

TWISTED TRUTHS OF MODERN DRESSAGE

A Search for a Classical Alternative

By Phillippe Karl

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We have been observing the slow emergence of high profile criticism of methods in competition dressage over the last few years and the issue is gathering impetus. In 2004 the *ecuyer* Michel Henriquet (Henriquet on Dressage: J. A. Allen) explained that he had begun to react with hostility to misleading forms of dressage equitation. He had sent an angry note to the Commission of Dressage of the French Equestrian Federation concerning the "misdeeds" of both a "stifling" type of dressage equitation and one that is in other respects too lax. He was rewarded with a severe reprimand. He reminded us that Articles 401 and 417 of the Rules of the FEI, stipulating the general goals and principles and position and aids of the rider, contained no set penalty for serious transgressions of those requirements – which can be stated as follows:

- Lightness of the forehand
- Submission to the bit with neither tension nor resistance
- Animation of the haunches at the slightest request
- The neck raised and rounded
- Gentle contact with the reins
- A cadence that is rhythmic and harmonious
- Legs descended
- Hands low

Yet, as he pointed out, the use of the voice lowers "by at least two points the mark for the movement that accompanied it"! He pointed out that if two or three marks were removed for a transgression of any of the above principles for any accompanying movement, what a "slaughter" would occur!

In 2007 Dr Gerd Heuschmann published in English the veterinarian's support of Classical Principles, promoted by Isabella Sontag in Germany and "Piaffe" magazine as "Tug of War: Classical Versus Modern Dressage" (J. A. Allen). He mounted a strong attack upon *rollkur* from a physiological and veterinary point of view and demonstrated the common display in competition dressage of poor rudimentary presentation of, for example, piaffe with hyperflexion of the neck and undoubtedly swelled the debate against *rollkur* and the departure from classicism both forcefully and with clarity. Dr Heuschmann also collaborated with Anja Beran who, working with Jorge Manuel Oliveira (featured with Sylvia Loch in *Cavalo Lusitano – O filho do vento*: Edicoes Inapa – Lisbon 2005) has presented her delightful DVD "Elegant Dressage Training" and accompanying book "In Deference" (reviewed in earlier editions of the CRC's newsletter and now republished under the title "Classical Schooling with the Horse in Mind: Trafalgar Square Books).

In 1992 Phillippe Karl had already published among other works "Long Reigning: The Saumur Method" (foreword by Sylvia Loch). By then he enjoyed an international reputation as an exemplary practitioner and recognised teacher and a former *ecuyer* of the Cadre Noir at Saumur. He was an instructor at L'Ecole Nationale d'Equitation from 1985 to 1998.

He has more recently produced a series of four DVDs entitled:

1. The School of Aids

2. The School of Gymnastics
3. The School of Dance
4. One Year On

through which he demonstrated the use of classical principles for the schooling and development of young horses. Viewing these, I was immediately fascinated by his calm and compelling approach, illustrated by the use of his flowchart containing the core principle of "Respect of the Horse" – and entitled "The School of Légèreté" based on General de l'Hôte's "quest for lightness" and inheriting the principles of de la Guerinière and Baucher.

I have personally watched the DVD series time and again and have derived enormous inspiration and assistance from his influence in my own modest handling and management of both inexperienced horses and my P.R.E. schoolmaster.

His recent publication "The Twisted Truths of Modern Dressage" follows the recent trend for frank encounters with the world of competition dressage and pulls absolutely no punches in its approach. In his foreword General Pierre Durand (Ecuyer en Chef – Cadre Noir and Director of the French National School of Equitation) points out that some may find Phillippe Karl's words harsh but that the seriousness of the stakes on the one hand and the technical rigour, frankness and passion of Phillippe Karl on the other are not really compatible with any diplomatic attempt at compromise.

Phillippe Karl's new book fulfils a number of functions, for it should not be thought that it is no more than an onslaught on competition dressage. These functions are principally four-fold:

First: Analysis of the comparison between competition dressage and classicism and its departure from classical principles

The experienced pure classicist will already have concerns over adherence to the FEI rule book, or the discrepancy between the rule book and competition dressage in practice, and will have observed, for example, false piaffes rewarded with good marks even at advanced level – the less experienced will be confused or misled by advanced competition dressage marking standards in seeing hind legs scarcely engaged or not engaged at all and forelegs moving with little elevation and receiving high marks. The author helps the reader by a series of hand drawn illustrations and photographs of the great modern equestrians (Decarpentry, Nuno Oliveira, Podhajsky, etc.) together with his carefully explained text, to compare many of the requirements of the rule book or accepted modern competition dressage techniques with the principles of classicism. The following is an extract of three "bullet" points spelled out in the starkest and most hard hitting terms:-

- "■ Either we admit that "collection" is no longer an objective of dressage competition ...
- Or that judges do not know what a genuine piaffe really is ...
- Or lastly that they are complicit in a system that is in a state of cultural failure, whilst being powerful and lucrative."

The author at the same time reminds us that the piaffe results from a raising of the forehand with the weight bearing foreleg remaining vertical and a lowering of the haunches with a distinctive and active engagement of the hind legs

under the body. "A genuine piaffe is therefore excellent proof of both balance and impulsion – a sign of accomplished schooling".

The first fulfilment of the book is the analysis of these current problems which trouble and confuse many of us who are in turn reluctant or fearful of questioning the apparent achievements of undoubtedly great riders at Advanced and Olympic level.

The second function of the book is to provide a complete manual for schooling and achievement on classical principles, including the basic training of horse and rider. He begins, we may not be surprised to read, with the problem of over-bending (already emphasised in DVD No. 1: The School of Aids). As he points out, today virtually all dressage specialists drop the poll and bring the head behind the vertical to make the horse go "round" and "give its back". By copying these "champions", both teachers and beginners are all over-bending their horses. He deals with the consequences of over-bending, illustrating the point with his own diagrams, demonstrating the anatomical strain on the neck ligaments and the impact upon binocular vision and by showing the reader numerous photographs taken at the 2004 Olympic Games depicting extreme over-bending. Phillippe Karl explains that in gymnastic terms this is the first problem to be solved since supple extension of the top line is the cornerstone of a correctly schooled horse and collection or good jumping style depends on this. Once again, the stark message is there:

"That stars of the international dressage scene attempt to justify it and promote it under the name of "rollkur" or "hyperflexion" makes no difference. It is an authoritarian and brutal approach to domination that significantly deprives the horse of its capacities and places "man's noblest conquest" in the position of a slave restrained in shackles."

He returns to his roots to remind us that historically all the masters condemned over-bending outright and the FEI rule book (Art 401-406) recommends "... the head slightly in front of the vertical". What is the purpose, he enquires, of a discipline that does not apply its own rules and allows the fault to become standard.

The second function of this book is, therefore, to teach us the solution to problems such as these and to provide us with the means to achieve collection and balance under the principles of lightness and respect for the horse.

The third function is to provide a series of engaging chapters on schooling technique. The Head. The Legs. The Seat. Each one of these is carefully illustrated and Phillippe Karl is a master teacher. Those who have already seen his DVD series will have noted and will see again in the accompanying photographs to the book that he holds the reins of the double bridle in the "Fillis" or French style with the snaffle rein passing over the index finger and the curb rein under the little finger. He explains the use of double bridle work and the management and correction of horses which go above the bit or lean on the hand.

Lightness of the leg is also the strong message here in analysing the familiar problem of the rider's belief that impulsion will only come with strong use of the leg and spurs. Continual harassment by leg and spur without gain in forward movement results in dulling of the aid to the leg. The author reminds us of the principle that simultaneous use of the hand and leg is to be avoided and defines the correct use of the whip as an aid to the horse's understanding of the demands of light leg pressure. Engagement of the hind legs falls under the chapter on "The Leg" and illustrated customarily with the author's own coloured drawings, photographs and again the examples of the masters,

including Egon von Neindorff (his book on Classical Horsemanship is due for publication in English in March 2009).

"The Seat" is a particularly well written chapter, with focus upon the importance and achievement of shoulder in and counter-shoulder in and lateral work. There is a useful section on "Strategy for Teaching Canter Strike Offs" and counter-canter together with the flying change.

From here the author moves on to Transitions and Collections and devotes a substantial section to the achievement and development of piaffe and passage and the value of Spanish walk. Unusually, this is a book which has the ability to assist us all, from the novice to the experienced; everything is here, well explained and authoritative.

The fourth function of Phillipe Karl's book is to provide the reader with an understanding of the anatomy and physiology of the horse in relation to the work we should (and should not) expect him to do. By this means we can understand the reasoning behind his clear advice.

I admire the concluding chapter headed "Proposing a Classical Alternative". The founding principle is absolute respect for the horse and is categorised by Phillipe Karl as follows:

- Légèreté is not a declaration of intent of an esoteric nature but a philosophy which brings together clear, effective and measurable equestrian concepts excluding the use of force and coercive, artificial aids; it includes all types of horse and takes an interest in all equestrian disciplines.

- It is based on an in-depth knowledge of the horse – anatomy, physiology, locomotion, balance, psychology and ethics.
- Its aim is to get the best from the horse and fulfil his rider through a constant search for efficiency with the minimum use of means.

This book will open many eyes in the equestrian world. No doubt there are plenty of advanced riders and trainers out there who are already firmly resistant to Phillippe Karl's strongly expressed views but I would defy them to produce a logically compelling argument to demonstrate that his criticisms are ill-founded. They may well point to the results, namely the marks they achieve from dressage judges, but this is not an answer to the questions: "At what cost to the horse?", "At what cost to defining principles of classicism?" and "Why does competition dressage at times fail to correspond with the rule book?"

The contribution of this book to our understanding of the relationship with the horse and the ability of the author to concentrate our achievements both intellectually and physically is, in my judgement, outstanding. I have already devoted hours to its study and promoted the work by word of mouth. We should not only have respect for the horse but respect for this fine achievement by a remarkable man.

ROBERT SMITH, Q.C.

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