



A well-balanced horse is quick, with his hocks tucked neatly in under him, light on his feet and who responds to the rider's slightest aid (Photo: Christina Barlow)

Lightness, suppleness and strength

by Theresa Odendaal

When talking of schooling, many people immediately shake their heads. "It is boring and anyway, I do not want to do dressage", they say. Nevertheless, just like human athletes, who have to practice for hours to tune their bodies and sharpen their minds to run better, jump better or swim better, horses need to be tuned to perform better at their chosen job.

In a natural, untrained state, most horses are "on the forehand". This means that they carry most (approximately 60%) of their weight on their front legs. During basic schooling, the aim is to encourage the horse to start stepping through from behind and carry more of his weight on his hind-quarter (engaging the hind-quarter), strengthening the muscles behind, thus lifting in the front and causing the horse to become lighter in the rider's hands and

carry himself, while moving forward freely and willingly, more supple and elastic.

This is not merely to look pretty, but serves to make the horse stronger in the back, building muscles which equip him to be able to do his work more easily and fluidly. It makes him more balanced, quicker to respond and easier to manoeuvre – for both horse and rider. As early as 360 bC, Xenophon, wrote about and promoted grace and lightness, balance and obedience, and deplored hard-handedness and cruelty. He is still considered the father of classical riding, with many of his principles still being applied in modern-day dressage.

Schooling and training

SA Horseman spoke to Chrystine Good, director of Beaulieu College Equestrian Academy, about how important basic schooling is for suppleness, strength and responsiveness in all horses, for whatever their chosen discipline or work.

The same basic rules apply throughout, whether one wants to show jump, event, do dressage, play polo, ride western, five-gait or even drive horses.

It is interesting to note that horses used in sports such as endurance riding, also need to be balanced and off the forehand, so that they can work over uneven ground and preserve strength to increase stamina, keep going for longer and reduce the chance of injury. Building muscle over their top line makes them stronger and more balance stops them from tripping, stumbling and injuring tendons.

This kind of work is not building aerobic fitness, but physical fitness (gymnastic qualities), so a good training programme will include both schooling and fast/long periods of work to produce a good all-round athlete.

In horse training it is important to remember that every animal is an individual, says Chrystine. They vary in conformation, intelligence, temperament, courage, athletic ability, adaptability and many other qualities, all of which affect their ability to be trained. Accordingly, no one set of rules or school of thought can be recommended for the training of all horses.

The basic rules of training both horses and riders, have been distilled over centuries from horsemen who recorded their views for posterity, like Xenophon. Much of what has been written has been based on common sense but, it is not always obvious until problems are experienced.

The trainer

A successful trainer will study the views of those who have gone before him, and the techniques of his contemporaries. Only by being open-minded and observant, will he be able to employ those techniques that are productive and helpful, and discard those that are unrewarding or in some cases dangerous. Deviations in the form of short cuts often create problems, which are difficult if not impossible to rectify.

Successful training employs exercises and equipment that improve the horse's balance, suppleness, agility, coordination, athletic

ability, strength, stamina and understanding of what the trainer requires, without causing problems at a later stage of training. The more simple and straightforward the work can be kept, the greater the chances of success.

In all training the first objective should be that the horse is calm, forward, and straight. On that foundation can be built the horse's outline, rhythm, balance, impulsion and tempo. Over time the horse then acquires self-carriage and cadence to his steps, and can work with engagement, suppleness and elasticity through the whole of his body. Thus he can gradually be asked to carry out more demanding work without undue stress or resistance.

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The rider

The rider's objective is to enhance his horse's natural abilities through training, in order to pave the way to success in his chosen discipline or line of work. In so doing he will also seek to develop a harmonious relationship with the horse, based on mutual trust and respect.

Successful training relies on the rider's desire to improve his own physical skills, expand his knowledge base and heighten his sensitivity to the horse's needs. His actual efforts to educate and prepare the horse for his chosen task, also contribute greatly.

In training it is often quoted that “a horse is only what man has made it”. It is important that as riders and trainers, we take responsibility for the physical and mental well-being of the horses with which we work and compete. A good training programme involves a variety of work. An obedient, relaxed, confident and well-trained horse will achieve more and last longer. A horse that is heavy on the forehand puts much more strain on his joints than a horse that is light in the front and carrying himself with well-developed muscles. SAH