

Spicy Meatballs

Critics of dressage will tell you that if horses could verbalize as humans do, you'd hear a lot of whimpering and moaning in the warm up ring—and not just from the riders! Because most horses are so stoic, it's our duty when preparing for tests or schooling at home to be sure that what we're asking is reasonable.

I met a new student with a horse not long off the track who told me she'd been having lessons, and she "just knew something was wrong." Her teacher told her that her horse needed to be "put together" and she just had to set her hands, hold him, and drive until he gave in.

My reaction—good luck!

The horse was inverted beyond hollow and absolutely miserable. This rider and her horse had been subjected to the mis-applied "hold and drive" method of training. When used on a horse with the wrong temperament and without a basic understanding of leg-to-hand connection, my wife, Susan, accurately describes this approach as Death by Dressage.

Now in "real life" we know there are occasions that when horses are otherwise ready but, perhaps, under-motivated, a degree of serving up the "OK, here's the bit; give in NOW" technique has some utility. But this was not such a case. Thoroughbreds and particularly ones off the track are often intrinsically claustrophobic, and need to develop an affinity for the bit—a desire to seek it—before they can be seriously pushed to it. Jamming them together just produces tension and resistance. After building their confidence, eventually some version of "drive and *receive*" is what usually works best.

So at that, we embarked on the long road to discovering soft and following hands, no locked elbows or rigid forearms, and then the ways to push her horse together in a non-threatening but still effective manner.

As I said to my student, finding that feel may seem really difficult now, but once you've got it, you'll look back and marvel at your past frustrations. Remember the old days before you could discern your diagonals or your leads? It's just like that!

There's the famous story of a reporter who was interviewing a renowned sculptor who had just completed a large marble equestrian work. "It's absolutely magnificent," the reporter gushed. "How did you ever conceive it?"

Replied the sculptor, "Well, Ma'am, I just started with a big block of stone and chipped away everything that didn't look like a horse."

It's *that* easy!

In fact, it's probably not easy at all, but you can give yourself half a chance if you go about your exploration the right way. Number One: Don't rush yourself. Exploring takes time.

Number Two: Make *controlled* experiments. Don't try to change everything at once. Even if it works, you won't know why it did, which makes it almost impossible to duplicate your results.

Along these lines, I once read what was billed as a cookbook for guys—a text for adult males who wanted to progress beyond the manly basics of incinerating a steak on

the grill. It suggested that any aspiring cook should do the following: Buy a couple of pounds of good beef and have it trimmed and ground by the butcher. Then line up all the herb and spice containers from your spice rack in a row on the counter. Make golf ball-sized meatballs, inserting a single herb or spice in each. Place the meatballs on a baking sheet, keeping track of what's inside each one. After they come out of the oven (15 minutes at 350 degrees), sample each one to experience how each seasoning would flavor a recipe you might be making. Only by learning the effect of single modifiers can you grasp how to use them in combination.

So back to my student on her 20-meter circle, trying to figure out what will make her horse go to the contact, trust it, and begin to come round, soft, and connected. So as not to be overwhelmed by the task, she has to make (directed) controlled experiments, altering one variable at a time. In her lessons I can point out to her which feelings her horse is giving her are desirable, which ones she can pursue to turn them into something more.

For people who like to grab a new piece of power equipment and pull the starter rope before they read the directions, this approach may seem pretty hum drum. But generally speaking, an artist is better off sampling a new color or a color combination on his palette before he slaps it onto a half-finished canvas. That's the route to follow here, too. Figure out how your riding tools work, and then create your art.