



# HAUTE ÉCOLE

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## In Memoriam Hildegarde Gekiere 1949-2013

It is with great sadness that we relay news of the death of Hildegarde Gekiere, who has had a long association with LANA, and who had been a regular contributor to this magazine. She recently penned a series of articles for Haute École on “Training the Horse for Dressage.” In appreciation, we have reprinted her series of articles in this issue.

Hildegarde Gekiere’s involvement with horses began during her childhood in Belgium and lasted throughout her 64 years of life. She was a dressage rider and instructor and, at one time, was director of dressage in the Belgian sports complex of Bloso in Sint-Ulrich-Kapelle of the Flemish Brabant province.

Lipizzans were of special interest to her.

In the 1980s she worked with our own John Nicholas Iannuzzi and others to establish the Lipizzan Federation International (LIF). Since that time, she has served as Secretary-General of the LIF, recently in an honorary capacity.

During the 1990s, she worked to help individual stud farms in jeopardy from wars in the former Yugoslavia, especially the Djakovo Stud in Croatia and the Vucijak Stud in Bosnia, sending medicine and feed for the horses.

Her presence as a supporter of the Lipizzan will be missed. LANA will miss a friend and supporter.



The founding individuals at the initial meeting of the Lipizzan International Federation in 1985. Included in this photo are John Nicholas Iannuzzi of LANA, Rudolf Leiner and Hildegarde Gekiere.

# Training the Horse for Dressage: by Hildegarde Gekiere

Dressage Rider/Trainer of the Classical French/Portuguese School  
Founding Member and Former Secretary General of the LIF



## PART I: BASIC TENETS

First, I would like to thank LANA and John Nicholas Iannuzzi for giving me the opportunity to discuss with you one of the most passionate relationships a person can build with his or her horse.

For 35 years, I have been training students and their horses in the art of Dressage. I must emphasize, Dressage is an art; it is not a sport. Unfortunately, we lost this descriptive with the beginning of competition in the first part of the 20th century. From that moment, commercialization has seeped into Dressage and horses had to be trained in a shorter and shorter time because *time is money*. But horses today are no different from those of 100 years ago. They still require the same training and muscle building. Of course, the modern dressage horse is, in many ways, superior to the horses back then. This has nothing to do with the trainers, but, rather, with the excellent skills of breeders all over the world. A Dressage horse still needs to be prepared mentally and physically to become an athlete, and that takes time. It is true with the human athlete, and it is no different with horses.

Unfortunately, the horse is no longer a companion. He has become a tool, an instrument for self-satisfaction. The Dressage horse should not be about success or public plaudits, nor about pleasing a competition jury. Rather, according to the classic Dressage Rider and Trainer, Nuno Olivera, the horse should be joined in a dialogue, a tête-à-tête with the rider in a search for a relationship and perfection. To obtain this, the rider needs two things: technical skills and a soul. Technique can lead to a certain level, but above that, the rider needs the psychological participation of the horse. To achieve this balance, the rider has to question him or herself

during every training session, day after day. And the horse will tell you exactly what is difficult for him and what is not; he will tell you if he understands what you are asking of him, and if he is capable of executing what you ask of him.

There are three main phases in the training of a Dressage horse:

- Learning,
- Understanding, and, ultimately,
- Balance.

### *Learning:*

I now address the first phase: Learning. How does the Dressage horse learn? By the contact of the bridle in his mouth with your hand. This contact is like having a conversation with our horse. Do you think this thought ridiculous? Well, it is not. Many riders complain about the concept of contact. That is why many riders utilize all kinds of artificial equipment: German reins, Gogue's, and all kinds of other equipment in order to shut the horse's mouth, cutting off conversation when he is explaining that he does not understand or that he is not capable of executing their command. These riders attempt to make the horse a slave. If a school teacher did what trainers attempt to do, not allowing the child student to tell them that they have a problem with a subject, that teacher would be considered a poor teacher and would, we hope, lose his or her job because they are not worthy of teaching. But with the horse, this is done all the time! With a child, we say that the contact with the student is bad; with a horse, we say that the contact through the bridle is bad. With a child, then okay, I will try to reach the student; with a horse, then okay, I will use some tool to make the horse obedient despite his complaints.

You must understand that the only way for a horse to communicate with his rider is through the contact; it is his only way to converse with you and explain his difficulties. And, if you listen, the horse will tell you

everything – so long as you don't try to shut him up or in. He will tell you exactly which exercises are easy or difficult, which side and in which exercise he is stiff. He will even tell you in the transitions between the different gaits what is easy for him and what is not.

A horse that does not know Dressage automatically, naturally, has bad contact. How would it be possible otherwise? You must teach a horse to have a light and stable contact. You do this by training his body in the different gymnastic exercises, precisely as a coach would teach a human athlete, developing his mental and physical condition, his muscles.

You must give a young horse the opportunity to find his own balance. This means that you should not pull on his mouth during his attempts to complete the movements you ask of him; you must allow him to keep his neck balanced, with his nose slightly ahead of the vertical. Your hand must give him just the opening with a completely steady hand which shall give him confidence, allowing him to go forward with neck and nose in a regular and relaxed position and pace. The horse will search out the contact **with the rider's hand himself**. His body and back will relax and he will go in confidence and will enjoy the work. Be aware of the circles and direction changes. Do not pull the inside rein because pulling will irritate the horse and, as a result, he will pull back. I don't have to tell you where this tug of war will lead. He is much stronger than you. Rather, give him light indications (half halts on one rein) that you will change direction; when he is going where you want, open your hand again. You have to think that the reins are made of a very delicate fiber that shall snap if you exaggerate your strength or the weight of your hands.

In the very beginning of a young horse's work, you should find out in a couple of weeks where his comfort is, and the conversation thereafter can be relaxed and confident for both horse and rider. Let us start with the first gymnastic work: the leg yield. There may be light

resistance in the first contact. This is natural because your horse is wondering what you're doing, what is happening. He may not understand immediately. Once again, he will tell (teach) you through the contact with your hand that he understands, that he can do it or not. Listen to him! This does not mean that you have to stop the learning process, but that you have to ask him only to do a few steps and reward him immediately (a hand rubbed next to his mane is enough) when he executes what you have asked. **Don't be preoccupied by the more or less bad contact.** He is just telling you that it is a strange thing you ask him, to move sideward, not forward. This is natural. As soon, however, that he understands the exercise, the contact will become smooth and confident. It is important just to do a few steps at a time. This is not only because the rider is pushing or pulling on the horse's



mouth (have mercy and be gentle) but also because the horse's muscles are not used to the movement. Think about human athlete's training. If your gymnastic trainer gave you an exercise, i.e., for your stomach muscles, and tells you to do it 30 times, what would this be doing, or over-doing, to your muscles? This trainer would be a bad trainer because he is damaging your body and muscles instead of training it and them.

To stay on the subject of contact, first you have the learning process; during this time, the smooth contact can be lost if you attempt to over-do the duration of the exercise. It shall be like that in all the exercises that you undertake, as the degree of difficulty progresses in the movements that you teach him, and you must take the time to gently, patiently teach – not punish – your horse into accomplishing the new movements. You can not immediately teach a new horse the piaffe or flying changes.

You must remember and keep in the back of your mind always as you train horses, we have the time, we are willing to take the time. If you do not, you will not be able to accomplish what you have in mind.



### *Understanding*

The second phase of Dressage training is the **understanding phase: the horse's understanding.** If the conversation between you and the horse is relaxed, confident, the horse will learn – unless you over-do the duration of the exercise and hurt his muscles. You want to make the horse supple, not stiff because of a painful body.

The understanding process may be long, but with continuing patience, your patience, and gentle implementation of the continuing conversation with your horse, from exercise to exercise, from movement to movement, from beginning Tests to more advanced Tests, your horse will understand what you wish of him and shall be happy to work with you in achieving your goal.

### *Balance*

The third and final phase, balance, comes into play after the horse has learned, understood, and thereafter is engaged with you in smoothing out his movements, building his mind and body to be capable of keeping his balance and activity in the exercises, reacting almost automatically to your aids.

During your training, you may notice that in the easy exercises the horse will keep his impulsion and activity, but may tend to slow down in the more difficult ones. It is very common that a horse is going to be very active and confident in the shoulder-in and slow down in the half-pass. I see it all the time. This is not due to a lack of impulsion, a lack of willingness. It is due to the fact that the half-pass is much more demanding than the shoulder-in.

The purpose of this lesson is to bring to your attention the great problems that can result from the hands of the rider. The legs, for that matter are another problem. But that is for another time.

We all start riding because we love horses. You must strive to keep that in mind as you train your horse. Indeed, it is something that seems to be missing as you observe some riders trying to muscle their horses into obedience. It seems to me that those riders are very often, irritated because the horse is not doing exactly what they – the rider – has in mind at that precise moment. Should you have such a moment of frustration, I think you can benefit from this thought: the horse is never wrong, nor is the horse purposely defying his rider. It is the rider, more than the horse, who may be expecting more than the horse can give at that moment. Or it is the rider who is deficient in conveying what he expects from the horse. This is the moment you must make the decision: do I wish to have a conversation with the horse, to have him work in harmony with me, or do I **want to irritate and torture him.** You are the trainer. It's up to you.

## PART II: THE LEGS

As the previous article ended by having a conversation with your horse and being patient, I will stay with this subject a little longer before continuing with work on the legs.

Please note: it is simplistic to say that you have to be patient training your horse. Everyone will acknowledge and agree with this. Unfortunately, you need something more than patience to train a horse. You must have understanding and insights: technical insights and psychological insights. Actually, when you have both of these, patience naturally flows along with them.

Also note: muscle building takes time. Occasionally, as a human athlete trains his body, step by step, to build muscles, he may find that he has to slow down the regimen, because muscles do not necessarily respond as easily as the mind can imagine, because **muscles don't precisely follow the mental anticipation.** Therefore, the athlete must slow down and go back to a slightly easier level, in order to give the muscles time to catch up with the idea. It is exactly the same with a horse. Mentally, it may very quickly understand the exercises, but physically its muscles are not able to follow the

mental understanding. Unfortunately, a horse cannot explain his difficulty in the same way a human being can. It will convey its difficulties in its own language, by a bad contact, by failing to balance its head correctly, by slowing down in the exercise, by losing his bending. This is the horse/pupil having a conversation with the teacher, telling the teacher that the exercise is too difficult, too strenuous, too long in duration.

Every one of us has had the experience with a horse doing a beautiful half pass to the left and when we ask for the half pass to the right, the horse is losing activity, trying to change his lateral bending, pulling on the hand. This just tells you that the right side is not as easy for it, that it is stiff on that side. The quandary is, how do you react, what do you do?

- Do you give the horse a sharp hit with the crop? If you do that, he will pull more because you hit him forward, causing him to lose his balance even more.
- Do you increase the weight on your hands? That shall disrupt his impulsion and he will slow down.
- Do you increase the duration of the exercise? Then you hurt his muscles and he will become more stiff, instead of more supple.



This is where understanding, then patience comes in.

You have to work the right side, not with harshness or punishment, but with understanding and patience. Prepare him on a circle to the right side. His

body will come along. When you feel his body relaxing, reacting with more suppleness in the circle, push gently into the half-pass once or twice. Be sure to take him out of the exercise as soon as he complains [resists], prepare him in the circle again, then move again into the half-pass. You have to come back to the exercise many times, for short periods. Be sure to reward him each time he does well. He will come around to complete the exercise well, as soon as his muscles are capable of maintaining the exercise. This is understanding. This is patience.

Before we go into gymnastic work, as it should be followed in terms of degree of difficulty, I first want to explain something basic: what a circle is. I have a bad habit of sometimes going “off road” in my explanations. Please don’t be impatient with me, as my diversions always have something to do with the subject.

The circle is and stays the same throughout the horse’s training. It is a very important exercise. It gives the horse a lateral roundness. Everything in Dressage is about roundness! First the lateral roundness and, later on, the vertical roundness (which is “collection”). Without lateral roundness, you will never achieve a collected horse.

Following most manuals on Dressage, you will read that the horse has to be bent slightly to the inside and the inside leg has to work in on the place of the girth. Why these manuals prescribe this, I don’t know. It is possible that the inside leg is needed but also possible that it is not!

Basically, there are four trouble areas for the horse on the circle for which you have to be careful. A horse can make more than four mistakes, of course, but I will stay with the most common. He can fall over his outside shoulder or fall inside with his shoulder. He can escape to the outside with his backhand or fall inside with the backhand. Each of these mistakes requires a different approach – which may or may not require an inside leg. Maybe it is, maybe it is not! Maybe you need the leg on one side and not the other. Here again, exactly as working with the contact, do not intervene with hands or legs until you need to. It is perfectly possible that a young horse makes a perfect circle and does not need an inside leg. If this is the case, let the horse execute this exercise without interference. No automatic inside leg.

If somebody were to ask you to describe dressage training in just one phrase, what would you answer? Well, the answer could be: “Dressage is all about

the training and activity of the inside back leg!" Everything is coming from that important point. From the beginning to the end of the horse's training; it is the back leg.

Since every exercise we teach a horse, up to the highest level of balance, comes from this part of the horse's anatomy, we have to be very careful to train and condition the back leg so that it is able to provide what is needed of it.



Remember, in all aspects of Dressage, in every roundness of the horse, it is the inside back leg that needs to impel the activity – and you must be very careful that the inside rein should not oppose this activity. The inside rein should not be dominating,

otherwise you miss completely the purpose of any exercise.

Again, if your inside rein opposes the fluid movement of the exercise, the horse will tell you that he cannot execute your demands by making himself stiff in the muscles of the neck. If the horse's neck muscles are stiff, it means that his whole body becomes contracted. The result will be that the horse will try to answer your aids, but has to find relief when your inside hand opposes the activity. He may do this by falling out or in with his backhand or shoulder, so that he can place his legs to the side instead of deep under the body. This, obviously, is a normal physical reaction to your mixed aids.

The circle is one of the most useful exercises during a horse's education. Everything comes out of the roundness of the circle, and the interplay between inside and outside and backhand and forehand gives wonderful balance to the horse. It is like fine cooking: bringing a number of flavors together to find the perfect blend.

Legs and hands opposing each other will stiffen the horse and give him artificial movements. If the legs push too hard, the horse will lose his balance and put his weight on the shoulders. The same will happen if you open the front completely. You must be aware of the interplay between your hands and legs until the horse reaches the point, or the moment, where he is capable of

supporting his own balance. These moments are rare and very exciting. Do not disturb them. Use this balance to advance to the next phase. As you advance the horse's training, developing his muscles, you will find that each advance permits you to go forward to the next higher level and balance.

### Leg yielding

Once again, everything comes from the roundness of a circle. The young horse can quickly go to his first gymnastic exercise, which is the leg yielding from the circle. Instead of finishing the entire circle, you can, when



you cross the midline of the circle, bring your inside shoulder a little back and make the contact of the outside rein slightly heavier so that the outside shoulder of the horse is under control. By turning your shoulder in the direction of his inside back leg, your hip and inside leg should then give him the indication that he has to go to the side. There is the horse's first exercise, a leg yield.

It is a natural language starting from a normal circle.

In professional vocabulary I say: keep the outside shoulder under control! But what really is happening is that you slow down the action of the outside shoulder which, together with the movement of your hip and leg, gives the horse the message that he has to go sideward.

Again, as soon as he responds to this, reward him. It will take only a few days before he can do the yielding from the midline to the side of the ring.

What can go wrong?

- Your outside rein can be too heavy! The horse will lose the roundness of the body;
- The outside rein is not working enough! The horse will only bend its neck to the inside and fall over the outside shoulder. In this case, the indications of your shoulder and hip will not be able to correct that. So, the inside back leg cannot be placed under the mass, but will only go sideward.



- The horse is not reacting to your inside aids (leg and shoulder) any more! Probably your leg is “sticking” to the horse’s body which gives him no indication of what you desire. A sticking leg is like a second girth. Why would he react to that? He is used to that feeling;
- Your inside leg is working too much backwards! The back leg will only go to the side and not under the mass.

If nothing seems to be working, bring the horse back to the circle or change direction, go forward. Then begin again. Do not wait until the horse becomes irritated. Put its mind on some other work and re-prepare him for the exercise some moments later.

These are the most common problems. Others can arise, of course, and again, the main thing is to listen and to analyse what the horse is telling you.

And remember, always, you have time. You must take the time. You have no other choice. If you are not willing to take the time, get off the horse, stop torturing him. You don’t really want to be a fine Dressage rider.

### PART III: LEG AIDS

In Part One of this series, I described the three main phases in the training of a Dressage horse: Learning, Understanding, and, ultimately, Balance.

In Part Two, I re-emphasized the importance of understanding, and of the patience needed in starting to develop balance, while beginning to use the legs.

In previous installments, I emphasized the actions, re-actions, and inter-actions between the horse and the rider’s hands. But that is not the end of the discussion necessary for a complete picture of Dressage training. While it is important to talk about the delicate use of the hands during the education of the horse, because it is sometimes very difficult for the rider, simultaneously, to keep his/her legs relaxed and not interfering with the movement of the horse, it may be even more important to discuss further the use and placement of the rider’s legs.

It is, of course, essential to gain suppleness in the back, being able to join the rhythm of the horse with

a completely relaxed back, but all effort disappears completely if the rider’s legs are constantly moving, often with no rhythm or a counter-rhythm. When this occurs, the horse has “to guess” which leg movement actually means something and which is just unintentional, uncontrolled touching without purpose.

The complaint that “my horse is not reacting well to the legs” is a very common complaint of riders training their Dressage horses.

Well, of course the horse does not react well if the rider is concentrating on control of the hands, and totally leaves the legs to follow their own course. It is an essential and continuing rule that neither the hands



nor the legs should interfere with the horse’s concentration and movement unless it is absolutely necessary. This rule must be followed at all times.

Let us explore together the training of the horse and its reaction to leg aids. Keep in mind that even a horse that has already had a bad response to the rider’s legs can be taught to react better, when the teaching is patient, calm, and controlled. Perhaps the most important of the qualities a rider/trainer must have is control: mostly the control of yourself, of your hands, and of your legs, which is accomplished through concentration, which must not fail for a moment as you train the horse.

Moreover, the aids which you use to signal the horse, whether by hand or leg, must be consistent, and employed in exactly the same fashion during every training session, because if you become careless or casual in the application of the aids, the horse will immediately react - or should we say fail to react out of confusion - due to lackadaisical or careless application of the aid.

Be careful with the movements of your body during training and, particularly, do not make useless or inadvertent movements at the beginning of training a very young horse, for the horse is watching you at all times, and even touching your nose could produce a reaction in the horse. This doesn’t mean you must be like

a statue on the horse's back. Quite the contrary. The horse must learn your body, learn to relax under your body, under the weight and shifting of your body, before the application of any training with leg aids.



At the beginning, the only use of the legs on a very young horse should be to use both legs to tell him he has to go forward (no input should come from the hands at all) using only a slight pressure of the hands to tell him to slow down (no interference with the legs). Please remember one of the most basic and significant tenets of the use of aids: ***“Hand without legs, legs without hand”*** (Captain Étienne Beudant (1861 – 1949).

Let me try to explore how the horse reacts mentally to a “leg lesson” with a small example. I have to admit that it is a bit of an odd example, but it is very effective and easy to understand. It shows exactly how the horse's mind works when it does not respond well to the leg. I always present this to my students. The horse's reactions are merely a matter of cause and effect.

I begin by asking the student - and you, dear reader - to think of standing in front of a horse, doing nothing. Then imagine if you were to walk along slowly next to the horse, then stand behind him and take a pistol out of your pocket and shoot that pistol into the air. As you might expect, in less than a second the horse will bolt as fast as it can to the other side of the arena!

Did the horse learn anything? The answer is: no, he did not. He just became afraid because of the loud noise and, as is natural, ran away.

But if I repeat the exact same movements from the front towards his back, taking the pistol out of my pocket in the same fashion, I guarantee you that after two or three repetitions of the same movement, the horse will run as soon as I start moving towards his back. He will not wait for the noise because he knows what is coming! Simple cause and effect! The horse recalls the movement that caused the effect and then runs away in anticipation. As Caesar Milan (working with dogs on his TV show) says: *“please don't try this at home.”* The pistol in the example is just one possible object representing something that might create a movement and noise which the horse can see and remember. Naturally, there might be other, unexpected reactions the horse could have besides my description of the exercise, and that is why you should not try it at home. But I just wanted to make clear how cause and effect are important in the learning process of the horse and, therefore, for the trainer to **keep in mind during the horse's continuing training.** This principle of cause and effect is present during every facet of the horse's learning process. It is not only applicable to the horse, but also to ourselves.



At this point, let us transition from the dramatic pistol scenario to the everyday, normal work of training the horse to the leg aid. From the beginning of training, we want the horse to react correctly and immediately

upon the application of the legs. So we have to carefully teach him cause and effect. When you are sitting on the horse's back, with an equal pressure of both legs - no hands - ask the horse to move forward. If the horse moves forward, you immediately stop the leg actions and reward him. If the horse does not respond or responds too slowly, immediately give him a very clear and more energetic squeeze with both legs - still with no intervention of opposing hands. Reward the horse if he does react, and repeat the exercise immediately with the initial simple pressure. This is important in order for the horse to understand the reason for the additional attack (pressure). Repeat the exercise again. When the horse starts its forward movement on the initial application of soft pressure, it shows that the horse has already learned the cause and effect principle. He knows that moving forward on initial pressure is expected, and he also has learned what will occur if he does not react smartly on the initial application of leg pressure.

Parenthetically, if the horse did not react to the push of the legs, nor to the second more vigorous application of the aid, you may have to supplement or reinforce the aid with the judicious use of your dressage whip - again, no hands opposing. Of course, the horse will react to the whip. Every horse does, depending on the dosage. If hard is necessary at first, well so be it! You have to know your horse well, in order to know how much or how little pressure you need.

Repeat the exercise:

Pressure. Reaction. Reward.

If no reaction, stronger attack with the legs, reinforced by a judicious application of the whip. When the proper reaction of impulsion results, reward immediately. Repeat: Pressure, Reaction, Reward. It is not complicated: you only have to stay alert as to when to reward, and when to insist that the horse respond by using a supplementary application of pressure.

So as not to bore the horse, go on to another exercise. Then return to the leg aid, repeating the exercise until the horse reacts to your initial, slight pressure. **Again, it is most important that during this "impulsion" lesson there is absolutely no opposition of the hand!**

And it is also very important to reward the horse when he reacts well to the initial pressure. The best reward is to drop the reins and let the horse relax for a

couple of seconds while you reward him with a gentle pat on the neck.

The above has been a long explanation which I hope is clear. Please remember that during training, and forever afterward, it is most important to give consistent signals to the horse so that he does not have to guess what you want from him; otherwise the horse becomes confused, irritated or bored with the work, and he will end up in a state of learned helplessness. He will become apathetic and he will not care anymore. And that is a dangerous state of mind which you yourself caused, all of which results in a very unhappy and confused animal.

Upon re-reading what I have just written, I hope that I have not bored you too. It may seem so simplistic, but it is very, very important to keep in mind the psychological make-up of the horse. And as long as I have not guided you into a state of learned helplessness, then I am successful. While training your horse, you must stay alert at all times and ask yourself the same three questions every day:

- Does my horse understand what I am asking?
- Is he able to execute what I am asking?
- Is he resisting my indications or signals?

You may never come to ask yourself this last question - and, if you do, you have to determine what mental, psychological and/or physical reasons there are for such a state, and then you must go back to the beginning, slowly, patiently starting over until the horse understands your signals.

Remember this simple principle:

the horse cannot be wrong!



You are the guide, you are the trainer. If the horse has descended into a state of helplessness, confusion or irritation, it is you who are sitting on his back, it is you who are directing, guiding. It is you who - inadvertently, intentionally - have brought the horse to this state of confusion. And it is you who must undertake to un-do patiently that state of helplessness and confusion. It is you who must go back to the beginning, help the horse to understand, to respond correctly to what you wish - and then reward him and yourself.

**Fine tuning a horse's training must start from** the first moment you begin the work with a young horse. If it is an older horse, it may have some bad habits, poor teaching from a previous trainer. Not to worry. Mistakes that the horse makes because they have been ingrained in him from previous training can be corrected. You have to bring the horse back to the beginning. Have a conversation with him. Even if some exercises are not going smoothly for a while, be gentle and patient as you, starting at the beginning, initiate the learning process all over again. Let the horse have confidence that you are gentle and understanding. When the horse opens up to you, follows your new aids, with understanding and enjoyment - not confusion - you will experience a reward from the horse to you, for your patience and understanding.

To end, I just want to give you a little example to think about! Of course it has something to do with the leg work. Imagine you standing on the floor and someone comes behind you and pushes your shoulder to go forward. You go forward. But the person behind continues to push you. After a few steps you will become very irritated and turn your head to say: *"stop pushing, I'm already going forward."* That is exactly what occurs after **you've given the horse a leg aid to move forward, and as he moves forward, your legs continue to move, continuing to urge him forward.** When the horse is already moving forward, it is essential that you keep your legs still, quiet. Stop them from giving additional, continuing signals. The horse is already moving forward. **Don't make life difficult for him. Remember what was** discussed in the first installment of this series: learning and understanding are critical in building a foundation in order to work in balance with your horse. Your horse must learn and understand the intentional actions of your legs, and you must learn and understand how to control your legs and use them wisely and clearly as an aid.

## PART IV: TRADITIONAL CONCEPTS

Many riders buy or collect equestrian books and magazine. However, in my experience, only about 20% of the riders ever bother to read these books or the articles in the magazines. With my own students, I have to make the greatest effort to push them to read at least the most important books and articles. And this reading they will do only reluctantly, even though they know the leading authors of the art of riding; I should say that they know them by name: La Guérinière, Podhajsky, Steinbrecht, Baucher and, more recently, Oliveira. All of these names, in some way, filter through the minds of riders who try to do something other than just sit on a horse. They just **don't actually read all these wonderful works.**

With all that has been written and published, you would think that everything about the art of riding has likely already been written. No contemporary author is really able to equal the insights and instruction of La Guérinière, or Steinbrecht, or any one of the other classical authors, for that matter.

So, why am I still writing about the subject - particularly as I have spent my entire life reading those classical books on the art of riding? Because, occasionally, I again read one of the classical books when I think and expect that they can help me with a problem **I'm having with a particular horse or its rider.** Naturally, it is the latest problem that I can't seem to solve which causes the greatest concern. It's then that I go through all the books, trusting that I'll find exactly what I am looking for. Most of the time, I am able to put my finger on the exact solution to the problem at hand. But, a lot of times it is very difficult to find clear descriptions and solutions for the specific problem I'm encountering. This always strikes me as rather strange, since these same problems appear, and must have appeared in the past, during work with a lot of horses and riders. When this occasional blank wall has appeared through the years, it has been very frustrating for me.

Steinbrecht is the trainer-writer who has frustrated me the most. I have read him in German, in French, and recently also in the Dutch [Flemish] translation. In none of those languages, has he become any easier to understand. After a few sentences I will have to start over, questioning his exact meaning. However difficult he is to understand, I would not overlook his instructions for the world; he always seems to be able -

after a while - to bring me back in the right direction when I look for solutions for particular problems. Steinbrecht is a brilliant trainer. I believe his book is the best that has ever been written on the subject. **It's just that you have to plod through his instructions paragraph by paragraph, after a strong night's rest.**

Olivera, on the other hand, is exactly the opposite. You can drink in his soaring philosophy of the horse from each page. He describes the discipline of dressage as a divine gift and talks about it with an immense respect. Between every line you can see the **image of Xenophon's triumphant free stallion, and read the respect and love for the horse!** It is a shame that so many trainers are far removed from his principles nowadays. **If only a few rays of Oliveira's sun would shine into the depraved hearts of some of today's trainers.**



A great part of the problem may be that trainers are not capable of correctly interpreting the classical books. The reason for that, of course, is the fact that trainers who just start out in their training careers have no classical master to explain the correct interpretation to them.

In training horses, it is very necessary to know exactly - and to follow - step by step the progression in

the exercises that the horse has to learn. For that, you need a riding/training master to follow! There are no automatics in training a horse to the highest level. Of course, not every horse can be trained to the highest level. But that cannot be known until after you start to train the horse. Each horse that is to be trained in **dressage starts out, on day one, equal in the trainer's mind.** And if the horse is to achieve the highest level, it must receive correct training, physically and psychologically, in order to make it an easy and supple horse, totally under the control of the rider in all circumstances. In order to educate the horse thusly, it is important that the starting trainer has insight into the purpose and the result of each exercise, that the trainer knows exactly why the horse has to learn certain movements before others and, most importantly, the trainer must be able to listen to the horse and to understand when the horse tells him that it is enough, that it is not able to do this any longer, today, or ever. When a horse becomes mentally stressed, it is not able to learn anymore.

What are some classic exercises for young horses, exercises that have often been described by the great writers on the art of riding?

Leg yielding: the first exercise after the circle - **and don't expect a perfect circle with a young horse** - is leg yielding. The reason leg yielding is so important is the very construction of the exercise itself. The bending of **the horse's neck and back is in the opposite direction of the movement**, this while he is going forward. The horse does this exercise naturally, in the meadow or paddock, when he sees an object that makes him nervous and he wants to step away from it. He keeps looking at the object while he is going forward and to the side away from it. **To say it simply, "the horse looks to the left when going to the right."** This is the easiest first exercise for a horse's beginning gymnastic work. A slightly heavier outside rein and a little help of the inside leg (at the girth) and *voilà*: leg yielding. Note: the leg at the girth is important, otherwise **the horse's backhand will go too quickly and too far out to the side**, resulting in only going sideways, which is not correct. He has to go forward and to the side. His shoulder always has to precede the backhand. Remember that: always the shoulder first.

**And, please, always remember: don't push him when he doesn't react immediately and properly.**

**Patience. Go back. Start again. The horse's output cannot be wrong; check the input!**

It is clear that we have to go into further detail on this exercise, but I want to mention the next exercise, which is the shoulder-in.

Shoulder-in: I want to keep these two exercises together because they are very much alike. You might say, and quite correctly, that leg yielding is the preparation for the shoulder-in. Both have the bending (from ears to tail) in the opposite direction of the movement. Leg yielding is forward and to the side. Shoulder-in is on a straight line or a circle - which is also a straight line by the way! A straight line means that the lateral pair of legs stay in the same track. Back and fore legs of each side cover the same line, they are not going out or inside. Therefore, you can say, it is a round straight line! This exercise is already more demanding for the young horse, because the outside rein is limiting the bending and keeps control of the backhand by maintaining, or freeing, the shoulders.

Both the above exercises can be executed in the walk, trot and canter.

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I want to again talk about the relation of horse and rider. It is the most important factor throughout the training of the horse. The trainer and the rider must **always keep in touch with the horse's natural behavior.** A young starting horse is subjected to unusual, unnatural, and uncommon stresses when he begins being trained. He was not born for this function; he is not a hunting dog created for hunting (M. Henriquet). On the **contrary, a horse's instinct for self-preservation** pushes him to escape from this extreme encounter by physical flight or, absent that, by mentally freezing. The movements of the rider, even if they are unconscious, can provoke contractions and even worse. The more sensitive the horse, so too must the rider and trainer be.

As already said, flight away is a natural behavior when something frightens a horse. This natural instinct must, above all, be taken seriously. Sprinting away being a **horse's first line of defense, naturally, the horse must be more perceptive than other animals, because his life depends on his capacity to sense and run.** Inexperienced riders often fail to recognise the horse's acute perceptivity. Horses have the incredible capacity to detect stimuli that are too vague for us to be aware of. So, for us, a **horse's sudden flight** - reacting to slight stimuli we



**don't perceive in the same way - seems inexplicable, and is often interpreted as "stupidity."**

It is not. It is sensitivity, i.e., sight, hearing, smell, taste and feel, only in a much more sensitive way. We sometimes wonder that such a large animal can have such quick reactions. However, in the wild, he has to react instantly and at high speed, otherwise he is injured, perhaps eaten.

In all this, it is the task of the trainer to desensitize the horse of his natural reaction to flee. Lucky for us, the horse very quickly responds to being calmed, desensitized. The horse is an intelligent creature; he very quickly learns the difference between **"frightening"** and **"frightening but harmless."** This is a necessary lesson every horse learns eventually, whether in the wild or in the arena. If he did not learn from his experiences, in the wild he would not have time to eat, to drink, or to rest. **He'd be on the run all the time.** Likewise, in the arena, when he learns the difference between **"frightening"** and **"frightening but harmless,"** he begins to respond to his lessons.

So, keep in mind, in every step of training, that you have to **take into consideration the horse's natural behavior and sensitivity.**

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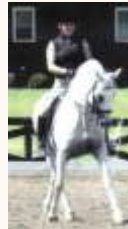
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