

HISTORY OF THE ART OF RIDING

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We will begin by reviewing the history of the art of riding from its beginnings long before Christ up to today. It will help the rider to understand the ideology of training the horse and it will also help to keep the ages-old riding accomplishments alive and thriving.

From Ancient Times to the Re-birth of the Art of Riding in the 16th Century

The teaching of the Greek Xenophon (4th Century BC) are the foundation of present knowledge and methods of training. The guideline laid down in his works *The Art of Riding* and *The Cavalry Major* are still of practical importance and are superior to the fragmented works of Kikkulis (14th Century BC) and Simon (4th Century BC).

Xenophon commended the same supple and independent seat as we do today. He knew the high school movements which were used to give the Athenian horseman a proud appearance during parades.

Xenophon also mentions in detail the cross-country riding which made parade horses equally useful for hunting and for warfare.

But there is something missing in Xenophon's lessons. The young Greek nobleman of the period rode only trained horses; the actual training and handling of young horses was not mentioned in Xenophon's writings.

We know from Greek art (the Parthenon frieze of Phidias) that the horses of Athens and Sparta were barely of medium height. They were bred in the Oriental-Thessalonion region, and since they had a lot of blood they needed very sympathetic handling.

Throughout his teachings, Xenophon's feeling for the horse's psychology is apparent. He could be called the first animal psychologist. This *feel*, although characteristic of Greek horsemen, was rare among the Romans, who imitated Greek horsemanship but could only copy the technical aspects without the creativity. In Rome, the horsemanship reached no further than voltage and racing, which entertained the masses in the Circus Maximus.

Although saddles, stirrups and nailed-on horseshoes – already known to the Chinese before the Christian era – were used all over Europe during this period: on the contrary, during the stormy times of the mass migrations many established horse breeds were destroyed, together with inherited knowledge of the horses. The art of riding was passed on merely as a caricature of Greek art. It was practiced in carnivals and circuses in Alexandria and later in the eastern Roman Empire.

The knights of the Middle Ages also rode without any sophistication. Well-bred horses were used only as pack animals, to pull coaches, or for hunting with falcons. In battle and for tournaments heavy horses were used, their riders wedged into very deep seated saddles with an extremely high pommel and cantle to prevent them from being too easily knocked to the ground. The horse had to thrust itself forward to give additional power to the knight's lance.

From the Renaissance to Guérinière (from the end of the 15th Century to the 18th Century)

Although the east Roman circus riders did very little for the development of classical riding, after the fall of Constantinople (1453) some of them fled to Italy, where they were patronized by well-to-do patricians. These refugees passed on their circus tricks, and revived interest in the art of riding. In the spirit of the Renaissance the classic principles which survived in the writings of Xenophon were rediscovered and developed, along with contemporary saddles, and bits with lever action.

So the art of riding began to flourish again in Italian riding academies, with master such as Grisone, Carraciolo, and Pignatelli. During the 16th and 17th Centuries their teachings spread to France, Germany, Spain and England.

During the Renaissance, the art of riding for practical purposes was rediscovered. The invention of firearms had eliminated the need for the heavy weight-carrier of the Middle Ages, and the lighter-footed Andalusian horse replaced the heavy battle horse, not only in man-to-man combat but also in games at court.

As already mentioned, one of the pathfinders in this rediscovery of the classic art of riding was Federico Grisone, who in 1532 founded a riding academy in Naples. Young noblemen from all over the Christian Occident attended this school. Similar establishments were founded in Rome, Florence, Bologna and Ferrara. Students were not only taught the refined art of high school riding, but also dancing, fencing and conversation, which at court had to be studied with Latin quotations. The horses at these academies had to serve as schoolmasters and therefore had to be schooled thoroughly to gain the necessary suppleness. The training methods involved were written down by various masters and scholars. In 1552 Grisone published *Gli Ordini di Cavalcare*. In 1588 the German Baron von Löhneysen published the first independent German riding treatise, *Die neu eröffnete Hof-, Kriegs- und Reitschul*. Although influenced by Grisone, the Baron rejected several forceful methods employed by the man from Naples.

Grisone's merit is that he adopted the teaching of Xenophon, following the Greek's criteria of a horse's carriage and a rider's seat but within the limit of contemporary saddles. Grisone emphasized trot work as a means of suppling the horse, which was unknown to Xenophon, who only used the trot for a few strides during a transition to canter. Grisone also emphasized the necessity of securing the horse's neck at its base (in front of the shoulders).

However, in one important factor neither Grisone nor any of his compatriots (with the exception of Pluvinel) followed the teachings of Xenophon; this was in the psychological harmony between horse and rider, which seems to have been forgotten and was often replaced by brutal methods.

At the turn of the 17th Century the forceful Italian training system shifted westwards to France, where its protagonists were two pupils of the Naples School: Salomon de la Broue (1553-1610), Riding Master at the court of Henri IV, and Antoine de Pluvinel (1601-1642), teacher of Louis XIII.

In de la Broue's writings the influence of the brutal Grisone can still be easily detected whereas Pluvinel's *Manege Royal* displays a timeless excellence. Like Xenophon, and like the horsemen of today, Pluvinel does not see the horse as an unwilling slave. He goes back to the horse's natural movements, which he tries to enhance, regulate and make more pronounced through training, without any loss of the animal's natural charm.

Among the auxiliary aids in use at that time were some two hundred different – often cruel – bits, as well as the 'gaulee armee,' a long stick barbed at the end with a sharp spur. This was invented to replace the rider's sideways driving leg aid, the rider's leg being fully stretched forward, with the knee stiff. This standing seat was appropriate for contemporary saddles, and was similar to the position adopted by knights in the Middle Ages, whose armour prohibited any bending of the joints.

Apart from Pluvinel and his followers the riding masters of those times merely created artificial paces. The art of riding was deprived of its class characteristics. It reduced the horse to a creature without will, misused and deprived of any initiative. Another sinister aspect of such brutal dressage was that young horses also suffered bodily harm. De la Broue confessed that many of his horses developed spavins.

Pluvinel, on the other hand, was known as the best French rider of his time. He taught the croupade, ballotade, capriole and courbette, the later of "half" or "little" courbette, with the forelegs touching down after every jump (mezair). Pluvinel is also said to have invented the pillars. Whether they have been a blessing to horses or not is arguable, but at least today they are used only by experts in renowned establishments such as the Spanish Riding School in Vienna.

The Duke of Newcastle, who received his dukedom in 1665 and died in 1677, rejected the pillars, as he believed that too many horses were ruined by unskilled work between them. However, he still utilized part of Pluvinel's idea – with one pillar as a fixed focal point around which he worked the horse on a small circle. With the horse's head toward the centre he developed the suppling exercise known today as turn around the forehand motion, or sideways volte. This exercise taught the horse once he had submitted to the one-sided inside aids to seek and accept the outside aids. This is the first

step towards straightening the horse on curved and straight lines. It also prepares the horse for the collecting movement of shoulder-in, which is the foundation of all other lateral movements.

Gustav Steinbrecht, most famous riding master of the 19th Century, preferred Newcastle's *General System of Horsemanship* to all other writings of the 17th and 18th Centuries. Others thought that the Duke's methods were inconsistent and often unnecessarily cruel, although frequently on the right lines. There is no doubt that Newcastle had as fundamental an influence on his compatriots as did later the Frenchman Francois Robichon de la Guérinière (died 1751). Newcastle pointed out that for true collection of the horse's hind legs have to be close together. He also knew how to use the snaffle bridle, the cavesson noseband and running reins.

What Newcastle did not realize was the importance of counter-canter and its advantages in straightening a horse and activating the hind legs, encouraging them to jump further beneath the centre of gravity. Nor did he use the well defined and exact aids of today's balanced seat, with its elastically bent knee and 'breathing', feeling legs. This discovery was left to the German Pinter von der Aue (died 1664) and to de la Guérinière seventy years later. Regrettably Pinter's early rearrangement of the seat was little noticed, mostly because contemporary saddles forced the leg into an unnatural, stretched position, and Pinter had neither the means or the influence to redesign saddles. With de la Guérinière taught, as we do today, that basic training is the same for every horse, no matter what he specializes in later on.

As Master of the King's stables, de la Guérinière was in a position to replace the then fashionable saddle (the *selle à piquer à la Pluvinel*) with the new flat *selle à la française*, which is still used today at Saumur. This saddle enabled the development of the modern seat, based on both seat bones and the crotch. The leg adopted today's position – no longer stretched out hanging down by the horse's sides, with a soft feel and ready to apply the aides instantly. It took half a century for this natural seat to become universally established.

Guérinière's main achievement must be that he developed every aspect of the shoulder-in movement. With it he handed down to use the means of achieving 'légèreté', 'Durchlässigkeit' (the horse's immediate willingness to respond to the rider's aids), and obedience, without the slightest resistance. He recognized that the trot was the pace for all fundamental dressage work, although he did not appreciate the value of the counter movements, later explored by G. Steinbrecht (died 1885).

Regrettably Guérinière used the snaffle bridle only in the initial training period. He then changed to the Pelham with two sets of reins (double bit with jointed mouthpiece) or to a double bit with extremely long lower cheeks. He liked to use the cavesson with running reins, and made use of the circle to supple the horse.

Guérinière repeatedly emphasized perfect coordination of the aids as the necessary pre-condition for the performance of piaffe and passage and the high school movements above the ground.

To summarise, the most important achievements of this creative horseman must be that he wrote down the first logical and continuous riding instructions. They still provide the guideline for today's dressage, in spite of some minor criticisms.

His tradition was kept alive in the 'School of Versailles', during the rococo epoch before being nearly lost during the French Revolution.

Cross-Country Riding. Downfall of the Art in France during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars

Newcastle and Guérinière cultivated high school dressage more or less for its own sake. They neglected natural cross-country riding and military riding by cavalry.

During the 18th Century a new development took place in Prussia: *campagne* (cross-country) riding, was developed there and became an important addition to the art of riding on the Continent. But the development was slow and was not fully established until a century later, by von Rosenberg in Germany and d'Aure in France.

Today we would call a *campagne* horse an eventer: a horse which is made 'durchlässig' through dressage training and

which is also taught to like and enjoy outdoor work. The rider is thus enabled to arrive safely at his destination, riding across country over obstacles and water, taking the shortest route, and using up as little energy as possible.

The Prussian King Friedrich II and his generals (the most notable horseman being General Friedrich Wilhelm von Seydlitz) needed such campagne horses for their cavalry, and within a few years von Seydlitz produced cavalry divisions which were decisive factors in many of the great king's battles. This overwhelming effect of the Prussian cavalry depended on the training of horses. The three qualities required were: *Speed*, as the attacks were ridden at full gallop. *Obedience*, to remain totally under the rider's control when in close formation. In face-to-face single combat they had to be agile and, in the words of the king, be able to turn 'on a space the size of a plate'. *Safe across country*, so that the cavalrymen could, if necessary, negotiate any obstacle in their path. Campagne-riding utilizing these three important factors was based on dressage training and developed alongside it.

Tragically, with the death of General Seydlitz and Ziethen, enthusiasm dwindled and the art of riding declined. The French Revolution and ensuing wars completed its destruction and encouraged the teaching of a more facile and hasty style of riding. Even when Napoleonic wars ended in 1815 it seemed impossible to revive the art. French riders split into two groups, one following classic principles (though only superficially, for the sake of appearances and without meaning); the other practicing a wild, purposeless cross-country riding. Both styles inhibited any worthwhile development.

East of the Rhine things looked brighter. The wars had not caused such devastation as in France. The Spanish Riding School still practiced classical dressage, and produced teachers such as Seeger. In Germany Hundersdorf was the first German master of classical riding. At the turn of the century he was a 'Bereiter' for the Hessian household cavalry. Later he became 'Riding Master' to the King of Wurttemberg and was knighted.

He gave the art of riding new vitality and related it to practical riding, which was particularly important, as the devastation in France had caused a break-down between Guérinière's teachings and day-to-day riding. Hünersdorf changed this in Germany, teaching according to Guérinière's thoughts but never using dressage as a mere decorative Art. Although he taught his pupils piaffe and levade on schooled horses, he never forgot the practical aspect of the art. Following in the footsteps of the Prussian cavalry generals he schooled mainly campagne horses, which after a two-year basic training had to be able to perform dressage, jumping and some cross-country.

In 1791 he published his book *Guidelines to the Training of Horses in the Most Natural and Best Manner*. This was the first classical German book on riding and training horses, and was praised by the French as the 'bib' for riders. It established today's balanced seat as the basis for the application of aids. The horse's self-carriage and relative elevation of the forehand were also defined.

The New Masters up to Steinbrecht and I'Hotte

In Berlin in 1817 an organization was formed 'to teach the training of horse and rider according to uniform principles'. This organization was first based at the Cavalry School at Schwedt (Oder) and from 1867 at the Cavalry School in Hannover. From here the teaching of classical riding spread, and had a decisive influence on German riding.

One of the early teachers in Berlin and Schwedt was E.F. Seidler, who specialized in training misused horses (cavalry remounts in those days were mostly of wild Polish stock). Seidler advocated unconstrained forward movement as the basis of an even contact on both reins, and relative elevation of the forehand. He also rode the horses across country twice weekly, and taught the rising trot, an innovation imported from England. He attacked the French circus performer Baucher for teaching his horses to trot and canter backwards.

The Prussian Lois Seeger (died 1865) also contributed to the development of the German riding system. He too, denounced Baucher and called him the 'gravedigger of classical riding'. His motto was: 'Never forget that riding forward is the soul of the art of riding, and that the necessary impulsion must come from the hindquarters.' Seeger was trained at the Spanish Riding School and was the favourite pupil of the famous Max von Weyrother. In 1844 Seeger published the *System of the Art of Riding*.

In 1842 Karl Kegel published *The newest Theory of Riding according to logical and wise thinking*. In this book, Kegel advocated the forward jumping seat, following the horse's head movement with yielding hands, and he explained logi-

cally why this seat eased the weight on the horse's back over a jump.

The same was taught by Count Szechenyi (died 1894) and by the 'official' inventor of the modern jumping seat, Federico Caprilli (died 1907).

Gustav Steinbrecht (1808-1885), a pupil of Seeger, was mainly interested in training horses for the circus, always according to classical principles. Many of his horses were admired in Renz, Carré and in American and British circuses. The famous lady circus rider Petzold was one of his pupils.

In 1885 he published his *Gymnasium of the Horse* which on the whole was a valuable guideline for classical riding, especially at a time when some riders had been led astray by the teaching of Fillis and Plinzner.

Steinbrecht's 'ride your horse forward and straighten him' became the motto for generations to come. He is considered to be the pathfinder of German riding instruction. The following is an excerpt from his book:

"The rider/trainer has achieved his aim and fully trained his horse when both forces of the hindquarters – the propulsive force and the carrying power – coupled with elasticity, are fully developed and when the trainer can use and balance the effect of these forces exactly."

The means of achieving this aim are rhythmic paces and 'Schwung' with a relaxed horse which is straight and moves in self-carriage 'through the poll', accepting the bit equally well on both sides. ('Schwung' is the transmission of the energetic impulse created by the hind legs in to the forward movement of the entire horse. An elastically swinging back is the necessary pre-condition.) When talking about lateral movements Steinbrecht repeatedly emphasized that straightness in the pure lateral bend gets lost (and with it 'Schwung' and regular paces) at the moment when the horse's hind legs no longer move on a narrow trace (close together) towards the centre of gravity. Only when they do so can the horse's hind legs bend evenly, carry more weight and with each step swing straight under the horse.

After Steinbrecht there were a number of famous masters teaching at various schools of equitation (often army establishments) who maintained and developed the art of riding. There were friendly connections between neighboring countries, and in order to gain experience army officers were exchanged between Hanover in Germany, Pinerolo and Tor di Quinto in Italy, the Bavarian Equitation Institute, the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, and Saumur in France.

During the 19th Century France produced General Alexis L'Hotte (1825-1984), who along with the German generals had an influence on the art of riding. L'Hotte was Chief Instructor, and up to 1879 Commander of the world-famous French Training Centre at Saumur. As well as being an elegant school-rider and brilliant all-round horseman he was a true psychologist, listening to the horse and always preparing it so that it could offer légèreté ('Durchlässigkeit' with 'Schwung'). Further masters of the French School were Danloux, Decarpentry and Lesage.

The Art of Riding in the 20th Century-Additional Comments by J. Michael Keirkegaard

In 1912 the first Olympic Games of modern times were held in Stockholm. World War I unfortunately interrupted the development of international competition riding, which became the focal point of dressage in this century. The Federation Equestre Internationale instituted an International Dressage Event in 1929 in order to protect the Equestrian Art from the abuses to which it can be exposed to preserve it in the purity of its principles, so that it could be handed on intact to generations of riders to come.

From then on the standard of international competition improved consistently. The tenets of the various countries became more uniform, and the tempi changes became part of the dressage Grand Prix test. In Germany, and other countries of Europe great attention was also paid to the standard of instruction among riding teachers. Many countries had cavalry schools, from which many teachers eventually came to the United States, including several from the Spanish Riding School.

World War II again interrupted the sport of riding. To the surprise of many, equestrian activities quickly revived after the war. Although neither commerce nor agriculture any longer had need for the horse, riding did become more and more popular as a sport and leisure activity. Today the equestrian industry is still showing a rising trend. Dressage has become

more popular, and is again attempting to elevate its standards of riding, along with the quality of the sport horses that are now available.

Some Observations About the Schools of Riding

Sometimes much has been made of the distinctions between the French, Swedish, or German schools of dressage, of which each, in its turn, has been prevalent during various periods of competition riding during the 20th Century. We address this briefly here because one of our aims is to consolidate principles in order to avoid confusion, and to systematize our approach to dressage for purposes of teaching.

In this regard it is worth recognizing that the FEI has been working diligently for many years to reconcile differences between competing artists, and to articulate the highest principles of the equestrian sport.

One of the most telling and enlightening statements of the long-standing efforts of the FEI to consolidate principles comes from General Decarpentry's book, *Academic Equitation*. Decarpentry was a long-time member of France's world famous Cadre bleu and the Cadre noir, and served eight years in the capacity of ecuyer (teacher) at Saumur. In 1947 Decarpentry became the President of the Dressage Commission of the FEI and undertook the difficult task of setting the standard for, and adjusting the requirements of, international dressage competitions and of bringing strong national opinions into harmony. His success on the juries resulted in reconciling many differences of equestrian thought and, at the same time, in creating a universal ideal for the perfect dressage horse. Words from Decarpentry's *Academic Equitation* are quoted here at some length so that the significance of his task can be more fully understood and appreciated:

"At the beginning of the 20th Century, both schools (German and French) ignored one another, and it is to the honor of the FEI that it has brought them together by giving them the opportunity to challenge each other from time to time in its competitions.

In the first contests, the differences of manner amounted to opposition.

The horses of the Romanic School, as the French School is known beyond the Rhine, showed more willingness than exactitude in their submissiveness, and facility rather than diligence in their work.

Their riders gave the impression of having avoided difficulties instead of having solved them and, in the course of their presentation showed a slightly negligent ease in their attitude and rather nonchalant leniency in their demands on the horse.

On the other hand, in the performance of their task, the German horses evidenced an exemplary submission, a little constrained and sometimes dull, and a strict precision that was more mechanical than animated. Their results clearly proved the studious application of their trainers, but the riders in their presentations too obviously betrayed a persistently laborious effort.

The judges' differences of opinion were no less sharp, according to the School they belonged to, and the placing of the competitors gave rise to heated arguments.

But the competitors themselves rapidly took advantage of the opportunity for mutual observations.

Without forsaking what was good in their own method, they each tried to improve on it by adding something which they had admired for their neighbor's ways.

Year by year, the differences became less pronounced, the styles of both school more similar, although fortunately for the sake of art, not entirely identical.

In the same way, a similar concept of "right and wrong" was agreed upon by the judges under the artistic authority of the President of the FEI (then) General von Holzring, and it is only in the scale of relative values that some minor differences of appreciation continue to exist among the judges.

This is how the Poetry of Equitation flourished after the Olympic Game of 1936, thanks to the fortunate artistic influence of the FEI.”

Thus, it is evident that both among those at the top of the judging world, and among the competitors themselves, who have an opportunity for mutual observation, each should strive to articulate, to consolidate, and to enhance the principles and techniques with which we must function.

Dressage is, however, not only an art, but also a science. One should study, therefore, and observe and draw conclusions from what is already known. Too often students, and instructors, and trainers alike have allowed themselves to be buffeted about by every new-fangled explanation of how dressage must be done. It is almost as though reinventing the wheel is more important, *per se*, than learning to use established methods, from which, given an appropriate amount of genius and feel for horses, once can thereafter perhaps evolve. Those who attempt to shortcut the process of learning have either not known of, or have failed to read, the rich classical literature of dressage, including the texts from those countries like France, Sweden and especially Germany, which has had unparalleled success in international caliber competition. As Leonardo da Vinci once said:

“Those who devote themselves to practice without science are like sailors who put to sea without rudder or compass and who can never be certain where they are going. Practice must always be founded on sound theory.”