

**Review and Commentary on:
Exploring Dressage Technique: Journeys into the Art of Classical Riding
Paul Belasik, 1994. J.A. Allen, London.**

By Daune Bronte-Stewart

When I first read this book I was rather overcome by the technical detail it contained. After trying to follow the numerous discussions about the various problems with different gaits and movements, I put it to one side. I returned to it several years later and saw it in a very different light. I presume this change in reaction to the book was due to my own developed 'readiness' to see the depth of Belasik's discussion and join him on the journey he invites the reader to travel with him. With my second reading I see how the author takes the horse's gaits and classical 'movements' and discusses issues around their desirable execution. Through these issues he explores such fundamental concerns as the horse's ability to balance itself (and its rider), and how it learns collection in the traditional, classical manner. Unsurprisingly, there are comparisons between the classical ideals and what we see in competition at the time of writing. Some of the points he addresses concerning incorrect training of the horse and its effect on the ability of the horse to collect are valid and discussed vehemently today, more than 20 years on. In the later chapters, the focus of his attention turns more fully onto the rider. This highly technical book also explores the rider's character, putting the reader in the position of questioning their ethical approach to the riding and training of horses. It was reading this book the second time, that helped confirm my growing understanding that the classical approach was not just about the riding of classical movements and the systematic and, more importantly, the systemic training of the horse via these classical principles and exercises. Suddenly, I could see a deep and central theme running through my study of 'classical' texts, namely, the importance of my own personal development through the process of riding.

The Introduction

Belasik explains that this book is his attempt to explain the role of technique in the journey of those who really want to ride well. As we devote ourselves to an 'art' we can become fixated by technique since it provides the tools to address the challenges we face. He warns us that to be really good we cannot allow ourselves to stay in this place, enjoying our mastery over technique. Those who will excel will realize that it's somewhere we need to visit but then move on, go further. When we understand technique, the resulting confidence will enable us to 'let go', to go beyond technique, 'applying it with more freedom and with greater insight. It is in this way that we free-up our potential to learn more. There are clear links between this idea of placing technique in its rightful place and the idea of the development of the rider's mind. We can tackle technique in a fairly mechanical way and many successful riders have done this. However, to reach a high level of understanding, to become expert, we need to be able to go beyond mechanical excellence. Belasik invites us to follow him on his journey of the mind and soul as well as of the physical body.

Chapter 1: A fog of walks

Much of this chapter challenges our understanding of the idea of 'gait'. Belasik illustrates and makes a fundamental observation that the concept of the horse's gaits (and what is pure, correct or otherwise) is a human invention. The Old Masters, not seeming to have our preoccupation with our idea of 'gaits', practiced many different 'walks', experimenting to see what was possible. They did not share our horror of the 2 beat walk.

Belasik outlines a problem that we have created for ourselves. He reminds us that The FEI only recognize 4 walks: medium, collected, extended and free. However, it is important to remember that the FEI 'rules' are guidelines for *competing* dressage horses, they are not rules for *training* dressage horses (p.18). If we were to follow FEI directive alone, he suggests, then "The danger is that an implication can be drawn that they are the only walks that should or can exist" (p.18). He draws evidence for his position that we should consider a continuum of gaits (as opposed to only those defined in FEI dressage tests) from the biomechanics research of Dr Doug Leach. He refers to de Pluvinel who talked about many different walks and concludes that he and Leach would have understood each other well.

For me, the big lesson here, apart from rethinking about how I can use the walk, is the reminder of the danger of mistaking a model (or description of reality) to be 'reality'. FEI 'rules' are a 'model' of how dressage competition should be. Let's not confuse competition movements with 1) horses' natural abilities to move and 2) our training of the horse.

Belasik moves to consider the reason why attempts to collect may cause the loss of the 4 beat walk rhythm. He explains that by anchoring the back feet more to the ground through increased bend of the hocks, the weight is moved backwards and this makes it more difficult for the horse to lift the back legs. This shortens the stride and leaves less time between the lift of the hind legs and the lift of the front legs. This shortened time between the 2 ipsilateral beats of the walk (e.g. hind left and front left), means that they become closer to one beat. The more collection then the more chance of an overall 2 beat walk. Belasik concludes by saying that for this reason he is happier to work with collection in other 'gaits' rather than the walk.

Chapter 2: The hovering trot

This chapter involves a fairly detailed discussion of the biomechanics of the legs in "an efficient forward stride". In reading equine locomotion and biomechanics literature Belasik recognizes an important point which he is able to relate to an undesirable movement he refers to as the 'hovering trot' (a "lofty trot which seems to go up in the air more than it moves forward. Unlike the passage, which is a great display of elastic power, the hover trot seems to dwell aimlessly" (p.25)). This realization relates to the understanding of the respective roles of muscles, ligaments and tendons: the protracting of the limb and its rotation around the fetlock is a reflexive action depending primarily on the tendons and ligaments. The dampening and smoothing of the forward movement, depending on flexion of hip, stifle, hock and shoulders are muscle dependent.

Horses that he had experience of that demonstrated the hovering trot were lazy in their attitude to work and he believed that this could explain the poor trot – it is not to do with a tight back (as suggested by Seunig) but because the horses have found an easier way to move: they "bound along off their tendons and ligaments with little effort towards deepening the step

or its complimentary powerful propulsion” (p.30). This way of thinking about movement and the roles of ligaments, tendons and muscles will be a recurring theme for Belasik when he studies the biomechanics of collection (Belasik, 2009). He points out that as far as reflexive actions are concerned, the horseman can have relatively little influence. It is only with the stifle, hock and shoulder where “conscious muscle manipulation can occur” (p.30) that the rider can make a difference.

At the start of the chapter, Belasik quotes a passage from Seunig which states that the horse’s back, when tight, produces artificially “exalted and exaggerated” steps. Belasik argues the reverse causality, namely, that the back acts according to the way the ligaments move: a tight back is caused by exalted and exaggerated steps:

Power must first be generated before the back can react to it. The action of the back cannot produce any steps at all, elastic or ‘exalted and exaggerated’. The action of the legs, and more specifically the muscular action of the shoulder, stifle and hock, must produce swift, strong, forward impulsive movement. The inaction of the legs, and again more specifically the muscular action of the shoulder, stifle and hock, produces hovering steps (p.31).

Before understanding the respective actions of ligaments, tendons and muscles Belasik had attempted to correct the hovering trot by means of longitudinal exercises: a training routine containing many extended trot to collected trot transitions and trot to walk transitions in an attempt to free the back. Once he understood that the ‘back followed the legs’ he realized that a more useful and effective way to work on the activation and increased use of the appropriate muscles was through lateral exercises: shoulder-in, renvers, and half-pass. He concludes that it is the ‘creative’ application of these ‘traditional exercises to develop flexibility and strength’ that will be likely to correct such problems as the hovering trot.

There is a sense of nervousness relayed at the beginning of the chapter where Belasik finds himself questioning Seunig’s statement. During the chapter, as Belasik is able to draw upon equine locomotive and biomechanical research we see him gaining in confidence to re-look at the teachings of past Masters. He recognizes how he has learnt two very important lessons from this search for understanding. The first lesson is that “almost all descriptions that become frozen by words are usually on their way towards something else.... During the Journey the horseman may arrive back at a city where he has already been and finds that the city has changed. Beneath one civilization lies another and another” (p.33). The second lesson is that “...every learning person builds his case as solidly as possible, not to hold it in eternity by its great construction, but to serve as an honourable base well built for something to go on top of it” (p.33). This second lesson serves well for anyone who wants to learn and discover things about our world of endeavours. For me there is also an interesting revelation at the end of this chapter. It refers to what I perceive about Belasik as a rider, teacher, researcher, and probably as a man. This is his constant need to try and understand the relationship between the science and logical aspects of his world and the feeling and art he recognises in dressage. From his writings it seems he has worked hard throughout his life to make sense of these two equally important phenomena.

Chapter 3: Rockin' and rollin' in the passage

This chapter is a good example of Belasik questioning some generally accepted 'rules' of training and searching for a scientific basis for a corrective approach. The schooling problem relates to the passage and involves an undesirable 'version' of this movement known as 'balancé'. Balancé is the effect of the horse lifting the front legs in an exaggerated manner and the hoof of each foot splayed to the outside with each step. The traditional 'corrective' action is to ride the horse forward more vigorously so as to achieve greater engagement behind and, presumably, encourage the horse to stretch the front end out more forward as opposed to up and down. Having experience of the 'problem' and lack of success in the 'correction' in terms of producing a quality passage, Belasik returned to study the science of equine locomotion. The ensuing description of the mechanics of the front and hind legs in passage is detailed. A key point is that when a horse widens its stance (front or back) it is a clue that the horse is "trying to widen its base of support" (p.38). In passage "where the horizontal forward force is restrained and the upward vertical force is accented, the sideways force can be substantial." (p.38). Belasik explains his understanding of the problem of balancé as one in which the horse needs to be able to manage both the horizontal and vertical forces necessary to execute the passage. If the horse is ridden forward, the rider may reestablish "the horizontal forces of the trot" but in doing so it "takes the emphasis off the vertical forces", the very part which "defines the passage". So, in this way balancé may be eradicated, but the quality of the passage is not likely to be improved. Instead, he suggests the very opposite 'cure', namely, "more fundamental collection" (p.39). However, the degree of collection needs to be considered carefully though, since if the horse is asked to 'sit' too deep, then his hind legs will be weighted and their action 'cramped' (p.40).

Belasik continues to remind us that collection requires the development of action and strength in the stifle and hock and that in exercises to develop collection "the rider must use as little hand as possible". It's probably worthwhile to quote his instructions that detail the way transitions, especially downwards, need to be the result of the rider's control of back, seat and legs:

At the moment of the downward transition, the hands become passive but the rider almost holds the horse forward with his back and abdomen pressed towards the pommel. The upper body stretches tall so that the rider does not lean back. The thighs close to give strength to the back and to help absorb some of the roughness that is bound to occur when young horses are learning transitions (pp.40-1).

It is the strengthening of the hock and stifle through such transitions that will enable the horse to become "capable of sinking under and holding itself in balance in soft but powerfully flexible transitions". Such power and strength, he argues, will eventually enable the horse to manage the vertical, as well as the horizontal, force required in passage. When this is achieved the balancé disappears.

A second problem with passage discussed in this chapter is the action of a horse whose front legs roll in towards the centre at each stride. Sometimes this action can be so exaggerated that each foot crosses the other. One reason for this, he argues, is a horse's weak or disconnected back. He explains that a strong back is required to transmit the energy and force from a rear leg without causing a swing in the opposite shoulder. So, for example, when the left

hind moves forward the right shoulder dips and the right leg swings under the chest. Good impulsion will enhance the swing until the horse's back is strong enough to carry the trot forward without the shoulder swinging. He advises round transitions and shoulder-in to help strengthen and connect the back (p.43). Another reason for the rolling of the front legs in passage is due to lack of engagement causing the horse's centre of gravity to be too far forward. The front legs swing under the chest to help support the weight on the forehand. Corrective action for this kind of rolling in is increased engagement and collection. As more weight is carried on the hind limbs, the centre of gravity is moved backwards and the fore limbs no longer need to support the extra weight and so can move straighter in the trot. Rolling in the passage can also be encouraged by how the horse uses his head and neck and stiffness of the shoulders will prevent the horse from reaching out forward with the front legs, again having the effect of causing the front legs to swing in towards the chest. Shoulder-in is a reliable corrective exercise (p.45).

Without engagement and with the centre of gravity too far forward, the horse is likely to have a back that is incapable of carrying the whole horse in the difficult exercise of passage. Problems show themselves in the hind legs too. Weak backs that hollow cannot produce good transitions from passage to piaffe. When the passage suffers from these type of issues, Belasik suggests that all work on the passage should cease and the horse should be returned to correct foundational work and proper sequences of exercises. He suggests that it is important for the rider to have a "system" for investigating all these types of issues and deviations from what is sought and to understand well the nature of the exercises that can be adopted to help address them (p.47). The simple, and frequent, instruction to 'ride more forward' is too simplistic to address the complexities of the evasions we might come across; we need knowledge of the range of tools at hand.

Belasik uses the complex biomechanics of the passage to remind us how strong and supple the horse needs to be in order to execute it smoothly and correctly. This is the reason why its training should be slow and steady to allow the musculature to develop. He declares "It is my feeling now that the great majority of evasions are the result of musculature inadequacies with the game horse. Unable to execute the strenuous passage, this horse tries to compensate and the dull trainer forgets to interrupt" (p.49). He discusses the two ways in which the passage is taught – either, in the more traditional way, allowing the horse to lengthen out of the piaffe, or to constrain or hold back the energy of an extended trot. A problem with this latter approach is that the constraint or braking force can tip the horse's balance off the haunches and onto the shoulders. There is a sense that Belasik favours the piaffe to passage route although he recognises the need to be flexible in terms of both the skill of the rider and the character and abilities of the horse.

At the end of the chapter Belasik tells the story of art critics' reaction to the newly cleaned Sistine Chapel – they hated the bright original colours. Over time, they had become used to the faded, dirty colours and these had become what they saw to be Michelangelo's art. The clean

fresh frescos were a shock but had to be accepted as the artist's original intention unless they were going to claim that Michelangelo's original colours were lacking. Linking this story to how we treat the horse, he explains:

Every horse has a passage in its own original colour. The way I see it, the best trainers 'wash' the movements of the developing horse over and over to take off filtering affectations, to find the original, the natural, the real. But there has always been a class of trainers who set themselves apart because of their erudition, charm, sophistication or power. They are like the art critics. They need to make the horse's movements their own. They seem always to want to do better than the natural and original. If you train a horse this way, always trying to add something, instead of washing something off, you can lose the dignity of the original horse,..... and someday when you are telling the horse how he must move, you will have to stand in front of him and convince him that Michelangelo could not really paint either (51-2).

Chapter 4: The Piaffe

For me this is perhaps the most thought-provoking and insightful chapter of the book and provides the basis of a discussion that Belasik comes back to in later work (*A Search for Collection*, 2009). Belasik focuses on the piaffe to explore some fundamental issues in dressage today. As an introduction to the topic, we are given two small stories: the first story concerns the author's work and discussions with John Winnet, who Belasik describes as a particularly interesting rider/trainer given the two strong influences in his riding background, namely French Baucherism and German competitive riding. Belasik explains how he sought to understand how Winnet managed to 'make sense' and amalgamate the two conflicting influences in his background, how he "synthesised these apparently different approaches into his own dressage" (p.54). The second illustrative story is a classic piece of Belasik writing in which he takes the reader with him on a snowy evening to the New Bolton Center Library where he has permission to use the Fairman Rogers Collection which contains "a magnificent assembly of historical equestrian masterpieces" (p.55). This collection is arranged with the old leather-bound treaties by authors such as de la Guérinière, Newcastle, de Pluvinel, Baucher, Seeger and on the other side of the corridor, recent equestrian research articles from veterinary journals, magazines, conference proceedings, etc. A small aisle separates the two collections and he remarks "In some ways a step across that three-foot aisle could traverse hundreds of years of horsemanship" (p.55).

The two stories seem to illustrate the way in which we often create divides and may struggle to make sense of the complex world that contains them both. Belasik also recognises that some may dismiss the older texts as being irrelevant today since the field has progressed. But he reminds us that horsemen today seek to address the same issues and problems as did those authors writing hundreds of years ago. The old works are there to be used, to prevent us reinventing the wheel, to be rediscovered, challenged, understood, applied and maybe even enriched:

It is worth the trouble to try to follow these courses. It is in these always moving rivers of information, these lineages of knowledge that many of the answers to the problem of

training horses lie. Great riders have told you something. They thought it was important.
(p.57)

This takes us to the piaffe. Belasik explains that the piaffe we see in competitive dressage is a long way away from the piaffe as practised and described in the old treaties. To explain the difference he coins the two phrases: *Piaffe as Preparation* and *Piaffe as Culmination*. He explains that originally the purpose of the piaffe was to collect the horse prior to executing the “airs above the ground” – the jumps. Terre-à-terre was also used in this way although rarely practised today (see Nuno Oliveira video to illustrate use of piaffe, terre-à-terre, and even petit gallop en arrière as preparatory collecting exercises for levade)¹.

The piaffe we see in competition today represents the culmination of training, not preparation for higher movements since the airs are not included in any level of dressage competition today (and rarely practised anywhere except the 4 remaining European Schools of Equitation and by a small number of individuals). Because, therefore, the airs do not follow piaffe, the requirements of the piaffe have changed – the collection, the gathering of the weight onto the haunches so to lighten the front feet to allow the hind end to spring the horse into the air, are no longer required (and their quality no longer ‘tested’ by the jumps). Belasik argues that in losing its purpose, the piaffe has lost its rigour and exactitude. Today the piaffe has only to conform to the rules of competition – balance is no longer a fundamental requirement and so “the result is that today you can see complex evasions occurring in the piaffe, primarily because they are misbalanced in one way or another” (58). It is the jumps that “keep the piaffe honest” (p.58). Belasik states that it is unlikely that the piaffe we see in competition today would allow a horse to execute a controlled jump out of it.

Prior to discussing the results of the evasions horses demonstrate when unable to load the hind legs in piaffe, Belasik tackles a problem of ‘logic’ regarding how we view a classical and correct piaffe. The traditional description maintains that (i) the back legs should be lifted to the height of the coronet band and the front legs to the mid cannon bone and (ii) that each diagonal pair should maintain the same ‘swing time’ (time in the air). He points out that if this is the case, then the front legs need to lift twice as high as the back legs but if they are to keep in the same rhythm then, logically, they must travel faster – back and front legs move at different speeds: “Then something important happens because one of the first requirements of the classic piaffe, contrary to a lot of opinion, is that it not be symmetrical front to back in spite of its sublime appearance” (p.59).

Unfortunately not all horses that produce a classical piaffe in terms of adherence to the rules above, are executing a classical piaffe. Although the hind end may be lowered the horse is unable to take the weight onto the haunches and compensates for this weakness by placing the front legs further underneath towards the horse’s centre of gravity so as to ease the weight on the back legs. The result is what referred to as ‘triangulation’.

Belasik explains that in his experience, triangulation often occurs when a trainer really tries to load the back legs, pushing them so far under the horse’s body that they become cramped and unable to move freely. By moving the front legs back the horse can relieve the pressure on the back legs by taking more weight on the shoulders. In this way the horse may appear to be

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfiTTYi2He8>

sitting deeply but in reality, little weight is carried by the hind legs – a good example of piaffe as culmination. Belasik tells us that the Duke of Newcastle was aware of deeply sitting horses that were not really weighting the hind legs and he understood the need to allow the back feet to move away from the front feet so they may carry their share of the weight more easily.

The second problem in piaffe discussed is the problem of the horse bouncing the back feet too high due, once again, to the hind legs taking too little weight. The problem is caused by inflexible hind leg joints but can be corrected by strengthening the abdomen, neck and rump and by increasing flexibility in the hind legs.

The problem of the hind legs being either too closely placed or too widely spread are also results of the horse being unable to take appropriate weight behind. Too close can indicate that the horse is not taking enough weight behind and too wide is an indicator of too much weight behind. Belasik states that in a 'traditional' or 'natural' piaffe, too much weight taken behind causes the front end to become too 'light' which causes the piaffe to "disassociate too much" (p.66). Too much weight behind also affects the ability of the horse to move between passage and piaffe, transitions that are a clear indicator of the quality of the piaffe. To correct the wide stance resulting from too much weight bearing the trainer should allow the piaffe to advance more.

The final issue in piaffe to be discussed is that involving lateral deviations. The same problems we saw in passage can appear in piaffe, namely balancé (sideways force of front legs leading to the horse swinging from side to side) and the front legs swinging inwards towards the centre, even crossing over. In each case relaxation and suppling the back and shoulders should help to improve the problem.

Returning to the traditional piaffe, Belasik reminds us that it is not quite a trot-on-the-spot since the front legs will move faster than the rear to keep the rhythm of the diagonals. Any lateral deviations are indicators of problems in weight bearing and suppleness that need to be addressed. Belasik agrees with those trainers who advise allowing the horse learning piaffe to use their head and neck to help in the balance and therefore allow them to carry the head a little lower than normal. Traditional piaffe should be allowed to advance slowly to "ensure that there is flexion and extension of the hind limbs" (p.69) which ensure that the hind limbs are gymnasticised since "Only in a circuit of flexion and extension of the hind limbs will the trainer avoid cramping the hind limbs – as Newcastle would say, 'too much assunder' – with a falsely lowered croup and a horse falsely on its haunches" (pp.69-70).

To bring the chapter full circle, Belasik returns to the issue of the legacy of the old classical writers. He warns against thinking in a linear fashion or trying to tie the works of these masters together in a "neat and tidy progression" (71). We cannot enter their time but we can try to make sense of them in our own time, in our own practise. They offer us a wealth of practical advice, especially in terms of technique and it probably fruitless to try and reinvent technique. He advises, instead, that to make use of these great writers, riders and thinkers, we should learn from applying their works to our own riding. The theme of 'going beyond' technique is revisited when he explains:

In a very real sense each one of us has to re-invent the wheel in our own time. What we must try to do is not necessarily re-invent the technological wheel with every generation, but we must re-invent the psychological wheel, the artistic wheel, the psychic wheel.

When one can find the wheel of the unconscious, Pluvinel comes back alive, and Guérinière has never died. You yourself come alive. By using the technological wheel correctly, you can move beyond it. You can see the source. You see your part as part of the source. You can see past the field of inferiority and superiority. You can be right there with Pluvinel now. The restraints of space and time are in your mind (p.71).

Such writing takes us a long way from the technical detail of much of the discussion in the chapter but the above quote gives us insight into the way in which Belasik himself has solved the problem of synthesising the works of the old masters on one side of the aisle and the scientific and technologically supported discoveries in the field of equitation in recent times on the other. The explanation also looks forward to Belasik's third book in his trilogy *The Songs of Horses: Seven Stories for Riding Teachers and Students* (1999) where he magically combines the past and present into stories to help the classical rider on their personal journal.

The last paragraph of this chapter rich in description of technique marries together the roles of technique and an individual's 'energy' or 'spirit', illustrating Belasik's growing understanding of the relationship between the two.

Chapter 5: Deep work

At the time of writing (1994), the training undertaken by some competitive riders/trainers was already under the spotlight. In this chapter Belasik discusses the benefits and potential pitfalls of what he refers to as "long and low or deep work". He admits that some trainers/riders do not advocate the type of stretching that such work facilitates but he takes time to describe how a horse needs to be gymnasticised and strengthened to take more weight behind (the aim of our training in our journey towards collection). The complex system of muscles that come into play in collection merits thoughtful consideration:

The abdominal muscles will gain strength and will add upward support for the back as the belly contracts, the top-line extends. The neck will extend and raise, adding a kind of fulcrum torque over the withers, enhancing the back's lifting (p.74).

He develops the description of how collection results in a 'round' horse, drawing upon the work of Bennet (1990):

...the back of the horse is lifted, rounded, basculed in collection by complementary abdominal support, and by stretching over two fulcrums – one being the withers and the other being the lumbo-sacral joint. When the hind legs reach under, the great muscle-tendon ligament systems pull around the lumbo-sacral joint and lift the back like a see-saw. When the neck is stretched the dorsal and nuchal ligament system pulls on the spinal processes of the withers and the scalene muscles at the base of the neck stabilize and push the lower neck up, the withers become another fulcrum so that the back lifts from the front also as the neck is stretched (pp.75-6).

This long quote is included here since the description it offers is so important in the arguments against the forms of so-called "stretching" that is referred to as 'rollkur' or hyperflexion and that are so damaging to the horse's wellbeing, in both physical and psychological terms.

Both collection and deep work require an active hind end. As weight is carried more and more to the rear, the front is lightened. A result of this is that the head is carried higher and to avoid cramping the horse it is also carried 'up and out'. Belasik emphasizes the importance of the neck being carried 'up and out' by explaining that "this retains an effective pull on the withers fulcrum, enhancing the round shape of the back even more" (p.76). Unfortunately, today it is not unusual to see horses ridden 'up and in' resulting in the neck being "cramped in an artificial arch or in an arch that is too high and tight". Consequently, "the top-side of the neck will actually shorten, nullifying the fulcrum effect" (p.76). The result of this way of going leads to a hollow, hyperflexed back, and stress placed on stifles and hocks – the result of hand-riding.

Collection lifts the back but young horses who have not become strong enough to collect can have their backs advantageously flexed and rounded by deep work. Belasik outlines two versions of deep work:

- i. Active forward movement behind, head low and neck stretched with the nose forward. The neck should be below the withers so that the fulcrum of the withers is brought into play. Belasik argues that in such work the horse may be able to stretch without activating this fulcrum by stretching along the crest. Instead the horse can straighten the neck and use the muscles on the underside of the neck.
- ii. Belasik prefers the second version in which again there is active forward movement, with neck lowered but with flexion so that the head is vertical or even a little bit behind the vertical. It is by ensuring that the neck is crested that the nuchal ligament is stretched, the flexion at the poll (that in the deep position causes the head to go behind the vertical) augments this stretch. He argues that such positioning mirrors the muscle usage that is required in collection:

...what, in effect, changes between deep work and collection is not really the shape of the neck but the lowering or engaging of the hindquarters. In a real sense the forehand does not levitate higher in collection, it is the hind end that sinks down (p.78).

His Figure 8 illustrates the second version of deep work and it not difficult to see how some may see various training gadgets as ways of implementing such stretches. It is fundamental that the stretching action is a result of the activity of the hind legs and not something that is created by pulling the head downwards.

In both the collected and deep work it is important that the horse "stretches *out* into an arch" (p.79 - my italics). The whole issue of the horse's head being ridden behind the vertical is one that causes much discussion and argument. Belasik makes his view clear:

It is my opinion that the horse needs to be only slightly curved in order to be flexed at the poll to effect the elastic stretching. But it does need to be stretched. Sometimes the horse may be behind the vertical in the deep work. Yet when the haunches engage for collection, the forehand raises the same arched neck which will now assume the correct position of poll high and nose not behind the vertical. When correctly done, arched deep work can enhance the horse's natural movement and keep the horse flexible in the back and body so its stretching complements the later flexions of collection (p.79).

Belasik emphasizes that deep work should be ridden with a light rein to stop the horse looking for support and encouraging elastic gaits and self-carriage; Belasik suggests that the horse also benefits psychologically from this light rein as he will learn to be 'responsible' and balance and self-confidence will develop (p.79). From the rider's point of view, riding with the light rein will ensure that there is no temptation to **"force the horse into overbending or overflexing"** (his bold), both of which are detrimental to the horse's muscles. The rider needs to ensure that it is the horse that dictates the amount of stretch achieved. Although he does not discuss it here, it seems important to emphasise that he talks of a 'light rein' and not 'no rein'.

Chapter 6: Lateral work – in search of the mother load

In this chapter Belasik sets out some 'rules of thumb' to help the rider consider the action of lateral movements in terms of their gymnasticising effects. His reason for doing this is his experience of contradictions in explanations surrounding the use and teaching of lateral movements. He suggests this confusion is due to the culture of equitation in which instruction and knowledge is passed from teacher to student verbally. Loyalties to those who teach us, the "transmission of feeling over facts" and the way that explanations (whatever their accuracy) become repeated or engrained over time results in "a continued passing of incorrect information over time" (p.82). The strength of what becomes almost an "oral tradition" means that any challenges to this tradition (e.g. from science) has a hard time to influence and change what is believed. Given Belasik's later interest and involvement in science to "test" the theories of the old masters, this problem of conflicting advice and rules is one that he takes up and examines in detail in later writings.

He defines the 'primary use' of the bending exercises of lateral work to be the correction of the 'natural asymmetry' in all horses. The lateral exercises allow the rider to isolate and exercise a particular hind leg so as to strengthen or develop its carrying ability. The aim is to develop both hind legs to work and carry weight equally and thereby straighten the horse's movement. To be successful in this fundamental training the rider needs to have a clear understanding of the workings of each lateral movement so that they can be used in a judicious way. The rule-of-thumb presented to help the rider in selecting an appropriate exercise is as follows:

"Whichever hind leg is crossing over, or in front of, the other, will be the limb that is exerting more force, doing more work, and carrying a greater load. The reason for this is that it will always be that limb which will be directing the horse's line of travel. That limb will be the primary source of propulsion for the horse's mass in the line of travel. In spite of many assumptive explanations and theories, this rule holds true, regardless of the bend in any of these exercises." (83)

Belasik gives examples of shoulder-in, travers, and renvers:

- Shoulder-in (left) – left hind steps under centre of gravity and exerts force
- Travers (left) – right hind pushes
- Renvers (left – now on other side of the wall) – right hind pushes.

Belasik describes an exercise, referred to by Podhajsky, which was popular in the Spanish Riding School, namely shoulder-in to renvers. This exercise is particularly useful since it changes the bend but keeps the same leg active and exerting more force.

By comparison, the half-pass, if ridden “on an angle with the shoulders well ahead of the haunches, as many of the old masters demanded” (p.87) has the potential to stress both hind legs at the same time: the outside hind steps in front of the inside hind whilst the inside hind has to step more under the body on account of the bend that the horse’s body is making. The straighter half-pass parallel to the wall that we tend to see in competition means the inside hind tends to step to the side rather than under the weight of the body. Consequently, the hind legs may criss-cross more, carrying less weight, resulting in less engagement and, therefore, producing less power for collection.

The rider/trainer’s skill lies in understanding that whichever leg moves “closer towards the centre of mass and centre of gravity in order to lift and propel the horse’s mass in that line of travel, irrespective of the bend” (p.88) is the leg that is ‘loaded’ and, therefore, exercised. Careful and thoughtful practice of combination of lateral exercises allow the rider/trainer to isolate whichever leg he/she feels requires extra work in the journey towards straightness.

At the end of this chapter Belasik returns to the question about the role of tradition in any field of human endeavor. He quotes from Ibn Khaldun (a fourteen century Tunisian/Andalusian historian) who lists the traps and ruts that tradition, its beliefs and followers may inadvertently impose on the development and maintenance of our knowledge about our world. However, in contrast to tradition, science, if it is well conducted and reported, is relatively easy to inspect and, if necessary challenge/correct. It is a different story when it comes to the ‘feeling’ that is so important in developing our skills in horsemanship. He explains:

It is harder to fix the inaccuracies of feeling. Here a rider must close the mind and open the body. So much of riding is the personal way one asks and answers without words. An inaccurate feeling is not one where the student feels something different to that felt by the teacher. All of us are different. So, by definition, we will feel things differently. Inaccuracies come about in how the rider goes about getting his/her feelings. The teacher cultivates the integrity of how you ask and answer. The feeling is between you and your horse (p.89).

Such knowledge is vital in our journey and yet its ‘validation’ is so much more difficult.

Chapter 7: Confucius and the Canter Pirouette

This chapter begins with quotations from five important commentators: the FEI Rules for Dressage, Boldt, Podhajsky, Albrecht and Oliveira. Each of the quotations relates to the collected canter and the canter pirouette which, Belasik claims, has the same relation to the canter as the piaffe has to the trot (i.e. a demonstration of the highest level of collection). The quotes are interesting in that two seem to be in accord and yet two suggest what may be a significant difference. The point on which they differ is the beat of the collected canter required for a pirouette – Albrecht and Oliveira both recognizing that as greater collection is attained in order to execute the desirable small, tight pirouette, with hind legs marking out a small circle, the rhythm of the canter will change from 3 to 4 beats. This surprises many since the 4 beat canter is commonly taught as a cardinal sin – a demonstration of faulty collection training. The

argument for the necessity of a 4 beat canter is based on the logical explanation of the horse's movement in pirouette where it describes two concentric circles (one for the hind legs and one for the forelegs). The smaller the circles, the less time in the stride there is for the suspension between the footfalls: impulsion and suspension are reduced and the rhythm from the original 3 beat canter is disrupted.

Watching slow motion video has lead Belasik to believe that, biomechanically, the pirouette must be in 4 time, but as it is an exercise in the collection of the canter, logically it should be 3 beat. By enlarging the circle made by the hind feet and allowing the horse to make a greater number of strides, the exercise becomes easier for the horse to collect and maintain the 3 beat rhythm. However, the movement in competition requires a small circle to be described by the hind feet and this causes the horse to balance by throwing its shoulders round, reducing the number of strides and thereby changing the canter to a 4 beat rhythm. It is not difficult to imagine Belasik's frustration and experimentation when attempting to find a way through this problem. Stepping back and leaving the world of technique and relying on "feel" to understand the development of the movement as a demonstration of bend and collection of the canter helps him find a way through. He explains:

To this day I still have found no philosophical compromise to the dilemma presented in the literature, the bodies of rules, and the biomechanics of the horse. I have made peace with it in the world of action. To me, the pirouette is not a trick. It is an exercise. Being an exercise it has built into it a relativity, a certain amount of freedom in its form, because the form will be changing as it develops (p.99).

The focus on 'purpose', he reminds us, becomes fundamental: "This is a classical principle: that the exercise's real value lies in the gymnasticising or 'dressing' of the horse and not in the display" (p.100). At this point he is able to explain that he continues to seek to ride the 3 beat pirouette as it represents the ideal of highest attainment, namely, collection:

To me, it is a reverence for the unattainable goal of pure paces. It is my homage to collection and its gymnastic values and to rigorous impulsion, which must be at the heart of all collection (pp.100-101).

At the end of this chapter Belasik returns to an important theme in classical equitation. He explains how the classical 'masters' and teachers provide direction so that each generation does not need to reinvent the wheel. Picking up on the metaphor of the wheel – the circle – the pirouette, he explains that whilst we do not have to reinvent the pirouette as a movement, we do need to find how we will ride it and it is this execution that:

...will reveal everything about our riding. In another sense we do need to reinvent the wheel with every generation. In each relearning more of us get trained, so we learn for ourselves all about the wheel and the circle (p.101).

Chapter 8: Resistance and Ethics

The final chapters of the book move away from the more technical issues that arise from the various stages of the horse's classical journey towards collection and the high school. In this chapter Belasik discusses the problem of how the *rider* might deal with resistance in the horse. The 'story' which is given to illustrate his own thoughts on this topic involve a horse he was riding who seemed unable to learn how to piaffe well. Belasik and the horse were subjects in an experiment with academics from the New Bolton Centre at the University of Pennsylvania. As part of the experiment, the horse's heart beat was being monitored and could be heard by Belasik as he was riding. Much to his surprise when he came to ride passage (as part of an advanced FEI test) the horse's heart beat seemed to drop. Belasik concluded that the horse was not 'stressed' by the difficult exercise at all but simply did not want to passage and so 'held back'. The question that this experience posed for Belasik was, how should he deal with such a situation? Many would use force and he explains that, unfortunately, many horses will respond to force:

If you are a trainer of horses you have to address the fact that all over the world horses trained in this manner [through brutality] are receiving praise and recognition in the form of prizes and accolades at riding competitions, and at the highest levels (p.106).

Alternatively, the trainer can choose to continue in an ethical manner; to have integrity, self-respect and mutual respect. He explains:

Once you act with integrity, in the issuance of commands, it is almost not your business what the horse does in response. If you are doing your work well, the horse will probably train well. However, if after a long while of your best work, the horse does not respond, there is no more you can do. The horse has decided not to be trained and you may have to let go. If you approach training this way, you will give the horse the ultimate respect. You give it a choice (p.108).

In addition to riding/training with integrity one needs to ride/train with knowledge of both a theoretical and a practical nature. If you do not choose to address resistance with force then you need something else to help you overcome difficulties you and the horse may face: you need technique. To have a deep understanding and be capable of applying technique wisely takes time and serious commitment. Such deep knowledge "is not intellectual philosophising. It takes mastery of a high level of practical psychology and physical development" (p.110). At this point Belasik makes an important point which gives insight into his own journey and how he has come to approach his own riding and training when he says:

I love the technical pursuit. Yet I started to realise that the body of knowledge is unknowable. It is too vast and our time on earth too short. It was hard for me not to be saddened by this realization. I wasn't going to make it. I saw every day how much I improved from the technical lessons. I wanted to obtain all the information. I wanted to acquire the perfect form. It took a long time before I began to see that wisdom is the knowledge that there is no knowledge. You cannot know a thing completely because it changes all the time. However, you can try to know a thing. The way you try to know something is what life is about (p.111).

The recognition of this situation and acceptance of it seems to be fundamental to Belasik and his understanding of his world and is a point he talks about elsewhere in his books. The message of the chapter seems to be: resistance itself is not that important: it is natural. What *is* important is the way we receive and react to resistance since it illustrates and illuminates our own character.

Chapter 9: The Myths of the Outside Rein

In this chapter Belasik uses a discussion of the use and misuse of the outside rein to explore the popularity of the detrimental practice of 'hand riding'. To start the discussion he revisits the idea of the horse being 'straight' on the bend of the. What is meant by this is that for the horse to be straight on a circle he must bend evenly through his body so that the outside feet describe one outer track and the inside legs a second, inner track. Whilst riders may understand that it is the outside rein that creates the turn, or rather provides the 'edge' of the turn, the line between the outside rein supporting the turn and the outside rein restricting the necessary bend is fine. If the outside rein is used in a 'braking' effect then the outside of the body will be unable to bend and the horse will become crooked, usually shown by the horse's haunches slipping off the circle to the outside. As soon as the haunches deviate from the straight, the loading and carrying power are reduced. A second possible effect of incorrect outside rein is that the horse will lean over (like a bicycle in a turn) as the body is straight/rigid on the bend as opposed to straight/bent. Belasik explains the correct use of the outside rein:

The proper use of the outside rein is to guide the power generated from behind, just as the trimmed sail helps guide the boat. Never does it take an active role and actually bend the neck. This will only succeed in eventually disconnecting the neck from the horse's body and lead to a rubbery neck in front of the withers and a stiff body behind the withers – instead of a flexible body and solidly connected neck, i.e. the horse moving in one piece (p.117).

The idea of the rein catching the power from behind leads Belasik to consider how the 'power' is generated from the rider's seat and legs. Independent use of the legs is critical:

The rider's inside leg can dually act on the horse, not only to move the horse forward by signaling the hind leg on that side to step up more, but also to encourage bend around that leg. So the inside leg generates power into the horse toward the outside rein, which encourages or guides the horse around the curve. Although the rider's outside leg cannot be asleep, it cannot be overactive near the girth or it will push the bend out of the horse and have a discouraging effect on the impulsive travel around the circle. The outside leg needs to be slightly back to catch the haunches if they deviate too much to the outside and to help encourage expanding impulsive steps on the outside of the horse's body. Too much strength and the rider will squash the horse into rigidity between both legs. It is not the easiest thing in the world to have independent leg aids but they are critical to good, free, forward movement (p.118).

Belasik explains how often he sees riders and trainers who concentrate on the action of the hands and this seems to result in 'hand riding' which, he claims, is "not real equitation". It is interesting that his own teachers, both 'traditional' and those who had Baucherist influences,

had always taught him that “hand riding was the crudest of riding” (p.119). He argues that “Rough hands will effect every physical and psychological aspect of riding” (p.119) and the results only produce a horse with a neck disconnected from its torso. This is the antithesis of the aim of the classical rider who seeks to make the horse flexible in its body as a whole. He explains that he has spent time inspecting the illustrations in the books of Newcastle, de Pluvinel, Eisenberg and de la Guérinière and could not find a single example of a horse being bent to the outside – all show inside bend. He considers how the shoulder-in can be seen as a development of the understanding of inside bend as a way of placing the horse with greater weight upon the haunches, an action that leads to collection. He explains:

The great *pli*, or neck bend inside, was gradually reduced as the riders became more masterful at bending the body vis à vis the shoulder-in, renvers. All this continuing work being based on the inside bend, around a pillar, around the leg. Eventually this bending developed connectedness and straightness (p.121).

Discussing the origins of modern ‘hand riding’, Belasik suggests that it is likely to have been influenced by the work of Baucher and his ‘disciple’, Fillis. In my experience Baucher seems to generate some fairly violent reactions. It is quite difficult to judge Belasik’s views on his approach since he recognises him as “a controversial albeit brilliant rider”, but seems to criticize his experiments to reduce/remove resistance by many forms of jaw flexions. He suggests that Fillis developed his own interpretations of Baucher’s flexions, the implication being that in this way they were compromised somewhat. One might argue that Baucher was (using the analogy from a previous chapter), reinventing the wheel for himself. What others later claim to be examples of Baucher-influenced approaches may not be the case. Belasik notes that when he watched Nuno Oliveira (recognised to be strongly influenced by Baucher) he never saw “pulling on the reins”. The irony of the situation is that many competitive riders who are said to be influenced by Steinbrecht and those German’s who dubbed Baucher the “gravedigger of French Equitation” demonstrate “ferocious rein pulling from side to side” (p.123). Belasik states his opinion that bad riding can come from “any school”. Lack of examples of properly classically trained horses and a propensity to have little patience to learn properly, leads young riders to imitate and to accept “hand manipulation as a method towards collection and lightness, when it is in fact a physical and biological impossibility” (pp.123-4).

Belasik reminds us that Baucher’s flexions were part of his method of distributing the horse’s weight equally over all four legs, not to place the horse more on the haunches. Using the hand is like applying a brake and when we apply the brake to a moving object, the weight moves forward, not backwards. So hand riding may create a horse light in the mouth as it avoids the bit but the horse will not be light as a result of engagement of the haunches that leads to “a cresting neck promoting bascule” (p. 124). This explanation helps me understand Belasik’s teaching to ride the horse’s neck “up and out” since, he says:

Horses that are ridden strongly, athletically, without the neck cresting up and out, lose their overall bascule. When the bascule suffers, so does the horse – usually first in the back, and therefore in the transmission of power (p.124).

The more we focus on the hand, the more we tend to forget about the importance of the seat and leg. This, he suggests, is why lungeing the novice rider has traditionally been such a “cornerstone of classical equitation”. He calls for trainers to teach the fundamentals of the classical approach:

It is up to the teachers of riding to insist on the acceptance of the common language of classical riding: the seat, and not the hands. This is not for sentimental nostalgia, but because if one doesn't understand all the reasons why hand riding is crude, including the biomechanical and spiritual, one cannot understand the finer forms of classical equitation (p.125).

The chapter ends with a paragraph that represents Belasik's underlying philosophy of riding. I have a feeling that the sentiment may have been hard learnt and all the more keenly understand because of that:

However, if you use the horse for travel towards some destination of your ego, you are no better than a bad farmer who has no love for the land, and your horse is nothing but a misused beast of burden. One of those fundamental tasks of the Journeyman is to learn to carry your own burden, and not project it onto other living things (p.125).

This sentiment is picked up and developed in the following chapter.

Chapter 10: Riding as a Meditation

In this chapter, Belasik suggests a distinction between two types, or philosophies, of classical riding. The first type is characterised by those who can be seen to take a somewhat brutal approach to the training of the horse (i.e. Grisone, Pignatelli, Newcastle), the likes of whom “never shied away from being extremely rough and severe in the training of their horses” (p.127). The other group, represented by the likes of Xenophon, de Pluvinel, and de la Guérinière, adopted a philosophy of horse training promoting ‘gentleness’, ‘judicious treatment’ and ‘naturalness’. Whilst we may recognise a difference in these two groups – “humanness versus brutality”, Belasik suggests that this is not sufficient as a true description of the difference between the two philosophical approaches to riding. Instead, he suggests that the real difference lies in “whether the riding is used for mundane purposes or whether it is realized for its metaphorical meditative properties” (p. 128). He gives examples: Xenophon was not merely a cavalry officer discussing the training and care of horses – he was also a philosopher. De Pluvinel returns often to the role of horse riding in the education of the youth and in particular to the personal development of his particular students, the Dauphin. De la Guérinière, at the very beginning, sets out the personal qualities necessary to become a horseman, qualities which are rare and which, consequently explain why there are so few real horsemen. This theme of critical self-reflection, learning and personal development is one which, I feel, is central to the classical approach and one which sets apart the classical rider from other riders (who might focus on the training of the horse and the learning and application of technique alone).

Belasik compares equestrian art to martial arts, whose practitioners have explored “the metaphorical qualities of their disciplines and their value as meditations capable of developing

self-awareness, self-enlightenment and natural understanding” (p.130). He compares the use of the bamboo sword in Kendo with the role of the ridden horse. In Kendo the bamboo sword cannot really harm an opponent – it is used to cut through one’s own ego. In this way the study of sword fighting is the vehicle through which one learns about one’s self and life. By comparison:

In horsemanship the vehicle of enlightenment is the horse, and the horse is nature itself. This is one of the reasons for the rich mythology involving horses and men. Since the horse is nature itself, the lessons are incredibly profound. The moment the horseman/rider succumbs to the lessons of the horse, they have transcended the duality of man and nature, man against nature. For modern western philosophy, this can be a great jump. However, if it happens, the I-ego dissolves, and the rider sees right into nature, his own and the horse’s which are, of course, from the same source (p.131).

Throughout this chapter, the references to Jung indicate influences on Belasik’s thinking and sense-making about this aspect of equitation. He uses a famous quote from Jung to explain the problem of an ego that dominates: “The man who must win at something has not yet arrived”. This “arriving” equates to the development of the self, to understanding the self. He explains the problem for the rider:

The Journeyman rider knows this place well. To get stuck in this world of winning at something means the totality of the self cannot be reached because the ego won’t recede. The ego stops the rider’s development on all levels and leaves him an imitator, not just on a personal level but on a technical level also (p.132).

In his book “A Search for Collection” (2009), Belasik speaks about riding ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the ‘system’. When one achieves balance, harmony, togetherness, when one becomes part of the horse, when horse and rider become one, part of the same entity, the rider rides ‘inside’ the system (the whole that is horse and rider). But ego, if dominating, takes a path that rewards desired responses and punishes undesired responses. A successful rider is rewarded with prizes and rosettes, eternally given recognition of success. He who seeks/needs such externally bestowed gratification is he who has not yet ‘arrived’, they are those “who have stopped on the road to his own enlightenment, his own individuation. The ego reigns in these places. It will not recede. The rider cannot further develop and must be vulnerable to manipulation from the outside” (p.132). Such riders are always riding ‘outside the system’ of the horse.

Belasik returns to the title of this book “Exploring Dressage Technique”. He explains that the more he read and studied technique, the more he began to understand that the ‘movements’ of classical riding were not the things that embodied the classical approach. He explains:

It is impossible to base the idea of riding classically on the performance of certain movements alone. Saying this or that exercise is classical can become increasingly cloudy the deeper you research them. My continuous study of technique kept showing me that the movements themselves were not the glue of classical riding (p.134).

He begins to understand that it is the personal development of the rider that completes the classical 'journey':

I was beginning to see that even if and when riding was dazzling in technical bravura, unless it made the step from mundane to meditation, it could not be art. No matter how great the technique, the rider could get arrested from arriving. I think it can be said that both philosophies of training produced well-trained horses, but only one also produced well-trained men (p.134).

A little later Belasik offers a fairly lengthy description of "a strong and vivid dream-like image" he experienced. He was riding fast across a wide, dry and dusty plane. Ahead was another rider, sitting stationary on a white Spanish horse. On approach he sees the rider is an old man, comfortable on his horse. As he gets close he realizes the old man is himself. He notes he sees himself galloping towards the end of his life and at the same time watching, waiting for his younger self to 'arrive'. He saw the strength and trust of the horse carrying him, and its true role:

The horse, always man's fearless companion, his most trusting ally, could carry him through and danger, through all those distortions that keep a man from being where he should be. I saw that the beautiful horse was, in the end, always ready to carry me toward my own real self. Somehow the horse knows that you are out there waiting for yourself. The horse will help the man. I began to feel that in the end this is the only job worthy of the horse's effort: not to serve a man's childish egocentric impulses and insecure desires – these jobs demean the horse and the lessons of the mythology. The horse, it seems, has always been there to help carry the man to his own real self, if the rider wants that challenge (p.136).

Epilogue:

In the epilogue, Belasik explains how, over the years, the complexities and apparent difference of opinion regarding classical riding have caused him less concern. It seems his route became clear when he focused on "what comes naturally to the horse" (p.139) and this is the criteria he uses to judge whether a movement is classical or not. He explains he has never seen an untrained horse do Spanish Walk (interesting since I have seen my elderly showjumping gelding execute up to 9 consecutive steps of Spanish Walk, at liberty, in front of his favourite mare). Whilst natural movement is his criteria for classical training he returns to reflect on what classical means for the rider. It is not just technical excellence but also soothing of the spirit. He suggests that riders make choices, whether to be driven by external praise (or lack of it) or whether they will take on the challenge of learning to know themselves. He explains how he came to realise that "the Journeyman cannot project his own missing face onto the spirit of the horse" (p.141). This second way is hard. Very hard. One needs to develop calm and inner strength to survive and grow. He makes it clear that this is his chosen route, but it is a route that continues day after day: it does not end as the end is never reached. For me, this is the meaning of the classical approach.

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