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## The Arguments of the New School of Riding

### Is it a “modern evolution”?

The argument that new training methods are an evolutionary combination of psychology, natural horsemanship, and science all together for the first time can be refuted using classical sources.

“Natural horsemanship”—a term that has become quite popular since the 1980s in conjunction with the popular horse training techniques that use communication with horses derived from observation and rejection of abusive methods—was in reality already described over 500 years ago in the original directives of the Spanish Riding School and about 400 BC by Xenophon as a part of the totality of classical teachings. The “nature of the horse” is the foundation of the whole Training Scale.

#### Natural Horsemanship

This popular term means that training techniques used hinge on communication based on observation of the horse in a natural setting, and they reject abusive or stressful training

methods. Value is placed on a harmonious partnership between horse and rider, in that both the horse’s body language and his well-being are taken into account.

Many classical masters have successfully explained the psychology of horse and rider in a way that is still supported by scientific knowledge. François Robichon de la Guérinière knew much about what we scientifically understand today as the mind-body continuum, about the learning process of riders and horses, and he understood how to incorporate this knowledge in his method.

### Has equestrian sport improved?

The supporters of the modern training methods claim that equestrian sport has changed for the better in the last decade and credit this change to the rise of new training techniques. Supposedly, Rollkur and hyperflexion have led “to a new dimension in equestrian sport” with impressive achievements and continually improving performances.

They maintain that these methods, when correctly used, yield relaxed and obedient horses. As proof they offer that for more than 10 years all of the most important titles at the top of dressage sport have



*This detail of a wall tapestry depicts the classical riding master de la Guérinière.*

#### François Robichon de la Guérinière

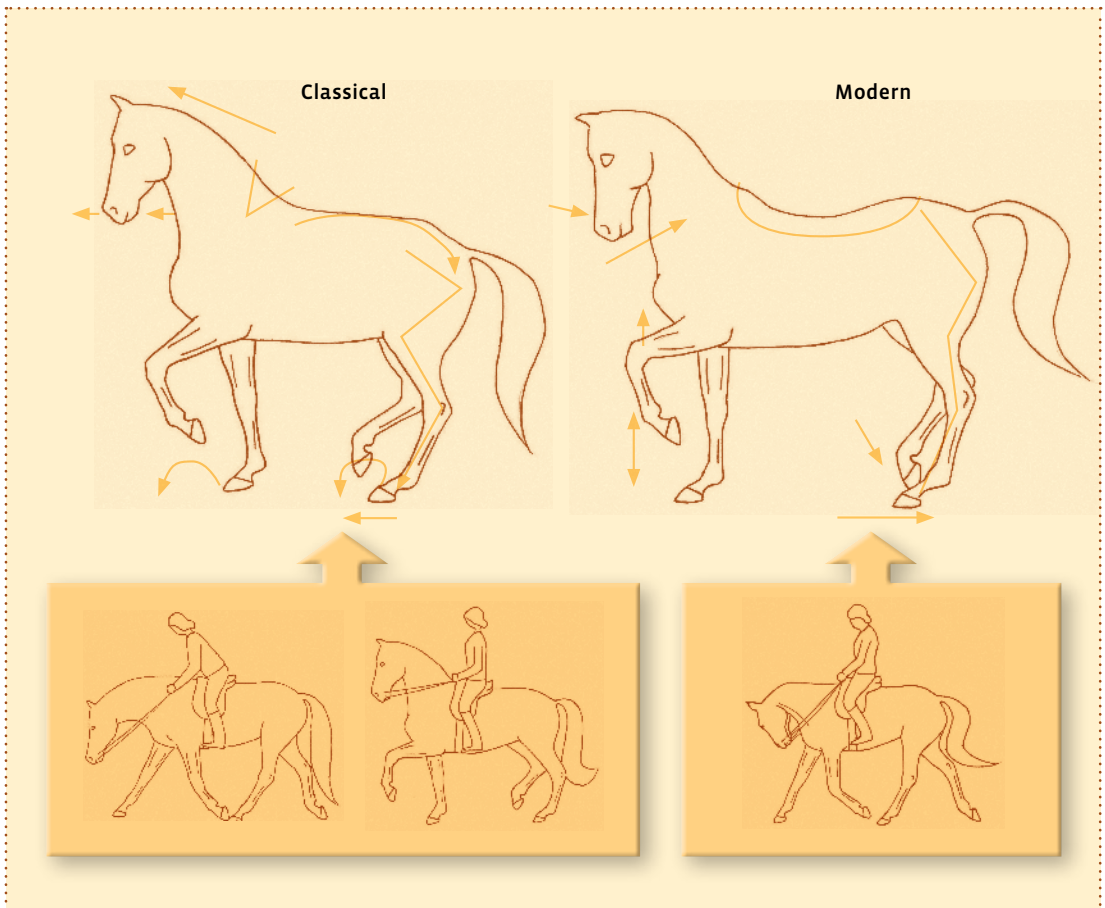
François Robichon de la Guérinière was, in 1733, the first to describe a systematic training system for the horse that didn’t use force. He is considered the founder of classical riding art. He developed the classical independent seat, which is still considered the ideal today.

been won by riders who have worked in this way. These riders credit their success to the round and deep training method refined in the Netherlands.

Using LDR, Rollkur, and hyperflexion, horses are supposedly positively developed: they are more supple with lighter connection, move with more strength and feel better to the rider.

They maintain that horses trained in this way are easier to straighten (collection isn't really discussed) and the rider has an easier time keeping her horse loose and relaxed. Moreover, this method claims to yield horses that are supposedly more beautiful and better muscled.

*These illustrations compare classical training postures (left) with modern training postures (right). As we have discussed, modern training postures don't lead to movement patterns that correspond to the criteria of the Training Scale.*



### Reality looks different

In my daily work I am frequently confronted with products of these training methods: horses that are tense, have lost trust in humans, are stiff, buck, rear, and frequently “go crazy” when the reins are taken up. I deal with horses that feel they either must protect themselves or have resigned themselves to their fate. Many have become so dangerous that they don’t let the rider get on and even attack their trainer on the longe line.

Interestingly, many such cases have been helped by psychological and physical rehabilitation according to the classical method. At the same time their rider is retrained in her seat, and her attitude toward her horse and toward riding itself. My goal is to help the horse forget the “new dimension” that the modern training methods supposedly opened to them so they can begin to enjoy moving again, as well as develop confidence in their own body and in their rider. Their musculing and physical expression change, and I’ve even seen stereotypical behaviors, such as cribbing, disappear.

### Playing the gender and strength card

The point has been made that today slight women are riding who can’t rely on strength. Videos of such “tender maidens” show, however, that the techniques used to make up for what female riders may lack in strength result in the intentional use of major, often painful forces on the horse. For example, holding the reins extra wide (as may be recommended) significantly increases the pressure on the bars of the horse’s mouth.

In his book *Tug of War*, Dr. Gerd Heuschmann explains how the “lever arm” ratios in the head and poll of the horse (the length of the lever that the rider has available for his rein influence) potentiates the power of the rider. According to Heuschmann’s calculations, lever ratios of about 1:10 with a weight of 66 pounds of force (lbf) per hand (on each rein) and a snaffle bit result in about 1,323 lbf being exerted on the horse’s poll (see *Tug of War*, p. 102, for a complete explanation of this phenomenon). The curb bit increases this effect many fold. When the rider also leans back and presses her hands downward, pulls them up, or to the side, it is easy to understand how the horse can’t free himself from the posture, even if only 120 pounds is sitting on his back.

1–3 This eight-year-old horse was subjected to modern training methods from his third to his seventh year. He was so psychologically and physically damaged that he developed ulcers that prevented his being ridden.

1



2



3





Since the curb bit is unjointed, it is not meant for one-sided, asymmetrical rein aids. The leverage acts harshly on the bars of the horse’s mouth.

The strength and weight of the rider is potentiated many times over by the lever effect of the curb bit. The horse’s pain continues even when the pull on the reins is relaxed a little since the curb doesn’t release immediately.

### Do horses “enjoy” hyperflexion?

The proponents of the new modern ways of training dressage horses have a whole host of arguments about why this type of riding is wonderful for the horse. All of these arguments can be refuted when biomechanical and mind-body principles are taken into account. One argument made is that the horse, as a prey animal, connects the low, deep, and round position with security and relaxation (such as that experienced when grazing, drinking, resting).

But, consider, by contrast, the forward-and-downward stretching position with the horse’s nose in front of the vertical, which really does have a positive effect on the horse. In this posture the horse, with his eyes placed on the sides of the head, can still see around himself, which is very important to a prey animal. As mentioned, once the horse’s nose is behind the vertical, he no longer can see around him; he can no longer see where he is going. In such a situation, a prey animal doesn’t feel secure or relaxed. Further, when the horse’s natural tendency to balance using his neck is taken from him because his neck is shortened or “rolled” or “curled,” and then forcefully held in





place, any sense of general well-being is undermined. He finds it hard to breathe and feels pressure on the poll and on the bars of the jaw.

Those who argue that a deep neck posture is a sign of relaxation in the horse refer to studies from the zoologist E. Slijper, who created the commonly heard “archer’s bow and string concept” (1947) and from the Utrecht University in the Netherlands (van Weeren, 2004), where it is explained that a lowering of the head lifts the spine and makes the back arch. But the necessary “fanning” of the vertebrae and relaxation of the long back muscle only happen in the forward-and-downward stretching position. When the horse’s neck is so shortened that his nose comes behind the vertical, the opposite effect can be seen in his back. Professor Michael Weishaupt of the University of Zürich discovered in a parallel study that when the horse stiffens his back, his

*Even slight women of moderate strength can put a surprising amount of pressure on the horse’s poll and jaw when using their full body in combination with the lever effect of the curb.*





1 – 3 When trained in self-defense, prison guards are taught a combination of holds for restraining an inmate that is similar to the hyperflexion method commonly used with dressage horses. By taking away the prisoner’s balancing rod (his arms) and then holding his neck, the guards make it impossible for the prisoner to fight back. They can keep the “aggressor” quiet and make him obey their orders.

hindquarters trail out behind him, and the space between the vertebrae where the spinal nerves “exit” the spinal column in the lumbar region are narrowed.

In the often criticized van Weeren study, certain perceived “advantages” of the Rollkur position (for example, for the development of individual muscle groups) are given without critically elucidating the effects on the biomechanics of the whole horse that have been shown in other studies, namely the reduction in ground cover; the inability to step under the body with the hind legs; and the stiffening of the back and lumbar areas.

Proponents also say that the horse demonstrates concentration and focus on his rider when ridden in a deep neck position. Here, cause and effect are confused. Since the rider takes the ability to see from the horse when she rides him deep behind the vertical, she in effect becomes a “seeing-eye dog” for her horse. The horse is dependent on her—not focused on her leadership as a partner.

Finally, it is claimed that a horse ridden with a low, deep, and round neck are more comfortable for the rider. The horse supposedly relaxes his back to such an extent it is easier to sit. He yields to the rider, both physically and mentally, because he feels better working in the deeper neck position.

This is a fallacy founded on a desire for more control. It is incom-

parably better to sit on a horse that stretches to the bit with his nose in front of the vertical. This horse can see well in front of and round him, and is freely engaged with his rider. The fact that the back, in fact, does not relax in the Rollkur position, is quite visible to the naked eye.

A study from the University of Guelph in Canada by Uta von Borstel (2007) counters the claim that horses “enjoy” modern training methods. Fifteen horses were ridden 30 times through a Y-maze, randomly alternating between sides. Riding through one arm of the Y-maze was always followed by a 20-meter circle ridden in a Rollkur position, whereas riding through the other arm was followed by a 20-meter circle with “normal” poll flexion. Immediately after the conditioning phase of the study, the horses were again repeatedly ridden into the maze; however, riders left it to the horse to decide which arm of the maze to enter. Fourteen of the fifteen horses in the study chose the side that led to “normal” poll flexion.



Being ridden in a posture similar to that a policeman uses when taking a criminal into custody is humiliating to the horse.



Horses ridden using modern training methods often appear similar to a sagging suspension bridge—their back doesn't arch upward but rather drops downward, with tight back muscles, trailing hind legs, and a blocked lumbar area.

### Does muscle development come from passive stretching?

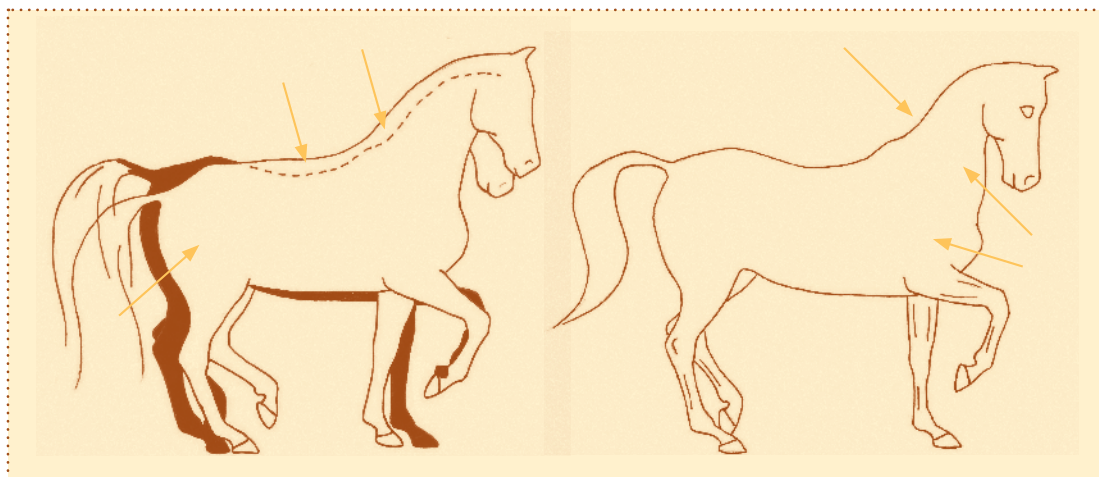
Another reason people claim using postures that are different from those we know from classical riding is of benefit is that the musculature of the horse can supposedly be improved more efficiently. Unfortunately, the recommendation of so-called "strength training" of muscles through passive stretching doesn't agree with today's sport science and training practices. Even in human athletics it is not customary to execute localized stretching exercises while at the same time stressing other body regions. Horses that are routinely worked according to modern methods demonstrate how this doesn't work by their appearance: Their upper neck musculature is not clearly pronounced, although they have a visibly developed muscling on the underside of their neck. They lack croup musculature. On the whole, horses that work at the upper levels via these techniques are "square" or "thick" in appearance, but they are not well-muscled.

*In hyperflexion, muscle groups other than those required according to the Training Scale are conditioned and trained. Instead of the musculature of the upper neck, an undesirable muscling on the underside of the neck is developed. The back is tight, and instead of the hindquarters, the forehand musculature develops.*

### Is science on the side of hyperflexion?

As must be apparent by now, the fact that this manner of riding is really about human dominance is hidden behind a facade of explanations. Some trainers will stop at nothing in their attempts to justify their actions, "re-interpreting" the results of scientific studies for their own advantage.

For example, as evidence that modern training methods improve



elasticity of the horse's movements and reduce the stress of dressage training, they have referenced the already mentioned study by Professor Michael Weishaupt (see p. 189), the head of the Sports Medicine Performance Center at the University of Zürich Equine Clinic, which was built in cooperation with the universities in Uppsala, Sweden, and Utrecht, The Netherlands. In fact, Dr. Weishaupt sees no advantages for the quality of the movement and instead clear dangers and disadvantages in terms of the horse's health.

The study compared the movements of horses without riders on a treadmill with the neck in one of six different, defined positions (see illustrations to the right):

- 1 A "free" or natural neck position.
- 2 Nose just in front of the vertical.
- 3 Nose just behind the vertical.
- 4 "Rollkur" (extreme overflexion).
- 5 Neck raised high.
- 6 Long reins, with the nose distinctly in front of the vertical (a young horse posture, long and low).

As might be expected, Posture 5 had the most distinct effect on back activity and the length of the horse's steps, since the horse's neck was aggressively elevated and the back was pressed down. With "Rollkur," the steps were shortened and there was also a more defined up-and-down movement of the back.

In an interview with the German equestrian magazine *Cavallo* (August 2007), Dr. Weishaupt explained what he had learned about the effect the Rollkur position (without a rider) has on movement. He said he finds it almost "unthinkable" that even a moment would be spent at the walk or quiet trot in this position, and he sees absolutely no advantage for the horse's movement apparatus. At the most, Rollkur produces an increased "movement awareness" in the horse—but only when done for a few seconds and the horse can relax afterward and reposition himself. When a horse is worked for a longer period of time with a "rolled" or "curled" up neck, often with the head positioned to the side, stressors are created and there is an increased risk of injury.

The position brings absolutely nothing to the table in terms of

#### A Potemkin Village

The term "Potemkin Village" is a saying that refers to a "fake village" that is built only to impress—in other words, a beautiful facade constructed to hide an actual sad reality. It is said by some that Russian minister Grigory Potemkin erected fake settlements along the banks of the Dnieper River in order to fool Empress Catherine II during her visit to Crimea in 1787, hiding the true condition of the land.



*When using Rollkur, the step sequence and purity of the walk rhythm suffer from the stiffening in the horse’s back and lumbar regions.*



improved hind end activity since the horse’s hind legs don’t step under his body. Dr. Weishaupt added: “It is much easier to manipulate the reins instead of working on the hind end with the seat.”

Dr. Weishaupt evaluates the phrase “positive range of motion” in conjunction with the movement of the horse’s back differently than proponents of modern training methods. In the Rollkur posture, the back lifts more intensely so that the middle portion, where the saddle sits, is overloaded. It isn’t supported in the same way it is when the horse is ridden in a forward-and-downward stretch. In the deep, round posture the openings between the vertebrae, which nerves pass through, are narrowed, and the transition between the lumbar vertebrae and the sacrum is overstretched, achieving the opposite effect of encouraging hind leg activity in collection. This is why horses ridden in Rollkur trail their hind end out behind and can’t step under their body. Their balance changes massively, and they use other muscles and leverage to compensate.

#### Range of motion

Range of motion refers to the distance and direction a joint can move between the flexed position and the extended position, without injury.