



Dressage not stressage!

For many, the mere mention of the word is enough to start the stomach churning. Listening to most tack room conversations, one could be forgiven for believing that dressage was invented to make people look bad, give their horses opportunities to 'misbehave' and leave riders totally and utterly mystified as to how the experts actually manage to do it. Like many things in life, it can all look like magic unless you know the secrets.

So why does something that's meant to be fun often turn out to be so stressful? Well it's partly down to good old human nature. There's a part of all of us that naturally seeks external approval; from our parents, our teachers, even a trainer or dressage judge. Those butterflies in the stomach are nothing more than the physical symptoms of our natural fear of disappointing, a challenge to be overcome and the 'price' that makes the success that follows more worthwhile.

On the other hand, the real meaning of 'dressage' - a French word usually translated as 'training' - is something much closer to '*a process of straightening*'. All horses are born bent to one side or the other and until their asymmetry is resolved by carefully thought-out and sympathetic riding and training this natural phenomenon imposes major limitations on the way a horse moves and is able to respond (or not!) to his rider's aids.

Unfortunately, dressage is often built on an underlying assumption that the horse has just 'got it wrong' and that the rider or trainer's job is to find ways to 'make' him move and carry himself according to a particular set of rules. Over the years this way of thinking has led to the development of all sorts of coercive gadgets and a belief that strong aids and 'a good contact' are the routes to success – accompanied by ever tighter nosebands which, coincidentally, prevent the horse from showing any signs of disagreement. Those same tack-room conversations, though, provide a revealing commentary on the long-term success rate of this approach.

"Resistance in another is a sign of lack of rapport"

A little over 10 years ago, I became fascinated by NLP, a branch of applied psychology that is amazingly effective at helping people achieve better results in whatever field they choose to apply it. One of the key principles of NLP is an assumption that a person's behaviour, however unhelpful or counter-productive it may appear on the surface, is in some way "*the best choice available to that person at the moment in question*".



(Dressage not stressage cont.)

Applying this same assumption to horses leads to a completely different experience of dressage. What if resistances, refusing to accept the bit or a lack of impulsion are all just examples of *'best choices in the moment'*? How would we change the ways we ride and train if we assumed that our job was not to find more and more authoritative ways to tell our horse that he's 'wrong' but rather to understand why the way he chooses to move and the way he responds to our aids *are* his best choices in the moment and not displays of naughtiness or unsuitability...?

A dressage test, as it was originally conceived, is intended as a measure of how far this process of understanding has progressed and how successful the rider has been in introducing her horse to a wide range of different possible choices and all the while allowing him to play his full part in a two-way conversation by expressing his opinions on the options available.

Horses are very compliant creatures by nature. You could say they are genetically programmed to take the line of least resistance. For some, that means just submitting to the demands imposed, whether or not they lead to long-term mental or physical health and well-being. Others respond by bringing all their strengths to bear in a desperate attempt to explain to us (using behaviour – the only language available to them) that perhaps our ideas of how they should respond to our aids are at odds with what nature says is actually currently possible for them.

Educated riding should never be stressful. Enjoyable dressage is based on an understanding of natural asymmetry, the effects and challenges it causes and discovering just how easy it can be to become your horse's trusted guide and mentor rather than an irresistible force to which he must submit or be conquered.