Chapter 13

THE PYRAMID OF TRAINING – STRAIGHTNESS

Improved Alignment and Balance

"A horse is said to be straight when the footfalls of the forehand and the hindquarters are appropriately aligned on straight and curved lines and when his longitudinal axis is in line with the straight or curved track on which he is ridden. By nature every horse is crooked, hollow on one side and stiff on his other side, thereby using one side of his body somewhat differently from the other. This also causes uneven contact in the reins. Appropriate gymnastic exercises develop the horse's symmetry. This allows him to engage both hind legs evenly and prepares him for collection. This process improves the lateral as well as the longitudinal balance of the horse." [*USDF Glossary of Judging Terms*]

"A horse is said to be straight when its forehand is in line with its handquarters, that is, when its longitudinal axis is in line with the straight or curved track it is following." [*Principles of Riding*, p 158]

"Straightness is necessary in order for the weight to be evenly distributed over the two halves of the body. It is developed through systematically training and suppling ('gymnasticising') both sides of the body equally.

Most horses are naturally crooked. Like right–and left–handedness in humans, this crookedness has its origins in the brain and is something that horse is born with. Also, the horses' shoulders are narrower than its hindquarters which further encourages it to be crooked." [*Principles of Riding*, p. 158]

"If the horse is straight, the hind legs will push exactly in the direction of the center of gravity. The restraining aids will then also pass through the horse correctly, via the mouth, poll, neck and back to the hind quarters, and they will act on both hind legs equally." [*Principles of Riding*, p. 158]

A horse cannot be positioned perfectly straight until it has mastered all the lateral movements. Only then is the rider in a position to keep the horse straight at all times with the minimum of effort and the lightest of aids. This, in its turn, is an essential prerequisite for the higher levels of collection.

"A crooked horse's hind feet do not follow the tracks of the forefeet, but step to the side, and the horse will not have an even contact on both sides." [*Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 46]

Definition of Stiff Side and Hollow Side

"A crooked horse has a stiff (convex) side and a hollow (concave) side. If he is stiff to the left, he pushes his left shoulder out, leans more heavily on the left rein, bends too much to the right and carries the haunches to the right. He steps shorter on the hollow, right side, to avoid bending the joints (the stifle, the hock and the fetlock) of his right hind leg and avoids moving it straight forward under the body. The effect of the reins does not go through to the haunches. Consequently the horse must be straightened before he can be engaged." [*Practical Dressage Manual*, p 79]

Purpose of Straightness

"Only when the horse is straight will it be possible, by collection, to make the hindquarters carry a greater proportion of the weight. By making him bend the three joints of the hind legs (hip, stifle, hock) cause him to carry out the appropriate gymnastic exercises which will improve his balance and suppleness and strengthen the hindquarters for further demands. Straighten your horse and ride him forward." [*Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 46]

Straightness is necessary for the following reasons:

- So that the horse's weight is evenly distributed on both sides, and to avoid excessive wear and tear on the limbs on one side.
- So that the horse can push equally and effectively with its hind legs to optimize the forward thrust.
- So that the rider can keep the horse on the aids properly, and develop its suppleness (Durchlassigkeit).
- To enable the horse to have an even contact on both sides.
- In order to obtain collection. Straightness is a precondition for collection since only if the horse is straight can the weight be transferred onto both hind legs equally." [*Principles of Riding*, p 158]

"Without straightness, you might just as well not bother to do dressage because without it the horse cannot work properly through, and you can never achieve collection and engagement. You can't achieve the athletic potential of the horse. You can see it when you get to the ultimate test which is straightness in piaffe on the centerline between the reins. You see it expressed now by irregularity. You will have one right hind leg that goes further under the body than the left or vice versa. If it is rider-created, it can be fixed and needs fixing right away by a riding instructor. It takes a long time to fix crookedness because it is natural. And, just when you think you have got it, it switches. It is now on the other side!" [*Dressage Insights: Excerpts by Experts*, p 50]

Qualities

"A correctly straightened horse is recognized by:

- The horse when going on a straight line is straight along the length of his body.
- On a curved line, the horse is bent longitudinally so as to allow the hind legs to tread into the hoof prints of the front legs.
- In lateral work the horse moves the quarters in the direction of the movement and does not step sideways away from it.

The rider will feel the horse is correctly straightened by:

- Feeling an even contact in both hands.
- Feeling that circles and voltes are equally easy to perform on both reins and on freshly prepared ground one only sees one set of tracks.
- Seeing that the ears of the horse are level and the horse is not twisting in the neck.
- The horse allows the rider to sit squarely, not making him hang to one side and thus be constantly correcting his seat." [*The Dressage Horse*, p 114]

Riders on a crooked horse will feel that the horse is leaning on the stiff rein and not on the hollow rein.

How to Achieve Straightness

Straightness is developed through systematically training and suppling (gymnasticising) both sides of the body equally.

"Straightness should always be achieved by aligning the forehand with the hind quarters." [*Principles of Riding*, p 167]

"Provided that the horse is working with impulsion, riding transitions on straight and curved tracks will improve the straightness." [*Principles of Riding*, p 167]

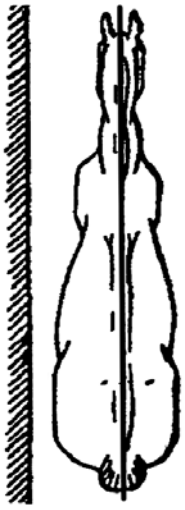
"It is up to the rider to make the horse ambidextrous. In the first year or two of training, it is encouraged by simply riding the horse ambitiously forward and keeping him between and in front of the rider's legs. Later, it is enhanced and confirmed through all the bending exercises such as shoulder-in, travers, renvers and half-pass repeated constantly until the horse's suppleness and strength builds, and he can remain straight without constant reminders from the rider's aids." [*Dressage Insights: Excerpts from Experts*, p 46]

"You may have a rider that sits crooked which is causing the problem. This can be addressed on the lunge line. Videotape the rider so they can see visually how they are not straight. If they can see what they do and see the correct way to ride it, it opens up their ability to feel it more." [*Dressage Insights: Excerpts from Experts*, p 49]

"When straightening a horse, the idea is to loosen

Source: Practical Dressage Manual

Crooked Horse



Straight Horse

and lighten the contact on the stiff side, and encourage him to seek more contact on the hollow side. Let us suppose that the horse is stiff to the left. Keep your right hand quiet and offer him the contact. Use short, soft pulls on the left rein to loosen up the resistance and prevent him from bending too much to the inside (right). No long, stubborn pulls, as this only makes the problem worse." [*Practical Dressage Manual*, p 80]

When a horse is stiff to the left, "you must work the horse with flexing to the left and circling to the left so that it will become more accommodating to the left side, and will stretch itself to take up the right rein and the result will be that its hind legs follow the exact track of the forelegs. Horses with a natural bend in the other direction are, of course, worked the other way around." [*Riding Logic*, p 81]