

**If it ain't broke, ~~don't fix it~~
Break it!**

I was riding a student's horse in her lesson one day, a horse that when he was imported, had been advertised as "Fourth Level." Such a designation means different things to different people. To some it means he can make flying changes and a semblance of pirouettes, to others that once in a schooling show he muddled through Test One with a 52%, and to still others that he *feels like* what Fourth Level is supposed to be.

On this occasion, his owner's miniature donkey managed to escape from his stall and began causing all sorts of mayhem in the driveway. "I'll go get him," I volunteered with unwarranted optimism.

I cantered out of the arena and located myself in the laneway between Charger and the front gate so as to herd him back to the barn. My horse showed no fear—that much was good! He also showed insufficient maneuverability to stay in front of that little creature to head him in the right direction. The donkey wasn't especially agile or light on his feet, but even so, Mr. Fourth Level couldn't keep up with his half-hearted dodges and feints.

Here was a horse who could truck his way through fancy dressage movements but who really was immune to moving his center of mass around in response to my weight aids. You've heard of the Quick and the Dead? He was among the latter. Another way to look upon his condition was to realize he was "trained" but not "broke."

It's very popular in some circles to claim that dressage is the foundation for all other disciplines. That's true if you remember that the basic behavioral skills every horse should learn are within the scope of that definition. If you jump ahead to endless, ponderous (yet rhythmical, cadenced, and balanced) 20-meter circles and your horse can't herd a damn donkey, you just may be missing the point.

I've sometimes said to riders that their horse must be at least as maneuverable as a large home appliance. Even if it's only so they can dust behind him once in a while. Being able to make a quick, prompt, argument-free reversal or displacement or a "canter right over there, stop, and stand" is as much a requirement of real dressage as the stuff that's written in the Directives and the Purpose on the test sheets.