

A Balancing Act

Alexander Grayton

Since the beginning of this year I have made a concerted effort to do some research and study into the origins of equitation and riding, in order to try and better and more fully inform my own riding and training as well as to better appreciate the masters who have influenced the masters that have taught me.

I have had the opportunity to ride for some duration with two of the preeminent horsemen of our time, Ian Millar and George Morris. Both of them remain avid students of riding, all the while being some of the best teachers in the world. The emphasis on evolving, adapting, and treating equitation as a continuous story rather than a finite textbook is admirable.

Through my own studies I have learned a great deal about the origins of horse sport, the origins of stable management, the diversion in the period of the Enlightenment that created the unique French and German schools of riding, and I have read about several riding masters own discoveries that have tried to reconcile sport with art, classical with modern, and business with training – this is the balancing act.

I have often found in my own training that the truth, so to speak, exists in the balance between constraining ideas, rather than solely at any one



point. As an example, just the other day in a session with a student we were working with a horse that was a bit fresh, and whose nature is to be very eager and hot. Ultimately the horse preferred not to take a contact on the bit and would tuck his chin to his chest, while providing

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more energy and intensity than was asked for.

So what is the right thing to do in order to ride and work the horse? It is a situation that happens often, but to simply give an exercise to do, or instruct the rider to do a particular task would be only correct for an instant, then a new and sometimes conflicting cue would need to be given. So how does one form a system that covers all situations in this case, in order to avoid giving thousands of continuous instructions, each one different than the last?

The answer is to identify the sources of conflict, determine and set a direction we wish to go in order to remedy those areas, and then essentially let the rider do the riding. The rider is the only one that feels the subtle shifts and changes, and is the only one that can orchestrate the corrections in such a way that the horse understands there is truly a direction to go with this work, rather than constant nagging or only ever being told "No, don't do that."

With this horse in particular, the directions we set were to encourage a longer neck (to counteract the chin-to-chest), a consistent contact (never mind how heavy or light to start, just that contact was part of it), a short and slow stride (to encourage the horse to think lower intensity), while riding straight lines (to encourage straight travel from nose to tail, with no potential open doors for drifting out or leaning in to complicate things). As we set the four points of focus to start, we could then build the rest of our ride on

top of that foundation.

This was not an easy task for any rider, but this was an educated and capable junior – long neck, consistent contact, short slow stride, and straight lines were basically all of the things the horse didn't want to do, and yet it was the most complete instruction I could give to the rider. The rider used their knowledge and effective position to manage the balance between these four constraints, and within less than three minutes the horse was no longer a tense, overbent, fire-breathing dragon, and was rather a balanced, straight, supple and eager (in the right way!) partner, that was fully engaged for the rest of the ride.

I'm sure there are other methods, including battling it out, lunging until the horse is tired, slapping draw reins on and pretend it isn't happening, find a bigger bit, or some version of happy hacking with blissful ignorance. None of those would have found the balance that the horse was craving.

This balance is found in the study of classical equitation too. There are so many articles and books that offer detailed analysis and single-opinion essays that extol the virtues of a single system (i.e. the German way is the only way and the French method is so backwards, or vice versa), and yet that just can't be it. There must be a balance between the seemingly opposing views – from the French who seek harmony and lightness above all else, and whose steadfast belief in the application of

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aids separately (Baucher, among others), to the German emphasis on proper shape and frame to accentuate the horse's natural state to be able to perform at its absolute highest potential (from the HDV 12 handbook).

Modern classical equitation must be seen as an individual's continuing experience learning and evolving with all of the information from past masters, seeking to find the balance and harmony of power, lightness, and relaxation on every horse.

Riders should strive to be thoughtful and

curious, always ready for an opportunity to learn from a master or expert, and to carefully weave the new information they get into their balanced repertoire in order to continue writing their own story in the sport.

Suggested reading:

Tug of War – Dr Gerd Hauschmann

Dressage For No Country – Paul Belasik

