

EVALUATING THE HORSE

Correct Confirmation/Physical Ability

“The horse must have pure natural gaits.” [*Complete Training of Horse and Rider*, p 130]

“Only horses suitable for the job should be chosen for advanced training. Horses with conformation faults or a difficult temperament may require an unreasonably long and troublesome training period, often with unsatisfactory results.” [*Advanced Technique of Riding*, p 25]

Higher level dressage requires a well made horse of quality, noble bearing and outstanding natural action.

“Complete relaxation and suppleness in a horse are the prerequisites for any corrections. Since faulty conformation of limbs can hardly be influenced by riding, problems will mostly relate to the back or the set of head and neck.” [*Riding Logic*, p 194]

Conformation Faults

The back coordinates and regulates the power.

Faulty Backs

Horses with this problem do not always have to be problem horses.

A *long backed horse* is often a more comfortable ride. If its back is well muscled up between wither and loin, its back cannot be called faulty. In fact a long supple back helps in the training. However, if the back is so long that the hind legs cannot reach the center of gravity, then this is very difficult for dressage as the steps of the hind legs are too short.

This fault may not be so serious for a show jumper or eventer as when making a mistake such a horse can use its back as a balancing pole. For dressage its use is limited as such a horse cannot overtrack and will never do well in tests. We must realize this when we start training such a horse. We cannot change a long back with training. We only have one chance: to encourage longer strides by repeated transitions and half-halts.

Short-backed horses are easier to collect, as their hind legs come under more easily. On the other hand they often have back problems. The short back is usually rather tight and needs a comparatively long neck to relax it. If this is not forthcoming it is practically impossible to obtain ground covering strides. Short backed horses are not usually comfortable to ride. They can only be brought to their full potential when the rider pays special attention to loosening exercises and works with exceptionally light hands.” [*Basic Training of the Young Horse*, p 98]

Over-Built Horses

“An over-built horse is higher in the croup than in the withers. This conformation defect makes engagement and collection difficult. The rider feels as if he is riding downhill all the time. Here again, long-term gymnastic training will help to teach the horse to bend its hind legs and hindquarter joints more.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 185]

Faulty Neck

Horses which are thick through the throat may have problems bending at the poll and establishing a correct contact. They should be worked on a long-term basis in an extended outline, until the position of the parotid glands and the lower neck muscles is more acceptable.” [*Principles of Riding*, p 185]

Reiner Klimke says, “The neck is the horse’s balancing rod. A short, heavy neck or one that comes too deep out of the shoulder cannot fulfill this function. An incorrectly muscled neck can be reshaped through long-term, specialized training. Sometimes the correct use of various auxiliary reins (side reins, sliding side reins) can be helpful.”

“...if in addition to these faults, the horse has a heavy, thick lower jaw the chances are slim of a true correction. A

thick lower jaw makes it physically impossible for the horse to give easily in the neck as the lower jawbone presses against the neck and therefore obstructs it. I advise against schooling such a horse as a riding horse.”

“Faults of the neck, such as a broken neck (the poll not the highest point), are sometimes caused by too strong hands. When training young horses as well as correcting badly ridden horses we must adhere to the principles that those who want to change the neck of a horse must work the hindquarters and back.”

“A long thin neck which has a strong bend at the top and joins the withers at a high point is called a *swan neck*. Horses with swan necks usually have difficulties in establishing a contact. We have to make a special effort to ride the horse for some time long and deep. They must not come up too early otherwise it could easily become a broken neck. Only when the horse has learned to stretch its neck forward and down, and is looking for the bit, can we continue with the training. If horses with ‘swan necks’ are asked too early for a high head carriage they will often stay ‘wobbly’ at the withers.”

The neck is not rigid, it can be pulled in or moved sideways, which can create an incorrect positioning and the outside shoulder falling out. It is especially important to ride horses with swan necks actively forward. Should the horse not take the bit I recommend trying a thick snaffle. When riding through turns stronger outside aids are advisable. The fault can only be eradicated by strengthening the lower neck muscles through riding forward with the neck long and low.

The *eweneck* condition is seen when the lower muscles of the neck have noticeably developed. This makes it difficult for the horse to stretch its neck. We must try to loosen the lower neck muscles and develop the top ones. It can be useful to ride the horse with low side reins or a third rein. A *eweneck* usually goes with a stiff back. Work over cavalletti is very helpful for loosening the back. Also gymnastic jumping can be used.” [*Basic Training of the Young Horse*, pp 97-98.]

Horse’s Temperament and Rideability

Necessity of Good Temperament and Rideability

“Temperament problems are often more difficult to cure than problems which result from conformational defects. They are frequently due to incorrect handling and training; for example, the horse had been pushed too hard during its preliminary training or at the beginning of its competitive career. Its excitable, erratic behavior is then due to fear and insecurity resulting from bad experiences.

If the temperament problem is an acquired one, as opposed to being inborn, closely examining the horse’s previous training and handling, and analyzing its behavior, will help the trainer to understand and allay its fears. It will take an experienced trainer to win back the horse’s confidence. Likewise, horses with naturally difficult temperaments should only be ridden – if at all - by an experienced, tactful rider. [*Principles of Riding*, p 185]

Reiner Klimke says “The horse is born with its temperament and physique. We can improve both with the right education and environment making it possible to use the horse for riding. On the other hand, the reverse can happen if wrong and bad handling is practiced. The faults with which the horse is born, and acquires are difficult to correct. Experience teaches that even after patient and hard work faults can reappear in a horse when an opportunity presents itself.”

Nervous Horses

“Nervous horses are inclined to take flight when faced with unusual situations such as strange noises, quick movements and flags. These horses can be calmed down with much careful work and patience. It becomes more difficult if the horse is also nervous of the going or of objects on the ground. It is my experience that a horse with this characteristic will never completely lose its nervousness. The trainer just has to accept the limitations. In contrast, a certain excessive sensitivity and nervousness can be used to advantage. I personally prefer to train a lively horse, even if it is a bit nervous and anxious, rather than a lazy one. The nervous horse is grateful to the rider who sits quietly, hardly moves and can wait. It needs fewer aids as long as the rider is patient and uses waiting aids; the day will come when the horse accepts the leg and can be ridden forward. Then one has won, but a rider with limited patience should never ride a nervous horse.”

Lazy Horses

Lazy horses can drive the rider to distraction. First of all we should find out whether the horse is naturally lazy or if there is any other reason: for example, it may not be fit enough, it may be ill or be ignorant of the rider's aids. It is best to take a lazy horse out into the country, preferably with a forward going companion. If the idleness persists, the rider can take stronger action. At the right moment he uses short sharp applications of the whip. If the horse then jumps forward it should be praised immediately. In my experience this method has to be repeated a few times before the horse realizes what is required of it and subsequently reacts to much lighter aids. It is important that the rider carries this through to get the horse going forward. He must, and can then reduce the strength of his aids so that the horse does not become dead to them.

Obstinate Horses

Obstinate horses can develop considerable strength and energy when they do not wish to submit to the rider. This is especially the case when they realize that the rider is not sufficiently strong and determined. This can quickly lead to the horse rearing which is a very unpleasant trait and difficult to cure. To correct this unpleasant habit, a brave rider is needed who sits firmly in the saddle and makes the horse go forward, without giving it a chance to be disobedient. When the horse obeys, the rider must be ready to praise it and re-establish the horse's trust. When the rider feels that the horse is about to rear or take off, a quick pull on one rein can prevent this disobedience but only apply it quickly and not for too long otherwise the horse could overturn with the rider." [*Basic Training of the Young Horse*, p.96]

With a lazy or obstinate horse, it is very important to apply the forward driving leg aid in the correct place, that is: directly behind the girth. If the leg is applied too far back, a common mistake, it causes the horse to push his rib cage against the rider's leg, thus making him even less likely to go forward. [Gerhard Politz]

Evaluating according to the Pyramid of Training

[Written by Vicki Hammers-O'Neil]

Your ability to correctly evaluate a horse is extremely important. Your assessment will determine the horse's future success or failure. For a horse to progress correctly, it must be evaluated daily according to the Pyramid of Training.

Although experience will best teach you how to assess a horse, having a logical format in mind will help you determine what course to take with a horse's training.

Evaluate the Horse Before Mounting

The trainer must first make an accurate assessment of the horse's current level of training and his strong/weak points.

History of the Horse

- Age
- Past training experience, current schooling
- Soundness history
- Level of fitness – including when last ridden
- Temperament: ask about this, and also observe it.

Horse's Conformation

- Body type (rectangle)
- Bone structure
- Top line and muscle conditioning
- Ailments, soreness

Tack Check

- Is it appropriate for the task?
- Is it safe?
- Is it comfortable for the horse?

Current Condition

On a day-to-day basis, you need to notice the horse's overall health, conditioning, coat condition, tendons and ligaments, heat, swelling, attitude, etc.

Evaluating in the Warm-Up Phase

The ingredients below need to be evaluated in conjunction with one another. Personal experience in the saddle will improve your ability to make an accurate assessment.

Once mounted, warm-up the horse in all three gaits (walk, trot, canter) and in both directions.

Use straight and curved lines. Use circles and transitions. Do not do difficult movements at this point.

Gaits

- Purity, regularity of rhythm, relaxation
- 4-beat walk
- 2-beat trot
- 3-beat canter
- Which gait is the strongest? Which is the weakest?
- Quantify the gaits using number scale, i.e. 5, 6, 7, 8. Why is it a 6 not a 7?
- Is the horse sound?

Acceptance of the Aids

- Is the horse relaxed? (mentally and physically)
- Does the horse accept the leg?
- Is the horse in front of the leg?
- Does the horse accept the hand?
- Prompt to the leg?
- Afraid of the leg?
- Does the horse accept the leg mentally?
- Does the horse accept the hand?
- Can you establish contact?
- Once established, can you use the contact?
- Does horse accept the seat?
- Is there a half-halt (balancing aid) appropriate to his level?
- Can you regulate tempo, length of stride?
- How does the horse respond to the circle of the aids?
- Is there a connection from back to front, and front to back?

Straightness

- Which is the stiff side? (the side he hangs on)
- Which is the hollow side? (the side he curls towards and will not take)
- Can you influence various parts of the horse's body?

Suppleness

Longitudinal suppleness: (long and short)

- Will the horse stretch?
- Will the horse allow adjustment of the length of his stride without changing balance or forwardness?
- Will he chew the reins?

Lateral suppleness: (left and right)

- Will the horse allow rider to position or bend him without change in the flow of movement or balance?
- Can he bend his body, step to the inside rein, and take outside half-halt?
- Can he do a shoulder-in on the circle without changing tempo?

Note: Suppleness and Straightness work closely together. It is very difficult to straighten a stiff horse.

Evaluating the Horse in the Working Phase

After the initial assessment, proceed to working phase.

Identify the Missing Link

- What part of the training scale is missing?
- Is the horse lacking impulsion? Is the horse not relaxed?
- Determine the cause of the problem (why is this happening?)

Determine What Exercises are Appropriate, by Considering the Following:

- Regularity of horse's gaits
- Horse's education level
- Horse's age and fitness level (i.e. maybe more work needs to be done in the walk)
- Riding conditions, footing, weather
- Horse's temperament (i.e. is he claustrophobic)
- What classical theory supports your choice of exercises? Is it classically correct?
-

Apply the Exercise

- Horse must maintain rhythm from gait to gait, and within the gait
- Introduce exercises in logical order
- Work both sides equally
- Give breaks and rewards
- Allow horse to chew the reins out of the rider's hands
- Don't repeat an exercise over and over
- Build exercises off each other
- Be prepared for more simple exercise if over-faced
- Be prepared for the next step if the horse is ready to move on (Keep in mind that it is okay to reward the horse and give him a light day)

Cool Down Phase

- A horse with a good attitude should always be rewarded.
- Allow horse to chew reins from rider's hands – even if only in the walk.
- This checks correctness of your work (does horse take politely, or snatch? Evaluate why)
- It rewards the horse
- It helps the muscles to stretch and relax

Final Assessment

This is made to yourself after each ride, to the owner of the horse in a client situation, and to the Examiner in a testing situation.

- Express what was positive, THEN evaluate the negative
- What exercises worked and why?
- Did the transitions on the circle help better than the transitions on the straight line? If so, why?
- Future plans: What would you do tomorrow? Next week? Next month?
- When training, don't have a pre-conceived agenda for the horse. The horse may be lame or tired. The horse may not be up to the task you have planned for that day. Be flexible.

Quantifying

It is helpful to use the judge's numerical scale and collective marks to analyze the gaits of the horse, impulsion and submission. Remember that all horses are trained to the same standard, regardless of their individual qualities or limitations.

The scale of marks is as follows:

- 10 Excellent
- 9 Very Good
- 8 Good
- 7 Fairly Good
- 6 Satisfactory
- 5 Marginal
- 4 Insufficient
- 3 Fairly Bad
- 2 Bad
- 1 Very Bad
- 0 Not Executed

[*USEF Rule Book DR122*]