

## Forced Helplessness

### The sad result of an extremely jammed, short and pulled together neck.

By Uwe Spenlen



Would you like to be treated like that?

Unfortunately the global dressage scene today does not appear to be particularly promising.

The FEI's tendency towards indecisiveness in regards to important issues such as "Rollkur" (which has after month of discussion been renamed to "Hyperflexion of the neck") does little to improve this situation.

Unfortunately this change of phrase does little to alleviate the symptoms of what remains a questionable method when assessed alongside the tried and proven methods of the **Classical Scale of Equestrian Education**, the **International Training System**.

This is not the first time that there has been an attempt at alternate training methods which aim to influence the horses behaviour through forced posture and unnatural movements. This sort of approach to riding has falsely gained credibility through the misappropriation and misuse of many classical phrases and concepts. The false application of these terms is an obvious and transparent attempt to mislead and misinform whilst usurping the credibility of the classical approach which it is attempting to mimic.

This incorrect "training method" often leads to a tense and stressed state in which the horse exhibits exaggerated movement in the front legs at the expense of the natural flow inherent in a horse's movement.

The false application and combination of training aids such as running reins ( draw reins), long spurs and sharp bits carries with it a high risk of mentally and physically unbalancing the horse to the detriment of the horses education and performance.

Forceful, aggressive riding will occasionally give the ostensible impression that the horse is under control, however this is always at the expense of the horses natural movement precluding such basic fundamentals as the regular, rhythmic three beat in canter or a clear sequence of footfalls in walk (both of which stem from a horses mental and physical balance).

The body posture and expression of a horse as well as it ear movements and overall calmness (easily seen in the eyes) all combine to give information about the horses wellbeing or lack thereof. It is critical that the rider/trainer understands this language and is capable of reacting accordingly. Tension in the back can be detected though a horses tail movements. The classical approach to riding places great emphasis on the idea that the rider should not impede the horse's natural movements. Rather the overall goal should be to reinforce and stabilize this movement to strengthen and stabilize it. The horse should be content and possess mental and physical balance.

Unfortunately it must be said that this "training method" (Rollkur) is not restricted to

Dressage. Showjumpers have now also "discovered" this method. It is however in dressage, where the emphasis lies on aesthetic rather than athletic achievement that this approach has gained acceptability at all levels of competition.

Extremely pulled together, clearly far behind the vertical or consistently pulled sideways necks rob the horse of its natural calm and balance. It puts the horse in a state of constant high tension, while massively distorting its balance and relaxation. **It can't even see anymore where it is going.** In a creature such as a horse, whose instincts tell it to flee when facing danger, this situation causes a high level of stress.

The normal function of the back as the centre of a horse's movement is blocked and damaged. This becomes more pronounced the longer this situation is allowed to continue. It becomes impossible for the horse to bring its legs far enough forwards its centre of gravity. The back can not swing fully and without this the natural momentum of the horse's movement is impeded by shifting its centre of gravity forward towards the front legs.

Detailed studies at Brisbane University in Queensland have shown that this situation will cause damage in the vertebrae in the neck as well as in the oesophagus and air ways if allowed to continue for a period as short as 60 seconds. The added pain in the mouth, lower jaw and poll adds to this damaging effect. The horse is deliberately forced into a state of helplessness, exhibiting a severe lack of horsemanship on the rider's part. Some horses may react by displaying the sought after unnatural movement, most however will sooner or later sustain serious damage because of the unrealistic and unwise expectations forced upon them. Hence it is no surprise when basic movements such as walk and canter or even the halt begin to display serious abnormalities.

Given the above negative aspects of this dubious "training method", the only responsible advice one could give to a rider who wishes to educate their horse (from basic to the highest levels) is to adhere to the proven methods of the classical training scale of equestrian education. This applies to all its aspects. The rider should know and understand them.

**Rhythm, Relaxation, Contact and the level of submissiveness appropriate to the horse's stage of training are the fundamentals upon which all further education is based. One can not compromise on these critical points.**

**Rhythm**, the regular beat inherent in the movement of all three basic paces is an important foundation for the further training of the horse.

**Relaxation** is a crucial and central training goal and should never be neglected. It has to be solidly established and constantly monitored. A relaxed horse will move with a swinging back and the natural, rhythmic movement beat. **The horse has to allow the rider to push**, something which is unlikely to do in a tense state. The activity and muscle formation of the back can only improve in a relaxed state.

By swinging through and stepping under with the hind legs the horse is able to stretch the neck muscles, "drop" the top line and "seek" contact. The exercise allowing the horse to stretch its neck completely (from the withers on without rushing) by gradually giving the reins can determine the level of the horse's relaxation. This is one of the most important exercises in the basic and fundamental training of the horse. **This exercise should be possible at any time** during the training, by releasing the reins up to the buckle as confirmation of correct riding technique. This holds true throughout the horse's entire education.

The correct **Contact** (without coming behind the vertical) allows the horse to balance under the rider and move forward in rhythm with a supple, natural swinging back. **Correct contact means always riding from back to front.** To force the outline of the horse's neck solely with the hands and reins is wrong. Contact with a pulled together, short neck (forehead consistently behind the vertical) increases the tension and prevents the relaxed activity of the back, making it impossible for the rider to have a supple seat. The willingness and ability of the horse to assume an extended posture (in walk, trot and canter) is vital for the horse to be able to cover more ground. The horse is not able to flex and bend properly without correct contact. A horse which is being kept too short in the neck is not able to flex in the first vertebrae. The flipping over of the crest of the neck (usual a sign for correct flexing in while turning) is impossible.

In especially problematic cases (such as conformation problems or incorrectly trained horses) it might be advantageous to ride them in the short term with a somewhat lower and longer neck position. The emphasis lies on short term and somewhat.

This allows the horse to relax its back, regain its mental equilibrium and thus enables it to once again focus on the rider's aids. Once this has been achieved the horse's neck position must be moved back where it belongs: the nose line on or slightly in front of the vertical.

In conclusion:

One sometimes hears that the phrase "**Classical Training Method**" or "**Classical Scale of Education**" are unclear definitions. The phrase "Classical Training Method" doesn't refer to an old-fashioned, medieval training method but rather to a tried and proven approach which emphasises good horsemanship. **Classical rather stands nowadays for: Timeless valid and effective in form and subject matters, matured to meet all requirements and high demands of modern equestrian sports education.**

To place a questionable method such as "hyperflexion of the neck" on the same scale as the classical training method is to ignore the wisdom, experience and understanding of many generations of successful riders, trainers and veterinary professionals.

Even the FEI commission can not state out at present that "hyperflexion of the neck" **does not** cause damage to the horse.

In the last 20 to 30 years the quality of the horses breeding has increased dramatically. The progress in breeding for well-formed, high set neck posture and good top-lines have misled many riders to neglect the necessary build up of fundamentals such as muscle tone and flexibility in the back. Many back problems originate from this neglect.

These and many other problems stem out of the incorrect or incomplete application of the **International Training Scale** not out of any inherent defects in it. However the emergence of these problems has caused many riders and trainers to seek a solution elsewhere (eg. "hyperflexion of the neck", "Rollkur") rather than returning to the proper application of the classical riding method.

In many equestrian magazines world-wide one can read that the judges are responsible for the quality and further development of dressage. It also belongs to our responsibility to differentiate between a horse with solid fundamentals and one which has neglected these in favour of "modern shortcuts". Inconsistent judging will only further confuse the issue. (Judge what you see today and not what you saw yesterday and expecting for tomorrow).

The breeders have done their bit - they supply riders and trainers with better than ever suitable equine athletes. Now it only the trainers, riders and judges can go back to the right principles of training. What a bright future that could be!

Click [here](#) to read a Statement from DRV (German Judges Association)

<http://www.cyberhorse.net.au/cgi-bin/tve/displaynewsitem.pl?20060403uwespenlen030406.txt>

On January 31, 2006 the FEI organized a first workshop to discuss the notorious „Rollkur“ training method that caused a big commotion in the dressage world following an article in the German magazine St. Georg August 2005.

Sixty to 80 experts (veterinarians, judges and a few journalists) were invited to this workshop.

Two major conclusions were reached at this meeting, which the FEI formulated as following:  
“ There was clearly no evidence that structural damage is created by this training exercise, when used in the right way by expert riders. However, the use of that technique by inexperienced people was a possible threat to the welfare of the horse. The role of top dressage riders as role models in the sport was underlined. Most of the participants agreed that the terminology “Rollkur” was not Comprehensible and decided it would be better to use a term which could be understood by riders, trainers and the general public. After an intensive discussion it was proposed the draft wording might be “hyperflexion of the neck”.

In the latest Bulletin of the German Equestrian Federation and the German Judges Association has responded strongly against the conclusions formulated at the workshop.

They published the following statement:

It is with criticism that the German Judges Association DRV (Deutsche Richtervereinigung für Pferdeleistungsprüfungen) reacts to the FEI workshop about the so-called „Rollkur“. The hearing of various veterinarians, trainers and officials has brought no results. No proof was delivered that the extreme, deep overbending of the neck is an appropriate method of gymnasticizing a horse. The members of the FEI Veterinarian and Technical Dressage Committees could not document that this training method is of any use, but they also couldn't provide evidence that it leads to physical or mental damage in a horse.

“The FEI has wasted a great chance to deal critically with this training method, which has been a controversial subject for years. Lack of preparation on the part of both FEI committees at this workshop allowed the defenders of the “ Rollkur” to demonstrate the virtues of their method through statements of their personal veterinarians as well as videos and thus to turn this seminar into a success for themselves.

The FEI should have countered this impression. After all, the “FEI Handbook Dressage”, which is currently being compiled, is based on the classical principles”.

The DRV seconds the German Equestrian Federation's demand for a scientific evaluation of the impact and the consequences of the “Rollkur”. No matter what the results of this evaluation will be, though. The judges abide exclusively by the National Show Regulations (LPO) and the Guidelines for Riding and Driving respectively the Principles of the Training Scale (Skala der Ausbildung). These are the pillars all judgment of rider and horse must rest upon, no matter on which level and in which discipline. These guidelines are just as valid for the conduct of a rider in the preparation arena. Any differing opinions are not consistent with the valid guidelines and thus with the convictions of the German Judges Association DRV.

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