

Why don't you dressage people talk about crossing a rein over the neck?

BILL— We do a lot of things that we don't talk about, mainly because we wish we did them less! If I go back to my early days of riding when flatwork in jumping length stirrups and "dressage" were fairly interchangeable, we heard a lot about the so called "five rein effects." They were the Direct Rein, the Opening (or Leading) Rein, the Indirect Rein in front of the withers, the Indirect Rein behind the withers, and the Bearing (or Neck) Rein. Each was rather rigidly prescribed for particular situations.

Over time, as garden variety American dressage has matured, the aids that are taught have become less formulaic. Additionally, teachers have discovered that it is hard enough to persuade their riders to solve problems riding "back to front" without further derailing their students' attention toward things they can be doing with their hands.

The Direct Rein is our staple, our conventional rein application. Beyond it, the Opening Rein is a useful auxiliary tool. It "opens the door" without a rearward pull in an invitational manner to shift the horse out or in, helping him to better understand what the seat and leg are saying. In general, it is rather obvious and less sophisticated than more refined aids which can take over as the horse's training progresses.

Crossing the hand over the neck isn't exactly a sin, but to the extent that it produces a result without the horse gaining a better understanding of how he should respond to the pushing aids, using it tends to miss the point. We all do those things a little from time to time, especially in moments of *extremis* or when a little cover-up is an element of clever ringsmanship. But the risk is that it becomes a crutch or, even worse, a crutch applied without the rider's awareness is enough to drill into our students: "one leg on each side of the horse, one rein on each side of the neck" and "solve your horse's balance and acceptance issues riding from a pushing leg to a (mainly) receiving and a (briefly) non-allowing hand."