

Joyriding into Cyberspace

On the heels of the Pool Noodle Escapade, we are again thrown into the breach—this time at the high tech end of the weirdness spectrum. But first, please excuse my redundancy redundancy. The first part of this post appeared earlier on our website in the “Question of the Month” column when the absurdity of the matter described below overcame me, and a rant ensued:

The other day came information about a special clinic being shilled in the Deep South. And, I’m sorry, I thought the brave new world it offered was just *TOO* goofy for me! It began:



_____ will provide instruction using her "Dressage Simulator."

Like our airline pilots do their simulator-training, she will employ a life size sensor-imbedded mechanical dressage horse with a variety of computerized screens that you "ride." It even does lateral work, pirouettes, tempi changes, and will crash through the arena fence if you don't give your aids properly to control it. One of the best things I think it does is it has screens to tell you all of the pressure points you are applying to the horse - how straight or crooked you are sitting in the saddle, if your aids are stronger

on one side or the other, if the timing of your aids is correct or out of sync with the stride of the horse. It teaches you to perform all the required movements in a dressage test: leg yield, shoulder in, half pass, flying changes, pirouette, passage, piaffe, and collected & medium paces. *The rider can repeat centre line, diagonal and any other movements indefinitely, with no anticipation from the horse. Unlike a real horse, the simulator won't anticipate practicing movements.* [My italics added]

On a certain level I see why this notion has some appeal. It IS a lot easier to find someone who'll let you on their mechanical horse for \$130 than it would to find a similar person to lend you their FEI horse. And, if you're still at the “flopping around” stage, no poor real horse will have to bear the brunt of your floundering.

But viscerally, to the Horse Simulator I react the way the Wright Brothers' neighbors must have felt in the years before Kitty Hawk: “If God had meant us to fly, She'd have ...”

My first fear—both unfair and uncharitable since I've never laid eyes on this device or its promoter—is that it probably isn't all that realistic. While masses of rote physical repetition are necessary to learn basic skills like posting or maintaining a following contact, the whole nature of the sport (art) as riders move into more advanced work IS ABOUT COMMUNICATING. Because horses are NOT the same every time, because they do move varyingly not only because you might be sitting off center but *because sometimes they just might feel like it!* And that's much more what riding is about. The feedback loop, behavior modification, nuance versus recipe. The Horse Simulator proudly denies you the worry over such esoterica.

My second fear is more serious. What if it IS realistic? What will become of The Children if the essence of riding mutates to “virtual riding”—a total corruption of the inter-species bond that (I hope) drew most of us to our fascination with horses in the first place? Like Dick Cheney, “*It’s better because it doesn’t have feelings*”? It just makes me uneasy when “virtual” gets equal billing with “real.” It’s Why-go-to-France-if-I’ve-been-to-Epcot? reasoning. Next thing, middle school health teachers will be handing out life-sized inflatable plastic dolls to the boys. You know, so they get it all right before it *counts*. Sorry, somehow it wouldn’t be the same!

But worst of all, what if virtual riding is *Beyond Real*? It’s bad enough when your regular living, breathing equine partner is balky or disobedient. But it would be way over the top if I have to face my Virtual Horse in his synthesized voice telling me, “I’m sorry, Dave. I can’t do that ...”

That was my reaction to the Dressage Simulator a few months ago when I first encountered it. Since then, the feedback from those who have experienced it in person has been flowing in. For the most part, it’s been quite positive, even laudatory.

Still, I’m not impressed. Let me spin the data my way for you. As I read through the riders’ evaluations, what caught my eye was that the less a rider appeared to know, the more she liked the simulator. Novices claimed they discovered the feel of equal rein contact or if they were sitting off center or if they were using their legs unequally. All good things. But, uh oh, more sophisticated riders had reservations. One called the simulator “more of a video game than a true dressage experience,” adding, “Without the ability to bend and without any response to the seat aids, the machine was not an accurate depiction of a trained dressage horse.”

One person with no prior riding experience who tried it out could “steer” perfectly right from the start—a savant perhaps? Or more likely just a guy with a lot of practice at screen/joystick coordination.

One respondent said, “I was just getting the hang of not using my seat or legs to control turning or transitions when the session was over.” The question on the table: Yes, the simulator will give you a bunch of new feelings, and some may be valuable, but without a neutral moderator (who isn’t trying to sell one to you) will the machine’s shortcomings leave less experienced riders with the wrong idea of what “correct” feels like?

My (clearly biased) take is that not all opinions are to be valued equally. But how do you know whom to believe? TV weathermen are your “friends,” but are they the best judges of the validity of global climate change? Probably not. They have no reason to know anything about it. On the other hand, back in the day, Robert McNamara was a bono fide expert that we had every reason to believe. What he told us seemed to make sense. Until it didn’t.

Where does that leave you with Cyberhorse? In this case—and I speak with self-proclaimed omniscience here—majority does not necessarily rule! If you get the chance, try one of the Dressage Simulators. But keep an open mind, hang onto you “line item veto,” and be as cheerfully skeptical of its advice as you’d be of any new instructor who has an answer for everything and whose methods are flashy but as yet unproven.