



Philippe Karl

TWISTED TRUTHS OF
MODERN DRESSAGE

A search for a classical alternative

CADMOS

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A search for a classical alternative

*In memory of my Mother...
and in tribute to her brother, Louis Wegbecher, an
uncle who, as a rider, had such a profound influence
on my teenage years.*





Imprint

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Horses used to illustrate this book:

- Odin (Lusitano. Breeder R. BOUZIN)
- Verdi (Lusitano. Breeder J. PEIGNE)
- Enanquim (Lusitano. Breeder D. LAHAYE)
- Sampaio (Oldenburg Stallion. Breeder H. BLANK-JAEGELER)
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Foreword

I always enjoy reading Phillipe Karl's texts, especially when illustrated by the author himself, whose pencil manages to perceptively and reliably capture the elegance and correctness of horses. But the pleasure is particularly due to the technical quality of his words that are true to the concepts of the French school at Saumur, whose mission it is to preserve and hand down to future generations this approach to horsemanship.

As a past Ecuyer in the Cadre Noir, Phillipe Karl has successfully participated in this noble task. He has schooled and presented several horses of different breeds, each with their own specialities, but all satisfying the basic requirements of training laid down by General L'Hotte.

Whether with the Lusitanos "Odin" and "Verdi", the Anglo-Arab "Tetra" or other horses that participated in the Ecole Nationale's shows, Phillipe Karl's presentations were always one of the highlights of these Gala evenings.

An exemplary practitioner and a recognised teacher, Phillipe Karl has recently produced a series of films illustrating the school of *légèreté*. The beautiful images they show supplement the present work. In them we can see horses that are willing, reliable, and calm, whose accomplished schooling is proof of their stable balance. They make you want to ride with finesse. The ease with which they perform can be seen through the "gallant mouth" described by Pluvinel and La Guérinière, the "Abkauen" (seeking the hand) of Seeger and Steinbrecht and the "soft mobility of the jaw" of Baucher and General L'Hotte. Without this, *légèreté* cannot be complete; and its absence is an infallible indicator of certain problems in the

horse's "state of mind and body" as talked about by General Decarpentry.

Relaxation of the jaw, a preliminary to any *mise en main* (educating of the mouth), opens the door to impulsion, that most essential of luxuries, and is accompanied by a light contact punctuated by pronounced *descentes de main* (lowering of the hand).

When experts still agreed on a common notion of good and bad, these values were sought by competitors and upheld by judges. This was an auspicious time for academic dressage. Although dominated by Germany, competition was governed by a framework that included all the *finesse* of this art, and which extended well beyond national borders.

Today, the art of schooling horses has become a sport dominated by economic factors. There are many white knights who denounce these changes.

Phillipe Karl also has a campaign of his own. His actual achievements give weight to his words in an era marked by the predominance of critics whose equestrian virtuosity is dubious at best. His critical study starts with observations, then an analysis of the situation and a proposed alternative. He presents a very relevant view of how dressage competitions could be in comparison with show jumping competitions.

Although some may find his words harsh, the seriousness of the stakes on one hand and the technical rigour, frankness and passion of the author on the other are not really compatible with any diplomatic attempt at compromise.

I wish his efforts every success and hope that this brings with it responsibilities that his horsemanship and ethics allow him to legitimately claim.

General Pierre Durand

Ecuyer en Chef of the Cadre Noir from 1975 to 1984
Director of the French National School of Equitation from
1984 to 1988

Preface



What is dressage? One dictionary gives the following definition:

“A series of processes based on physical and mental pressure used to create conditioned reflexes with the end purpose of using an animal for various tasks.”

This is how we train a dog to be a watchdog, to hunt, to rescue people from avalanches or to guide a blind person, or an elephant to haul tree trunks, a seal to balance a ball on its nose or a rabbit to pop out of a hat.

Naturally, we can judge the value of dressage according to its effectiveness and results, but also according to the quality of the means used to achieve it since these can range widely from a fun learning approach, to force, or even brutality or cruelty.

In terms of riding, all riders consciously or subconsciously do dressage, even if they do not admit it. Horses make no distinction between a so-called “dressage” session and any other form of usage. Whenever we use a horse, whatever we do should be considered either a positive or negative act of dressage training because it marks the horse's psyche.

In the broad sense of the term, “dressage” is therefore all of the principles, methods and processes used to optimise the horse's capabilities, whatever the breed and whatever the discipline.

How has the concept of dressage changed over the centuries? In terms of riding, the middleages were limited to an empirical, warlike and often cruel use of the horse.

From the creation of the first academies during the Italian Renaissance, which occurred in the mid sixteenth century onwards, horsemen ceaselessly tried to develop an ideal training approach. Arts and customs became more refined. Equitation tried to distance itself from brutality:

**“Time wears away mistakes and polishes the truth.”
(G de Levis)**

Whilst the majority of those living in the seventeenth century were satisfied with the theory of “animals-as-machines”, the discordant voice of William Cavendish, 1st Duke of Newcastle laid down one of the founding precepts of classical dressage:

“Art must always follow nature and never oppose it.”

In the eighteenth century, the century of enlightenment and encyclopaedists, equitation started to become more rationalised.

François Robichon de la Guérinière contributed brilliantly to this with his School of Horsemanship:

“Knowledge of what is natural in a horse is one of the cornerstones of the art of riding and all horsemen should make it a main point of study... Without this theory, practice is always uncertain.”

This philosophy, strengthened by the scientism of the period, is a common thread throughout all equestrian research in the nineteenth century. General L'Hotte, one of the best known students of F. Baucher, wrote the following in 1906 in his book *Equestrian Questions*:

“Nature is the first of all masters. Its book is the fairest, most knowledgeable of all books, the most useful to consult. The effects recorded in its pages lead us to the causes which generate them.”

Finally in the 1920s, with the creation of dressage competitions, the art of schooling horses became a sports discipline.

Governed by the International Equestrian Federation, this discipline has become a sports business that is professionalised, sponsored, mediatised and globalised and used as an absolute reference for training purposes.

Since “doubt is a remedy taught by wisdom” (Publius Syrius, Roman writer from the 1st century BC) we can rightly challenge the roots, consequences and historical legitimacy of such a monopoly in comparison with our classical equestrian culture.

Considered as a specialised discipline, dressage only has a meaning if it results from the search for the most correct processes, in other words methods that are both efficient and gentle, because they are not contrary to the horse's nature.

In this book, we propose an analysis of modern dressage based on knowledge of the horse. This is the most reliable approach to avoid the pitfalls of fashion, the inevitable restrictiveness of specialisation, the preconceived ideas of different schools and the tyranny of current dogmas.

Using fundamental data on anatomy, physiology, locomotion, balance, psychology and the all-too-neglected

science of common sense, we will embark on a point-by-point study of the principles that govern official dressage. We will take these principles from dressage manuals and more particularly from those of the German Equestrian Federation, the current bible for any rider who rides in a rectangle surrounded by letters... wherever he is on the planet. The official handbooks of the German National Equestrian Federation, the Kenilworth Press published by, are Book 1: *The Principles of Riding*, completely revised edition 1997, and Book 2: *Advanced Techniques of Riding*, edition 1996. (These are referred to throughout the text as B1 and B2.)

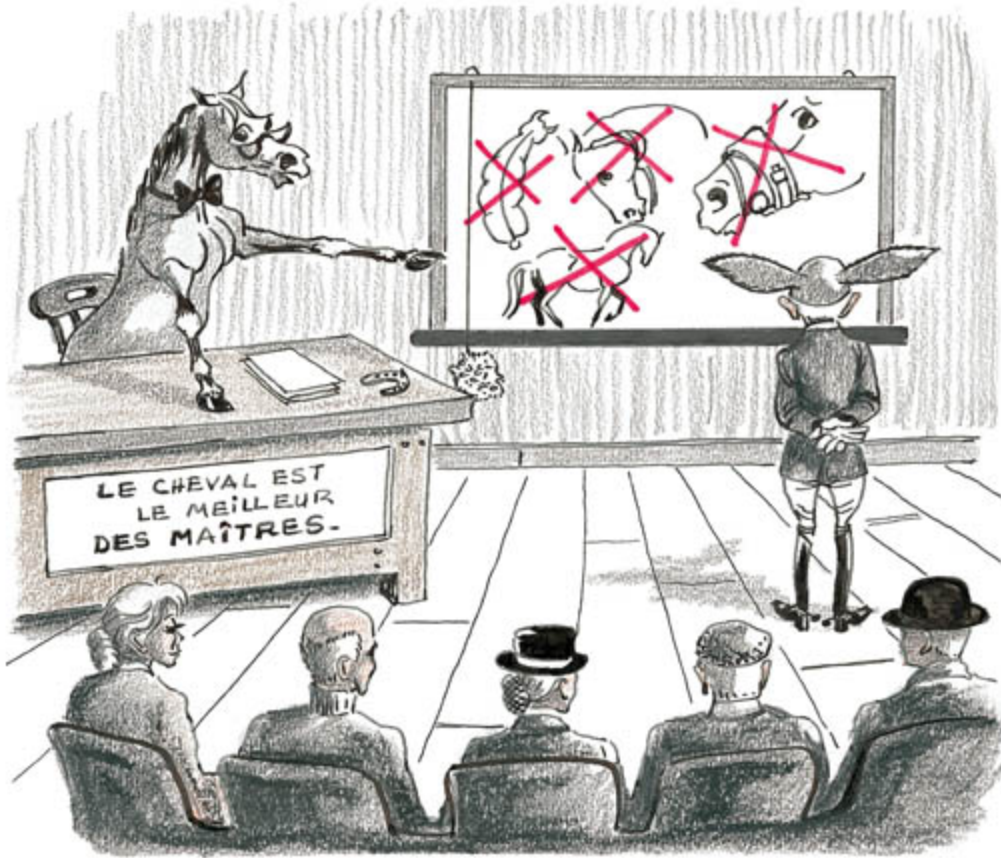
In light of this analysis we will reveal the shortcomings and explain the detrimental consequences of the dogmas of modern dressage. This will also allow us to deduce well thought-out alternatives on the following aspects:

- definitions of major equestrian concepts
- dressage methods
- rider education
- teacher training
- criteria used to judge dressage competitions and the design of the tests themselves.

Lastly, our equestrian culture requires that we should look at the writings of the best known masters to confirm the legitimacy of what we propose.

“Correct and incorrect do not result from nature, but from the law.”

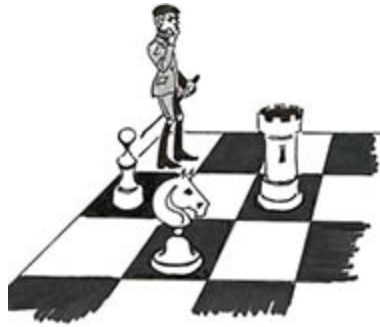
(Milesian school of philosophy, VIth century BC)



The horse is the best all masters.



KEY ISSUES IN DRESSAGE



Checkmate...by the horse!

Riding in general, and dressage in particular, involve a certain number of key issues that we need to identify. They cannot be effectively dealt with unless we make the right diagnosis.

Psychological Aspects

Analysis

In the past few years, under the pressure of ethologists and other “horse whisperers”, dressage manuals have consented to include a few pages on the psychological aspects of riding.

In Book 1, “*The Principles of Riding*”, we are judiciously reminded of the main traits of a “horse’s nature” by the following general recommendations:

“The schooling of a horse cannot only be judged on the quality of its paces under the rider, but also the

maintaining of its natural attitude and personality. It is these fulfilled horses, ready to give the best of themselves in their daily work, that produce a stable and harmonious relationship between man and his horse. These foundations will be strengthened and developed through patience, a sense of psychology and frequent reward."

"In riding, progress relies on theoretical knowledge. Knowledge of the nature and behaviour of horses, how to look after them as well as of riding and dressage principles are naturally essential for any serious and responsible horseman." (B1, page 12)

We can only agree with such statements. But a dressage manual cannot simply rely on declarations of intent, however admirable they are. Without decrees for application or resources for implementation, a law is no more than a hollow shell. Preaching the benefits of equine knowledge is a good idea, but it is even better to say what you need to know and to draw some real conclusions and rules that can be used to guide dressage riders.

The basics of equine psychology allow us to determine three main stages in the relationship between rider and horse.

The taming stage

Even when raised close to man, a horse naturally remains a herbivore with a gregarious instinct and with a highly developed sense of hierarchy. Since it is a victim of predators in the wild, the horse is fearful and has very sharp senses, using flight to save its skin.

To satisfy his needs, man subjects the horse to a way of life that is contrary to its nature, separating it from its fellow

creatures and imposing worrying situations on it, starting with the bit and the saddle.

Nothing good is possible until the horse accepts that man is a well-meaning and dominant fellow creature.

Trust and relaxation are absolute preconditions for any work of quality. In real terms this means banishing any use of force and coercion, as well as any constraining devices.

“The free consent of the horse gives better results than any remedies through which we try to constrain him.”

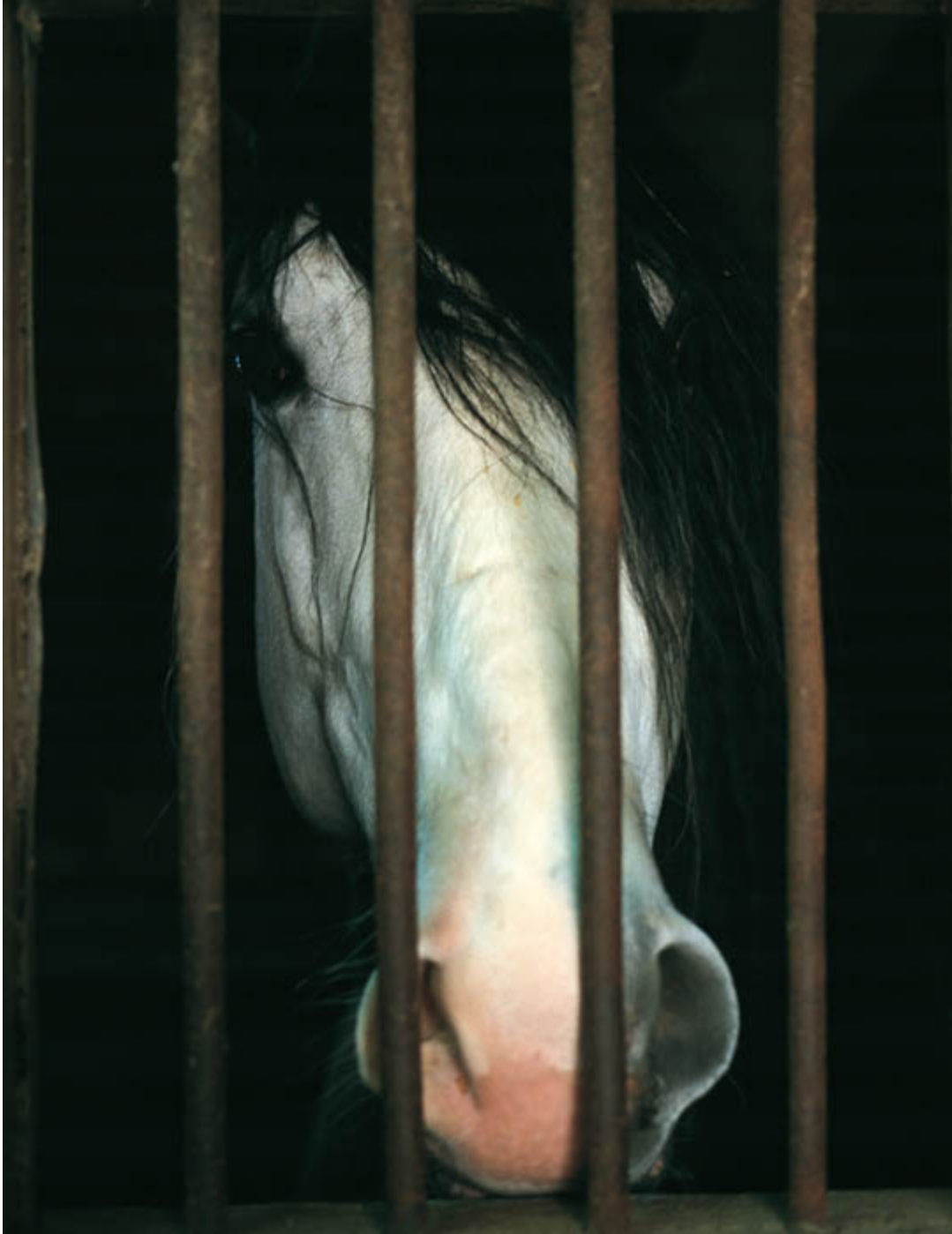
(Salomon de la Broue)

“Of all the conditioning required to educate a horse, the most important is that of his will.”

(Charles-Hubert Raabe)



Naturally a victim of predators, horses are herbivores with a gregarious instinct and a highly developed hierarchical sense.



To satisfy his needs, man subjects the horse to a way of life that is contrary to its nature. Photos: Laurieux

The learning stage

Horses are not just a mass of muscles to be shaped in order to satisfy our desires or to produce a performance, they are sensitive beings. Expressions such as: “The horse must do this... the horse must give that” are all too common in dressage jargon. The horse owes us nothing, it is we who have a duty to make ourselves understood.

“It is essential to link the rider’s gestures to those of the horse; this link is none other than the horse’s intelligence together with his moral consent.”

(Maurice Hontang, “Psychologie du cheval”)

So what is this intelligence worth? No master based their dressage approach more on the intelligence of the horse than François Baucher:

“Horses have perception as well as feeling, comparison and memory; they therefore have judgement and recall, and they therefore have intelligence.”

And we can believe that this approach is justified since General Decarpentry wrote the following in *Baucher and His School*:

“The results obtained by Baucher were extraordinary from all points of view. However it would seem that the speed with which he obtained them is what is most remarkable - it was truly prodigious.”

In fact, horses are capable of understanding everything that the rider is capable of getting them to understand.

In the end, it is the rider who needs a high level of equestrian intelligence in order to get the best out of the horse.

How does a horse learn? Fearful and worried by nature, horses spend most of their time assessing potential dangers in their environment. Any new element will monopolise their attention and is assessed on the basis of their past experience.

A brutal, authoritarian or simply clumsy rider, focuses the horse's attention by unwittingly becoming an aggressor. He triggers protective mechanisms (tension, resistances, evasions) which hinder or cancel out any quality learning.

For a rider to achieve significant and quick progress from a horse, he must have a subtle teaching strategy that takes account of the horse's psychological traits, its anatomy, essential points of its locomotion and the laws of balance.

We often insist on the importance of patience. But it is powerless on its own. It would be better to say:

Patience is not a science

But one needs...

a lot of science and a lot of patience.

The skill of a rider lies in the way that he plans a logical sequence of learning events. The wiser he is, the more he will arouse the horse's curiosity and provide an element of fun in work that it enjoys.

Typical learning sequence

A rider communicates with his horse via the “aids”. Therefore, he above all teaches a language that is intended to influence the horse's movements. Several steps must be complied with in a consistent learning sequence in order to ensure success.

1. The language of the aids

Ensure that the horse understands all of the necessary aids for what you want to teach him.

2. Objective

Determine the smallest possible step in progress, relative to what the horse already knows. Any demands that are inconsistent or excessive will be seen as aggressive.

3. Prepare

Focus the horse’s attention on exercises that favourably bring together the conditions for the coming experience.

4. Assess

Put the horse in the new situation (position, balance, locomotion) in which it will naturally and certainly react, even if it is only by very slightly starting to do the desired behaviour.

5. Reward

Immediately reward the horse to confirm that this is what you want (use your voice, pat the horse, let him rest, give him a treat, etc.).

“You must reward the slightest concession as if it was a full submission, because it will certainly lead

directly to that.”

(Alexandre Guérin, 1817-1884)

6. Repeat

By repeating the “assess” step and its reward we confirm, fix and perfect the new behaviour.

As a necessary to acquire any knowledge, repetition often leads the horse to respond by anticipation during the preparatory sequence.

This behaviour is a sign of goodwill and enthusiasm and the horse should never be punished for this. On the other hand, you must frequently repeat the preparation step and maintain it without executing the response.

This result should be rewarded just as much as a perfect response. In this way the horse learns to remain attentive to the rider and wait for a request that may come – or not as the case may be.

7. Perfect

As the new behaviour becomes imprinted in the horse’s mind, we can reduce the preparation step and depend more on decisive aiding.

In the end, the aids themselves will suffice and will become increasingly discreet until they are virtually invisible.

It then looks like the rider simply has to think about a movement for the horse to do it. This expresses the myth of the centaur.

8. Review

Something that is learned is only of value if it is part of a consistent whole, enhancing previous steps and used as a reference for future experiences.