

“LEARNED HELPLESSNESS”

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Under Pressure

The body language of the horse reveals much about his state of mind. Dr. Ulrike Thiel explains how she recognises whether a horse has completed its dressage training mentally relaxed and balanced. Or if it had been simply placed under pressure and has had to learn not to try to help itself.



Illustration: The way it should be: Donnerhall with Karin Rehbein has performed his test satisfactorily. He stretches forwards and downwards, relaxed, calmly leaving the arena in walk.

The physical posture and facial expression of the horse, the movement of the ears and the expression of the eyes provide information about its well-being or discomfort – assuming that the person can understand the body language of the horse. Put another way: some physical positions into which the horse is placed put it into a particular mental state. For this reason classical training considers it to be particularly important that the rider, with his seat and aids, doesn't disturb the horse or cause it pain, but brings it into positions in the movement in which it feels comfortable. It should be in balance, not only physically but also mentally. The effect of a hollow back with an exaggerated, upright neck on the well-being of the horse was described in the previous article (ST GEORG 05/11. P 82): The horse is effectively in a state of constant alertness, and cannot become supple, instead it feels permanently in “Flight” mode.

In such a case it can be helpful with an excited and therefore distracted horse, to ride briefly with a slightly rounder and deeper head position (the emphasis being on “briefly” and “slightly”) to release the tension. This enables the horse to round its back, and with this movement it can re-establish itself again mentally so that it can concentrate on its rider once more. Once attention and relaxation is re-established, the rider can resume normal training, with the nose allowed forward where it belongs, that is, slightly in front of the vertical.

In the history of equestrian sport there have been repeated attempts using unnatural, forced physical postures and movement patterns, referred to as “Training positions” or “Athletic exercises” to achieve mental effects with the horse. The rider can put the horse quite easily into a physical position that turns the horse into a functioning “Bundle of stress” that reacts hyperactively and moves with increasing tension. It is not difficult to make a horse insecure and to unbalance it physically. Combined with “appropriate” technical or artificial aids (Draw reins, curb used incorrectly, sometimes both) it is possible to dominate the horse more effectively.

“SPECTACULAR”

If the rider gives contradictory aids, then the horse is brought very quickly to a relatively high level of activity. Confidence suffers as a result, but the movements can become spectacular. If observed carefully, one can certainly recognise from the expression of the horse that this extra activity has been bought with stress. Eyes, facial expression, breathing and overall tension expose the trick.

Similar reactions will happen if the horse is ridden in an extreme position (the nose drawn in the direction of the chest) over a longer period of time. The equilibrium will be hugely disturbed, the natural balancing mechanism, the neck, will be unable to function. The horse cannot see where it is going,

circumstances in which in a flight animal lead to mental stress. Then with the addition of exaggerated use of the curb (and draw reins), pain in the mouth, lower jaw and poll area, the vicious circle is complete. A "Panic energy level" develops, in which the horse reacts in an extreme way.

The horse learns that the rider is not responding to its signals. It must continue, whether it is now in physical balance or not. Whether it can see or not. The head cannot be moved independently, even less so the neck. If one can imagine, that it is possible to fix a horse on the ground by rigidly holding its neck, like a predator holds its prey, one can imagine in that moment which instinct will be awakened in the psyche of the horse. The rider dominates the horse like the predator that holds it down on the ground. It is helpless. Protest, if any, is only possible by calling on all possible reserves. The horse's discomfort can be increased by the rider—(one hesitates to describe this) who responds with particular actions, such as pulling up roughly to a halt, then immediately using the spurs, then when the horse jumps away, standing in the stirrups, leaning backwards and pulling on the reins. So the horse repeatedly learns that it is fundamentally at the mercy of the rider. In technical terminology it is called "Learned Helplessness", acquired helplessness, in which the horse must react with exaggerated movement, because not reacting means even more stress. Particularly, horses that are near-thoroughbreds and therefore extremely mentally and physically active, become accustomed at least part of the time to this pattern of response and the associated stress. They react with the required exaggerated movement that other horses do not.

At the top level of sport one sees riders who bring their horses to a state of hyper-activation where the horse is unable to cope and then control them using the "Rollkur" technique. The horse appears at least briefly to be moving actively and correctly, responding well to the aids. Frequently problems occur later on as many of these horses finally physically having health problems or mentally disobeying because they cannot cope any more.

RECOGNISING TENSION

One can recognise from the whole way of going that these horses exist in a state of tension. This tension does not go away when the reins are long and the test or training has finished.

Often, these images originate from the inability of the rider to bring the horse, through correct working—in, including mentally, to a state of suppleness. Here one must question the trainers. As a riding instructor I watch especially what my student's horse is telling me through its body language and I try to act as the simultaneous interpreter. Then I can usually help the rider to re-establish the harmony very quickly and to feel for himself, what effect his corrections have made on the horse. Horses repay the ending of stress, pain or hindrance, mostly with immediate relaxation. They do not take offence in the human sense, but react immediately against that which has disturbed them. The rider's feel comprises of nothing more than the ability to enable the horse to move without stress under the rider in a physical position in which it feels comfortable, and for it to enjoy this movement.

When the horse is moving in balance, with a positive contact over a rounded back, on which the rider's weight is causing no discomfort, and when it can use its neck to balance (if it becomes unbalanced with the rider) then it generally feels comfortable, even when it has to work more strenuously. In principle a horse does not experience difficulties when it trains hard. As an ever-alert flight animal it conditions itself naturally through movement and play.

This "Position of Well Being", has been accepted into international regulations: The degree of collection for the level of training, the activity of the back and the neck position (carried freely) that results from the even, constant contact coming from the horse. The poll is the highest point and the nose is in front of the vertical, enabling the horse to flex as it relaxes in the lower jaw. The regulations also talk about relaxation, harmony and voluntary submission to the rider. In training this means changing in between collection and forwards downwards.

Accordingly, the judges should observe the physical appearance of the horse. Breathing, sweating, expression and harmony of the movement, tail swishing and teeth grinding are important criteria. The judge must also see: Which muscles are moving freely, which are tight and tense? Where is the movement flowing, where isn't it? Every horse provides information about its condition through its whole physical posture. Spectacular movement, such as an extreme "electric" hind leg that comes from the hock rather than engaging from the hip, can be a sign that the horse, under pressure from

the rider, is actively tensing or bracing itself. The judge must also ask if the horse and rider are really interacting with a "movement-dialogue" or if the horse is being mechanically controlled. Perhaps judges should also be trained to observe the signs of Learned Helplessness, or be allowed to judge the demeanour of the horse before or after the test to establish if they are dealing with a "Happy Athlete".

To understand correctly the signs in the horse's body and in its movement, one must learn to observe. It is the interaction of many physical and mental expressions that create the whole picture. One has to understand this language, as a rider as well as, as a judge. Exactly like some actors are convincing and others not, one can learn to observe instinctively real and false harmony in the movement and the expression and then to recognise with increasing clarity how the immediate physical and mental state of the horse may be read.

I advise every rider who wants to work with a happy horse, to train themselves to do this. One should have oneself videoed again and again. It is also important to "adjust" the feel from the saddle. Sometimes over a period of years riders programme subjectively into their "inner eye" the feeling of a tense horse as the "correct" feel and they know nothing else. One of the many possible misunderstandings between people and horses.

Physical Signs of Well-Being

- Flow of movement is harmonious and in rhythm
- Movement is round
- Expression is coping with the situation
- Relaxed poll and loose around the lower jaw
- Calm, attentive eye
- Ears relaxed, responsive to the changing circumstances and to the rider
- Regular breathing with the emphasis on exhaling (snorting)
- Sweat development corresponds to the movement, intensity of training and the condition of the horse
- Contented, harmonious physical expression in the whole movement
- Flexion and relaxation of the relevant muscle groups synchronises harmoniously (through the whole horse in the same way not neck more than body)
- Whole physical expression is positive
- Tail swings with the movement of the back



No trace of a relaxed walk, instead thick foam on the neck – the inner composure of this horse after the completion of the test should be doubted.



A contented young horse: Damon Hill with Ingrid Klimke. His eye is calm and composed, the ear movement shows that he is interested in his rider and the spectators but that he is not intimidated by them.



The "Rollkur" enables the rider to have maximum control; the horse learns that it has no chance to resist or to escape, its field of vision is limited, it cannot use its neck to balance. In behavioural science this is called "Learned Helplessness" – in German "Angelemte Hilflosigkeit"



Chaos at the Prize Giving throws a bad light on the inner balance of the horse

Leave Fear Behind!

Horses that have been made to feel insecure over a period of time can be recognised by their behaviour, not only during but also after the end of a test or training. Frequently this behaviour will be falsely interpreted as "high spirits":

- Chaos at the prize giving: The horses leap away when the rosettes are handed over
- They continue to piaffe or passage, even when the test finished along time ago, they leave the arena nervously, instead of relaxed ,walking with a long neck
- Breathing, sweating, eye and ear expressions show an uncertain and fearful horse, not a horse that by his own effort is content, still active but relaxed

Training the eye: An Experiment

After providing appropriate guidance Dr Ulrike Thiel asked 30 riders, therapists, judges and lay people to make a judgement of 10 dressage horses after they left the arena, using criteria that relate exclusively to the welfare of the horse.

- Breathing: Quiet and puffing rhythmically *according to the beat?*
- Development of sweat on areas only where the horse has to engage physically or on other areas
- Eyes: quietly looking around and then staring or looking around without making contact
- Facial expression: wide open eyes, unsteady mouth?
- Tail: swinging quietly or swishing wildly?
- Ear movement: Flicking backward and forward or swinging relaxed?
- Muscular tension (fitting with engagement or too much)
- Whole physical appearance

After the end of the test

- Physical appearance
- Interest in the surroundings
- Trust in the rider
- Confidence in the situation
- Regularity of the rhythm
- Calm rhythmical walk
- Position of the neck
- Activity of the back from the hind leg to the poll
- Activity of the mouth

Interestingly, those making the judgements, experts as well as lay people, were largely in agreement about which horses were relaxed and content and which were tense and stressed.



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Equus portat ET animam ET corporem hominis !!!!!!!