

USE OF THE WHIP AND THE SPURS

Description

“One whip no longer than 47.2 inches (120 cm), including lash may be carried in all classes except USEF/USDF Championships, USEF National Dressage Championships, USEF High Performance Championships, USEF High Performance qualifying and selection trials, and observation classes. (Exception: Competitors riding sidesaddle may carry a whip no longer than 47.2 inches (120 cm), including lash, in USEF/USDF Championships.) [USEF Rule DR120]

Purpose

“The whip is used to make the horse more alert. In dressage it is also used to increase the activity of the hind legs.” [Principles of Riding, p 79]

Application

“The dressage whip is held a little way in from the end, near to its center of gravity. It should lie obliquely across the rider’s thigh, pointing from front to back. The rider should use the whip to touch the horse just behind his lower leg, taking care not to disturb it in its mouth. Using the whip in the flank area or behind the saddle is not usually practical, since in many cases it not only fails to make the horse work more actively with its hind legs but it also causes it to raise its croup. The dressage whip can also be used to touch the horse on the shoulder in order to reinforce the regulating or sideways-pushing aids.” [Principles of Riding, p 79-80]

The whip should be applied with a short turn of the wrist, giving the horse’s side a little tap. Like the spur, the whip should be used together with, or after, the leg aid. The whip can only support, never replace, the leg aid.

It should be used quickly and lightly behind the leg to emphasize the aid or to ask for more attention. The whip helps to reinforce the leg aids should they prove insufficient.

Changing Your Whip Hand

“In an indoor school the whip is usually carried on the inside to prevent it touching the wall, otherwise, it should be carried on the side it needs to be used.” [Principles of Riding, p 80]

“If the whip needs to be changed over into the other hand, the rider puts both reins into the same hand as the whip and pulls the whip slowly upwards out of this hand with the free hand. The hand holding the whip then returns to its normal position and takes the rein back from the other hand.” [Principles of Riding, p. 80]

The “Circle of the Aids” and the Correct Use of the Whip

[Taken from articles written by Karl Mikolka]

The rider who searches for harmony, confidence, trust, balance and lightness, those concerned about the classical way of riding, should spend some time studying the great advantages that the proper use of the riding whip has to offer. The rider who has learned to master the finer points of handling the “wand” has access to one of the most effective training tools ever discovered: [The Circle Of the Aids].

Every dressage rider and trainer of dressage horses knows the importance of the circle as a ring figure, and is aware of the necessity of developing a good feel for the geometry of the circle. The rider’s communication with his partner, the horse, can also be envisioned as a circular flow of signals.

The whip brings the horse into the rider’s legs. The rider’s legs are guiding rails, which bring the shores on the bit, and with the help of the reins, into the rider’s hands. The rider’s weight influences the horse’s relaxed back and in conjunction with half-halts, affects the resistant-free joints of the horse’s hind legs, thus closing the circle.

At no point should the circle be interrupted. Otherwise, the rider loses instantaneously partial control of the horse, and this can lead to many disadvantages in training, such as delay in the horse’s progress or, the creation of a horse which

perhaps does all kinds of fancy stuff but stays completely behind the rider's legs and seat. As a result of being behind the rider's aids, at higher level movements like piaffe, passage, flying changes and pirouettes, the horses show either open mouths, biting madly at the bit, or an ugly tail swishing that accompanies each step.

The best results are achieved if this circle of the aids remains undisturbed throughout the entire training process. Unfortunately, it is all too easy for both partners to break this circle. It can be broken by the rider, who, with stiff hands does not feel the horse's level of sensitivity. Hard gripping legs kill the horse's self-locomotion. A heavy, ungiving seat hinders the horse's back activity. Badly timed half-halts ruin the gaits. The horse can break this circle with stiffness in the neck, poll or jaw, tight belly muscles, a rigid or a weak back, and hind legs that escape the half-halts through crookedness and stiffness.

The whip awakens the horse's sensitivity to move forward and by doing so brings the horse into the rider's legs. What does it mean to say the whip brings the horse into the rider's legs? Everything in riding depends on motion as well as on forward motion. The horse is a born runner, and his natural will is to move on without being asked to do so.

Unfortunately, this natural tendency of self-locomotion is frequently destroyed by the rider who uses an unnecessarily hard grip in his/her legs, thus making the horse dependent on this grip to keep going. These riders kill their horse's desire to move on and eliminate their legs as useful aids. Instead of creating a brilliant mover, they create a lazy one, and as time passes, they form a leg-dead horse without spirit, without fire.

The ultimate goal of training is to create a horse that drives itself, a horse that goes forward merely because it respects the presence of the rider in the saddle. No leg pressure should have to be used to keep this respect alive. It is a mutual agreement that should be confirmed as the training proceeds.

I frequently meet riders who neither carry a whip nor wear spurs and who want to train their horse with the legs alone. They do not know the circle of the aids and the importance it has for the correct training of the horse. It is as simple as this: the whip brings the horse on the bit into the rider's hands, and from there through the seat everything flows back into the horse's hind legs – closing the circle.

The gateway to the circle of the aids is a horse well-tuned to the whip. Such a horse is characterized by the following:

- He moves forward on the soft touch of the whip, known under the technical term: *the horse is in front of the whip*.
- He has learned to recognize its own sensitivity level, and pays increased attention to soft, invisible aids from the rider.
- He works off the rider's leg.

First, the rider should learn how to hold and handle the whip. The whip should be carried over the rider's thigh, pointing backwards and slightly downwards. Make sure that the whip is the appropriate length. The pressure through the whip is applied through the handle by twisting the fist so that the little finger turns slightly upward. Hold the handle so that at the most, two inches are sticking out of your fist.

While mounted, gently approach the horse's side with the whip until it lies softly against the horse's skin. By softly, I mean the weight of the whip alone should touch the horse, no pressure through the whip should be applied. Many riders trying this test will fail. Instead of bringing the whip slowly closer and closer towards the horse's belly, until it lands there gently, they misjudge the distance and although they think they give a gentle aid, it always ends in a slap that is too hard and meaningless.

You must learn to judge not only the distance the whip has to go, but also you must learn to 'read' the horse through the stick as soon as you make the contact. In order to feel, one must develop calmness and a very relaxed hand. To feel is possible only when the rider can maintain the contact of the whip with the horse's body for a few seconds. This is easy at a standstill, but difficult at trot and canter, and only possible if the rider has a stable hand. As the reins should have a steady contact with the horse's mouth, so too should the whip at times have a steady passive contact with the horse's side, maintaining it for a few strides, and trying to feel the horse's sensitivity as well as mental attitude.

Yes, the good rider should develop such a feel in his fist through the whip that he can determine in a split second his horse's mental readiness and sensitivity. Unfortunately, many riders make the mistake of using the whip without knowing their horse's sensitivity level and without testing it shortly before they apply a whip aid. Therefore, most of the

time the whip is applied much too hard, scaring the horse or equally bad, the whip aid is much too light and does not go through, thus teaching the horse to ignore the rider.

Each horse reacts differently towards the first testing by the whip. Some do not react at all. Some of them only twitch their skin, as they do when a fly touches them. Others swish their tails, a few will try to kick out against the whip. The only correct response should be the forward response.

If the rider feels that the horse shows no tendency to move on, then the pressure becomes vibrating. First soft vibrations should be used, always carefully concentrating not to pass the level of the horse's sensitivity. Should these soft vibrations have no effect, then they should become more determined, ending with a slap – a soft slap at first. At this point, as during all teaching processes in the training of a horse, the handling of the whip becomes quite tricky. Any horse not too dull will decide to move forward somewhere between the soft slap and the more determined one. Some horses trying to out-wait the rider will require one or even a couple determined slaps to make them move on. The old masters advise, 'do as little as possible, but as much as necessary, to reach your goals.' Therefore, don't think it is wrong to use the whip in a cracking action if the good horse should decide to need it.

It will take constant alertness on the rider's part never to allow the horse to forget his level of sensitivity. If the touch of the whip creates liveliness in the horse's hind legs, resulting in free forward motion, then the first stage of the circle of the aids is established. Only then can the rider proceed to the second state: the use of the rider's legs in order to bring the horse on to the bit, to make the horse relaxed and to prepare the horse to accept the half-halts, which will close the 'circle of the aids.'

Forward on the whip, enlarging away from the inner leg pressure into the outside rein and from there, through the rider's seat over the horse's back with half-halts into the horse's hind legs, completes the circle of the aids. This circle, the condition sine qua non of proper basic work must never be voluntarily interrupted, neither by the horse, nor by the rider. [Source: Karl Mikolka]

The Spur

Description

"Spurs must be made of metal. The shank must be either curved or straight pointing directly back from the center of the spur when on the rider's boot. If the shank is curved, the spurs must be worn only with the shank directed downwards. However, swan necked spurs are allowed. The inside arm of the spur must be smooth. If rowels are used, they must be free to rotate." [USEF Rule Book DR120]

Purpose

"Spurs are used first and foremost to enable the rider to apply his leg aids with more finesse and, secondly, to reinforce the leg aids. In this secondary role, their use can complement that of the whip. Before using spurs, the rider must have learned to use his legs in a controlled fashion and independently of his seat." *Principles of Riding*, p. 80]

Application

Spurs are a refinement of the aids and should not be used as a sole means of creating impulsion. The rider must be able to apply his legs without the spurs touching the horse.

"The most effective use of the spur is to apply it like a "wake up call" – quick and short, thus enhancing the horse's sensitivity to the leg. The spur should never be used constantly and never clamped into the horse's ribs. Such use of the spur only de-sensitizes the horse and causes unnecessary tension." [Gerhard Politz]

Note: A rubmark in the horse's coat where the spur has been chronically over used is a sign of poor skill and horsemanship, second only to perforations in the horse's skin, including bleeding from spur use.