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ASSESSING THE HAPPY ATHLETE

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 has been placed under pressure and has had to learn not to help itself.

UNDER PRESSURE

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 in classical training it is 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 is that 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 PACES

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

PHYSICAL SIGNS OF WELL-BEING

- Flow of movement is harmonious and in rhythm
- Movement is round
- Expression fits the situation or just copes with it
- 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 through the neck more than body
- Whole physical expression is positive
- Tail swings with the movement of the back

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.

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.

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.

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 in rhythm with the walk
- Development of sweat on areas only where the horse has engaged 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?
- Muscle relaxation and muscular tension: fitting the situation or excessive
- Whole physical appearance and

And 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.

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 between collection and stretching forwards and downwards

ASSESSING 'POSITION OF WELL-BEING'

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 inter-acting with a "movement-dialogue" or if the horse is being mechanically controlled. Perhaps judges should also be trained to observe and 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. This is one of the many possible misunderstandings between people and horses.

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dents train in the harmonious communication with the horse. www.hippocampus-nl.com
This an abridged version of the article Learned Helplessness that appeared in St Georg in December 2005 and has been translated from German for British Dressage Magazine by Linda Waller.

THE HAPPY ATHLETE AND THE JUDGES' RESPONSIBILITIES.

I refer to Nick William's article published in British Dressage containing some criticism to the introduction of the "happy athlete" concept in FEI rules. Our long standing friendship is a guarantee of my strong will not to be (or even appear) controversial towards your remarks, but I think that this matter deserves an open discussion.

Unfortunately I was not yet a member of the Dressage Committee at the time of the introduction of the above modification of the rules. I would have wished to have been one of them, but I take the opportunity to congratulate the colleagues who introduced the "happy athlete" concept in the FEI Rules. I think they deserve all my admiration for having understood the underlying implications of that.

I sent the article Evaluating the Happy Athlete which is in this issue of the British Dressage magazine. I fully agree with every single word of that article, where the meaning of the "happy athlete" concept is fully explained as opposed to a "tense" athlete. Please consider that article as an integral part of this letter.

I talked recently with Hubertus Schmidt on this subject and his main concern was that there are more and more judges who do not want (or can?) recognise a "tense" horse. He added that it is the responsibility of the judges to indicate the correct way and, as a consequence, riders will show horses according to our guidelines expressed by our evaluation.

Based on that it is not surprising that some riders have suggested to eliminate the walk movements from the freestyle tests and that extended trot is becoming one of the main criteria in the judging of young horses classes. I have a question on the latter: how many winners of such classes have then later successfully competed in Grand Prix?

The above article is in my opinion very useful to understand in depth the "good" done to dressage by the Dressage Committee through the introduction of the "happy athlete" concept in FEI rules.

VIVA the "happy athlete".

Enzo Truppa member of the FEI Dressage Committee, Milan, Italy

ROLLKUR – THE DANGERS

The way in which a muscle works is by contracting itself so that its length is shortened and whatever bones its ends are attached to are pulled closer to each other. The action is completed by an automatic, gravity-assisted relaxation back to its resting - and so, longer - state. The efficiency of the muscle is dictated not only by its state of fitness, but also by its capacity, in terms of size and length, for contracting.

An actual stretching of the muscle, by an outside source (since the muscle can't stretch itself beyond its resting state), suggests a straightforward way of adding to its length. This in turn should increase its ability to shorten further when required, but only if a corresponding contraction matches every lengthening, always, since it's the muscle's response, not the stretch itself, which provides the working-strength value. The dipped back of an old horse suggests some idea of the end result of too much of the one without the other.

The dressage rider is faced with a practical difficulty in regards to rollkur (stretching the neck-raising muscles in front of the withers). Though he has used his own muscles - of the arms - to get the horse's head down, it would cancel out the hoped-for benefits if he used them also to get the horse's head up again. He needs a technique, such as Anky clearly has, for asking the horse to himself shorten those muscles between his withers and the lower bones of his neck (which underpin an arch), in order to enter the arena with the head up and, hopefully, in front of the vertical. In the absence of a previously-arranged understanding with the horse about carrying his neck like this, up and forwards and from along his back, the dressage rider may find his down-and-round-stretched horse becomes progressively less, rather than more, able to carry himself like Anky's horses do.?

Daphne Pease, Perthshire.