seat the aids cannot be used effectively. The study of the aids, however, does not have to be limited by the rider's athletic abilities. The physical skills involved in

the work in hand are those of walking and very simple physical coordination. Thus, for riders who are uncertain in their seat, the work in hand enables the rider to develop an effective practice of the aids without interfering with the balance by placing the horse under saddle. For those who have a good seat, the work in hand develops the rider's eye and gives greater tact and clarity to the rider's practice in the saddle. The aids are a language for communicating with the horse. This work is like syntactical practice for the rider as well as the horse, and when the rider does mount both are more assured in their understanding of the conversation of the aids.

Certainly work in hand permits the effective control of the horse on the ground, its main use is to educate both the horse and the rider in the cultivation of a positive relationship. While it is a common understanding that the aids are for controlling the horse, it is in fact primarily a method for addressing the horse's mind.

While throughout the course of history there have been many ways of working horses both good and bad, the good systems take into account first the

horse's mentality. An effective use of the aids takes the horse's mind into account. There are three possible attitudes possible:

- 1- The horse's mind works against the rider
- 2- The horse ignores the rider
- 3- The horse works with the rider.

It goes without saying that the whole point of work in hand is to cultivate the third response. To produce a good saddle horse or an upper level horse which is a pleasure to ride is a simple matter of, instead of focusing on movement or the specifics of the dressage tests, we seek to captivate the mind of the horse before attempting to control its body. To do this, though, requires education – not just the education of the horse, but that of the rider.

Work in hand educates both the horse and rider in the language of the aids. Because the rider is not mounted during this process it becomes possible for him or her to observe the horse's movement. This makes work in hand a vital tool for an instructor, but for the serious amateur it provides a way of establishing strong and correct control and checks the work under saddle as well. If a movement is

executed easily in hand, but is difficult under saddle, there is no doubt the rider's position or seat is at fault.

Work in hand is a simple process, in fact, its greatest difficulty is in letting go of our tendency to make things hard and truly grasping how simple it can be. It is an excellent tool for the development of the tact of the equestrian. In this series of articles we will explore the basic tools needed to establish a good working relationship with your horse in hand. These tools include the method itself, the theory behind it, and the tools of the trade. We will debunk some myths about the method, challenging many of the tools and techniques in common use today. We will explore the nature of the horse, the nature of the rider, and the principles behind the very simple method called the work in hand.

