

PIAFFE IN ENGLISH

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A plea for suppleness of horse and rider

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tense steps than real mechanics and communication between fore- and hindquarters by a resonant back, because he is so caught up in trying to achieve technical perfection in the lections and the expression of his ride.

1. Suppleness in the eye of the beholder

“Loosening your muscles is the fundamental element for the whole art of dressage. Indeed so far, as to that only what the horse does supply is of real value. And equally the other way around: The collection which seems to be at its best, the most artificial schools, done with a tense back or neck or the muscles of the lower neck convulsively popping out, are not only completely worthless but also causing damage for the horse’s legs and can never create a good feeling for the rider.”

Harmony of body and soul

This quote of Kurt Albrecht, the former director of the Spanish Riding School, already clarifies the significance of suppleness for riding a horse and for its training. Suppleness is, according to the German directives for Riding and driving, a state of physical and mental relaxation of the horse and therefore touches another central aspect: the harmony of body and soul. Only a horse, which unconditionally engages with its rider and trusts him, is able to really loosen its muscles in order to develop forward thrust, the power to carry weight and be resilient in its joints in the sense of positive body tension.

Recognising a supple horse requires a lot of sensitivity of the rider and good visual abilities and experience of trainers and judges. A skilled rider can often hide deficits in suppleness and deceive the observer. And often, the rider won’t notice that his partner, the horse, rather moves with exaggerated

Ideals through the ages

The goal of a “spectacular expression” has slowly infiltrated competitive dressage in the last decades without someone noticing. The effect of this, that clearly disturbed mechanics of a movement especially in extended trot, Piaffes and Passage are judged as high quality, is a dangerous development – but also understandable. Because: the longer and more often the eye perceives certain patterns, the more these are internalised and become the right standard. This effect is especially obvious with the line between the horse’s forehead and nose, whose position influences suppleness. Older pictures from the 19th and 20th century often show horses whose neck is not under control according to today’s standards. As important as the yielding at the poll is in dressage training and

therefore as a measure for judging: It must not be missed that especially young horses need time until the first contact between hand and mouth, which is allowed to be of a bigger frame, develops into real bent at the poll with the head raised. The following picture from the riding directive of 1912 clarifies this, which shows “the position of a young horse in the first canter” .

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- Abbildung HDV -

The following picture is from “Die Klassische Reitkunst” by Podhajsky. The horse presents itself in an extremely collected manner and the line between its forehead and nose is obviously in front of the vertical. The author says about this: “Often, it will be necessary to allow the horse a deeper position of neck and head to learn the Piaffe. But this must not lead to the horse tending to overbend its neck (...). If the diligent, but rhythmic and engaged steps of the hind quarters are learnt (...), then the time has come to demand a more upright position – even if one has to set the stronger bent of the poll aside for a short time -, in order to add final brilliance to this lection of the high school. Thus, the rider will have reached his goal: a Piaffe with even, energetic steps, which seems resilient and effortless. The engaged hind quarters lower the croup and the right position of head and neck will be there automatically.”

- Abbildung Podhajsky -

This old picture of an ideal state seems to have given way to the idea that the horse’s head has to be put more or less clearly behind the vertical. Unconsidered riders at the beginning and ignorant imitators in connection with partly rather uncritical judges – not only at the top, but at all levels of competitive dressage – have pinned this image in countless heads. Compare the ideal, how you also know it from the German directives for riding and driving, to any modern photos and pay attention to the poll, the level of collection and the arc of body tension. If one already called some negative examples of the “new images of competition” new standards, this would of course be like lumping together and denigration of the whole world of competitive dressage. This would be wrong without a doubt. But still, the attentive and critical observer will conclude that obvious tendencies in development are there.

Furthermore it is remarkable, that there have always been clues to seemingly modern misdevelopments . Koch has already portrayed a “wrong, damaging perception of

the movement of the horse’s back” in Piaffe brilliantly in 1928 in his remarkable work “Reitkunst im Bilde” . Please keep in mind that at this point the basic rules of classical training had already been acknowledged for some decades.

- Bild Koch -

More countless examples of short-time meanders could be quoted and fill an exciting book. But rarely the tendencies in development damaging suppleness have been so far spread and obvious as in the past two decades; never has the call of the defenders of classical training resounded so loudly in the scene, which has led to controversial and heated discussions some years ago. Thanks to the new diversity of media and modern means of communication, even though the criticism, which has partly been expressed polemically, has not improved the image of dressage and the whole world of equitation in public. But maybe it also need some harsh words to wake up the consciousness of broad circles. The FN and the German association of judges has realised these misdevelopments, so that among others the eye of future judges especially in young horse shows is focused on natural movements as an important criterion . Maybe it would have been good for equine sports and the horses’ wellbeing if the image of a really supple horse would have been put right at an earlier time.

Harmony from a layman’s point of view

Dressage as the result of correct classical training is harmony between rider and horse. It is an indispensable precondition that both parts are relaxed. Try it yourself: Put a layman next to your riding arena who judges the rides. His judgement will differ a little from the correct placement, but normally he will be able to separate the wheat from the chaff. Because the aesthetic of an inner as well as outer harmony of horse and rider is not missed even by an unpractised eye, but literally gives you prickles and goose bumps – without the spectacular mechanics from the bag of tricks of the “horse swindlers”.

2. Suppleness as the mirror of the soul of horse and rider

Suppleness always mirrors the soul of horse and rider. Every one of you will have countless pictures in your mind when reading this sentence. Some of them are outlined in this chapter.

“Happy face” – a smile can work wonders

Have a look at the faces of riders when training or competing in a dressage show. We expect the horse to show a “happy” face as the expression of suppleness. Now now think of the many riders’ face which can often be described as “grim”, “tense” and “overambitious”, sometimes also as “angry” but also “concentrated”. Only very few riders also look happy when they are not cheering up on and with their horses because of a success or a good mark at a show. But we expect it from the horse constantly as the fulfilment of the criteria of suppleness.

Without a doubt training with the sports and leisure partner horse require a high level of concentration . And sitting at your desk or outside the arena it is always easy. But try to motivate the grim looking rider to smile and pay attention to what happens to him and his horse regarding suppleness at this moment.

You will be surprised! The rider loses inner and at the same time negative tensions, as head and pelvis communicate . His horse will notice this immediately and reacts with improved suppleness.

Unconventional methods can help resolve problems

I’d like to illustrate this with a situation at a dressage clinic: a talented teen-aged rider at L/M-level had problems in the transitions from canter to walk and with the changes. She knew when and how the aid is developed from the abdominal muscles ; but she lacked a certain inner and therefore also physical suppleness: “The transitions have to work!” Her hips and pelvis were blocked, the normally flexible upper part of the body was thrown back in the aid, the hand joints were

stiff and every aid was a fight between hand and the horse’s mouth because of this negative tension. The rider was asked to do another transition canter-walk without giving her new instructions. Shortly before the transition we asked the rider which book she was reading at the moment. Astonished and smiling, she was able to do the transition in brilliant suppleness, asking back “What kind of question was that?”.

Feeling positive moments

Of course it is not our goal to instruct the rider to do a complete dressage pattern with a smile on his face. Smiling as an expression of happiness is only a snapshot. But it is important to reach these positive moments in daily training again and again and help the rider to feel them and the feeling of suppleness. Because such a short moment after which you immediately discuss the feeling with the rider, builds the fundament for changing mechanics which have often been falsely learned and hold the rider captive and block him. “Take this positive feeling into bed with you and ride what you felt mentally before you fall asleep.” – a suggestion which you should make to your clients after feeling a positive moment more often .

“Make your horse happy and give him a break”

Pictures at horse shows repeat themselves; negatively as well as positively. Let’s look at a positive and well known example: The rider gets a good mark or finishes the course without mistakes and hugs his horse enthusiastically. As nice this moment is for the audience, trainers and judges; the horse will not be able to share this reaction of happiness with the rider in this situation. Because why and for what it is rewarded suddenly and without connection, while it approaching the exit of the arena with loose reins will not be obvious for it.

Another try it yourself for you: In one of your lessons, pay attention to how often the riders reward their horses. The horses are required to fulfil great tasks according to their level of training – sometimes unfortunately far

beyond that. Transitions and lateral movements are trained or they have to do countless canter pirouettes and Passage and Piaffe. Unfortunately we often forget, to give the horse a short break and reward it at the right moment for trying so hard. Every management trainer would scold his trainee if he treated his employees like that. Rewards and breaks immediately after an exhausting task, even if it was only partly completed, support the horse's will to cooperate, the motivation, especially with horses. Try it and you will be astonished which positive results a little rewarding and some breaks have on the horse and its inner suppleness. The instruction of the trainer "make your horse happy" cannot be given often enough.

"Mentally spicing up" your training

An example from my practical experience in training: A young horse has to learn leg-yielding. The horse is still insecure about the new task and reacts to the aids of the rider by speeding up and loses its suppleness constantly. The trainer helps from the ground, supports the influence of the inner rein by constant, playful contact and enhances the inner leg by carefully touching the horse with the whip while the rider can concentrate on the remaining aids. After approximately three successful steps where the horse has yielded to the leg and played with the bit faithfully, the rider stops the horse and rewards it enthusiastically. All of this is repeated at the following long walls of the arena successfully, where every time the horse accepted the aids the lesson is interrupted immediately. The horse chews and snuffles happily. In the following days the trainer can reduce his help from the ground step by step as the horse now connects a positive, motivating experience with leg-yielding and keeps its inner suppleness.

The mental spice of training is not mainly to ride lessons correctly all the time like they are required by the pattern book. A diverse training, of course also in the field and jumping course and the right dose of shortly but not constantly repeating what has been learned and new material in combination with short breaks with loose reins make a nice

training for horse and rider and support the team's inner suppleness.

Good friends

Unthinkable amounts of money are put into the assumed well-being of the horse: In order to keep the animal from freezing on colder summer days, we buy trendy blankets, bandages and saddle pads matching in colour, we decorate the browbands with Swarovski-stones and mix powders for a shiny coat under the oats. It is very positive for some economic branches, but three questions come to my mind: Isn't a huge part of all these things also done to salve the conscience or the social status-thinking of the horse owner? Of what kind of use are these things to the horse? And: what do these things have to do with suppleness?

The relation to suppleness is easy, in the form of a fourth question: Why do so many riders think about their horse's well-being but forget to look at the horse as a good friend and treat it like that when they are riding? If one recalled this point of view again and again when riding, making it one of the primary ideas of the daily work with the horse, many problems concerning inner and outer suppleness would not arise. There would be less situations where horses are asked too much physically or mentally, breaks and rewarding after greater or smaller successes would be normal and the rider would ask himself more often if maybe he was the cause for the problem, or if the basics of the teamwork with his horse are still right or if maybe he has to go one step back.

Of course, you can also scold your best friend if there is a reason for it. Especially with young horses, the borders have to be clear. As little as a clear word damages a friendship, but rather makes it stronger if the basics are right, as important is it for the rider to find the right relation between rewarding and motivation on the one hand and a certain degree of subordination on the other hand. Our experiences also show that more positive energy in many situations of daily training is extremely helpful for improving suppleness.

Mind and body

Of course it is important to look at your work with your horse self-critically, but it is equally damaging for suppleness on both sides, if the rider lacks all self-conscience and he becomes insecure – often because of negative experiences. This often shows in negative tensions, especially in the shoulders and legs. The result: The rider loses all suppleness, especially in his hips and pelvis, he cannot give proper aids and hold his hands independently from his seat. The horse's reaction: Depending on its mind it either starts running and loses its inner suppleness – this is often the case with very sensitive horses – or it becomes slower, fighting the rider's hand, becoming less diligent and tightening its muscles. The sometimes fatal circle between the rider's influence and the horse's reaction is starting.

Is it only technical problems or does the rider's mental tension play an important role, which leads to mistakes? The question whether the egg or the chicken was first, does not have to be solved. It is much more important that the trainer knows how tightly mind and body of the rider are connected. If you only work on seat and aids, when there are clues that the rider has lost his self-confidence or has other mental issues, you will fail in improving the situation.

Detaching from your inner pressure

You can make good experiences by taking the inner pressure from the rider, that everything has to work perfectly and the horse has to yield in the poll at all costs or complete all this lesson correctly. This exaggerated attitude of expectation is counter productive, for the rider and his horse, as it starts the circles described at the beginning. If you tell the rider that it does not matter to which level he is able to control the poll and that in this lesson you will only concentrate on his seat, he will not understand at first. But as a result, mostly you approach your goal by focussing on this part goal in big steps. Of course it is a precondition, that rider and horse are generally able to achieve the actual, but not explicit, goal of i.e. yielding in the poll. If the trainer manages to improve weaknesses in the

seat step by step this way, the described circle can be breached. This is because the rider learns to feel how positively the horse reacts to the sole corrections of his seat and automatically suppleness seems to be in reach.

Ambition and vanity

Being too ambitious is damaging in every aspect. First it blocks the inner and finally the outer suppleness of the rider and as an immediate result the horse's, too. Being too ambitious can also prevent the rider from being critical regarding the work of the team in this moment. If mistakes are made in basic training, they will stay with him and his horse for all times. Many of these mistakes can only be thoroughly corrected by repeating the basics which have been trained in the wrong way. Of course, this is not a lot of fun at first, but will finally improve the canter pirouettes and not only something seemingly as profane as the position of long and low. This is why in many places people rather try to hide the problems instead of working on them. In my experience, next to contact it is the suppleness which is not correctly trained and higher tasks are approached too quickly. But the rider who reduces his ambition and also his vanity a little and has the heart to go back to the basics of suppleness, will feel how much the lessons will improve after this time of "back to the basics".

3. Suppleness in the training scale

If you look at the training scale, you will notice the significance which suppleness has in the whole system of training horses and in dressage development. Suppleness is the second criterion after rhythm. Training a supple horse is therefore a central part of the first training period, the phase of getting used to riding. It is the basis for further systematic training of the young horse, in order to make it finally reach the climax of its mental and physical possibilities and become an obedient and nice riding horse. After this first phase the periods "developing forward thrust" with the components suppleness, contact, suspension,

straightening as well as “developing the ability to carry weight” with the components suspension, straightening and collection can be developed.

This schematic picture shows how the aspects of the scale interlock. Thus, suppleness is not only a central aspect in the first phase, but also in developing forward thrust, so that the horse’s potential can be unfolded to the maximum. Suppleness is a decisive moment, so that the horse can learn to react free and easy to the rider’s aids. The horse is resonant in the back, chews with its mouth closed, has a happy face and a free tail. Next to these signs of outer suppleness, the horse is mentally relaxed if it snorts.

Interdependencies in training: bottom-up

This makes clear how important a mentally and physically supple horse is, in order to complete the following steps in training successfully. For example, suppleness has a positive effect on contact. Only a supple, happy horse will be willing to accept the bit and look for contact to the rider’s hand. Think about, how many horses you see which hold their backs tight and therefore do not look for constant contact which you can recognise from an unsteady head and a mouth which tries to get rid of the rider’s hand rather than looking for contact.

At this point, the next relation to developing suspension is made, which requires a resonant back with supple, relaxed muscles: Only a supple horse has a resonant back and can develop perfect suspension in soft contact, because the back accepts the impulse from the hind quarters freely. The rider feels that he is taken along in his horse’s movement.

Regarding the development of forward thrust and the ability to carry weight, straightening the horse is very important. Suppleness does not only have a positive influence, but is a precondition for a perfect straightening. Only a supple horse will like to be straightened, therefore adjusting the forehand to the position of the hind quarters, which leads to track-covering movements – a tense horse is not flexible and smooth enough to be able to

bend laterally, which is the work that has to be done if you want to straighten the horse. Here, the rider’s aids would have no effect on the horse and every try to rider a shoulder-in would not train the horse’s muscles positively.

If you look at the final step in training from this point, the collection, which is the highest level of accepting the rider’s aids and leads to the highest level of suppleness, it shows that only a relaxed horse can reach correct collection. It is willing to carry weight by stepping far under its body with a resonant back and to position its head and neck relative to the lowering of the croup. A tense horse cannot show the elegance in trot and grandness in canter which correct collection requires – for example in trot you would always get the mechanic steps which are wrong.

If suppleness is an indispensable precondition for further training, it also has an effect on rhythm which is the first step of the training scale. As only a supple horse will move rhythmically, evenly in time and space. The reasons for mistakes in tact is often missing suppleness and tense movements.

Interdependencies in training: top-down

To which extent the individual training phases are connected and that there are also feedback effects is shown by a top-down perspective. For example, looking at the tandem of suppleness and rhythm from a reverse point of view, it shows that rhythm also has an effect on the horse’s suppleness: Only if a horse moves in even rhythm, it can move with a supple back and without haste and is willing to stretch long and low.

A horse moving in contact to the rider’s hand is in a frame of the rider’s aids, therefore it is the basis of the individual speed for each horse. These basics lead to suppleness, as it is the only way for the horse to learn to accept the rider’s aids without hesitation. The horse must never run hastily without contact or become slow because of too much influence from the hands.

Looking at the effect of suspension and suppleness it shows that a horse moving with suspension normally is also supple, because a tense horse is limited in the flexibility of its back and therefore, the back cannot accept the impulse from the hind quarters. The rider is not able to sit properly and is not taken along by the horse. The back, the connection between forehand and hind quarters is not working properly, so that suppleness cannot be achieved.

Straightening can also support suppleness. A straight horse will find its mental and physical relaxation more easily and quickly, because the even burden for each side is a nice basis for the horse which makes happy and tension-free training possible.

Finally also collecting work can support suppleness to a certain extent. A correctly collected horse will achieve more suppleness in collection because collection makes sure that the weight distribution also considering the rider's weight is anatomically beneficial for the horse. This feels good for the horse and allows working in a relaxed way.

An overview of the contents of the second part of the article:

Part 2

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