

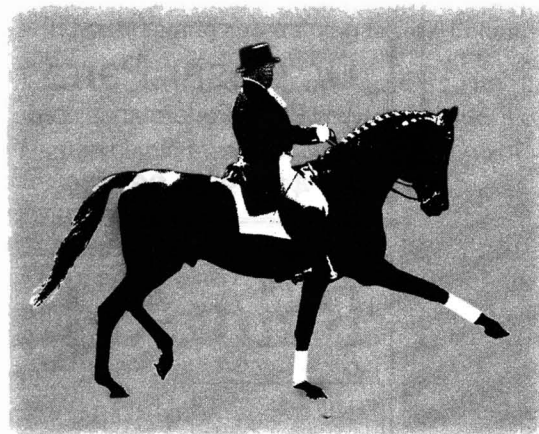
# The Controversy Over “Short and Deep”

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**I**N THE NAME OF DEFENDERS OF classical training, please allow me to state an opinion concerning the confusion over the so-called “short and deep” training method.



This horse is a “leg-mover.” His back is hollow, his hindquarters cannot step underneath himself, and his forehead is thrown too high. His head position looks good but is forced by the rider’s hands.

First, training a horse, the noblest of animals, is a long process. One needs endless patience, love, and understanding. “Dressage” is a word that I don’t like to use. It reminds me of training circus animals. I prefer “the joining of two fundamentally different beings, horse and rider, into a harmonious entity.”

On the one hand is the horse: big, strong, noble. He patiently allows us to do almost anything to him and with him, although he is instinctively extremely timid. He is startled by a little bird or a piece of paper and can panic. To escape this perceived threat, he knows

only to flee, his natural instinct. We must particularly respect this instinct in the training. He must have the feeling that his way to flight is not held shut by the hands of the rider. Through the forward-giving hands of the rider, the horse should feel that “the door is open.”

The young horse must get over many fears. First, he must overcome his separation from his mother; then he is taken from his pasture playmates. Then he is made to get into some form of transportation that is usually narrow, and he is taken to a new place and new experiences.

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and years he lives in a small box (stall), which replaces his freedom. Many things that are new and frightening are done with him.

Next, the snaffle is introduced: A piece of metal is put into the most sensitive part of his body. A saddle and rider are put on his back, which is the second most sensitive part of his body.

These new elements completely alter the horse’s natural balance, which must be regained through careful and well-planned training. His neck is of utmost importance in reestablishing his balance. The situation can be compared to a tightrope walker’s balance bar. If the horse’s head and neck are confined in a short and deep position, his sense of balance suffers and his way to freedom through the flight instinct is completely closed. One should try to imagine how discouraging this must be for the poor horse.

Even though today we have horses of better quality as the result of planned breeding programs, the young horse (aged three and a half to four) still needs a full year to develop trust in the rider’s hands. This is accomplished by riding the horse in a long and low frame with



Another “leg-mover.” This horse’s neck is too short and his back is hollow. Along with the horse at left, this horse will not put down his hooves where they point to during the moment of suspension.

his nose in front of the vertical. In this way, his musculature—especially his sensitive back muscles, which allow the impulsion of the hindquarters to be transmitted to the passive hands of the rider—can develop correctly and in the right places. In the same way, his heart, lungs, bone structure, joints, and tendons require time and patience to develop. There is no shortcut.

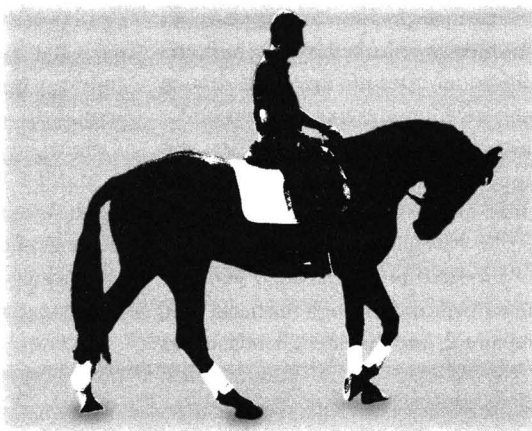
Should one try to shorten this process or to skip it altogether, there can be no harmonious partnership. Every mistake made in the basics opens the door to the next mistake.

I compare the horse with a child in kindergarten. It is difficult for a child to be separated from his mother for long periods of time. In kindergarten, certain demands and discipline are placed on the child. If the child is told to do first- or second-grade work, he becomes anxious and loses the desire to learn. The situation is exactly the same with our horses. The way to top achievement is built slowly on the development of the basics.

Now we come to the second element of the partnership, the rider: hand-oriented, hunter, domineering, leader, and usually impatient. Above all other qualities necessary in training a horse, patience is the most important. We can use our voice and words with a child, but our communication with the horse is limited to the use of our weight, our legs, and the rein aids. Not only must these be correct, but they also must be given in the correct instant. To make things more difficult, the situation is constantly changing, and the rider must

change the aids accordingly.

One recognizes whether the aids have been given correctly or not when the horse executes something other than what the rider was expecting. This is the language of the horse. He “tells” us by his reactions whether we have made our aids understandable. Our ability to recognize his reaction is very important, for we must accept that we have made the mistake and must give our aids more clearly and with enough willpower so that he understands.



This horse is far behind the bit. He is too short and low in his neck. This way of riding stops the shoulders and prevents the forehead from stepping forward.

### The Problems with “Deep” Riding

“Deep” riding has attracted much attention in recent years because it has been practiced by a number of successful Olympic and World Championship horses and riders. In truth, this kind of training is nothing new. The meth-



A “back-mover” full of harmony and with classical self-carriage

ods of the well-known French trainer François Baucher (1776–1873) involved breaking the horse’s will and initiative; he forced the horse to give in. You can still see this type of riding today. But even Baucher, when he got older, found out that this way of riding was not real training; and he tried to get closer to classical and natural training. Still, he earned many followers in Germany, who did not have enough patience and whose goal was to get success quickly. But he had also opponents in Germany, including Louis Seeger (1798–1865) and Gustaf Steinbrecht; and in France, including Count d’Aure, the chief trainer at Saumur. All of these opponents of Baucher’s methods warned riders that using force to train a horse is the wrong way and does not have anything to do with the harmony between horse and rider. It enslaves the horses.

Here is why “short and deep” riding is so counterproductive to the gymnastic development of the horse. In a short and deep frame, the loosening of the musculature and joints is not possible. And one can’t even speak of classical relaxation and suppleness when riding a young horse in this frame. The young horse’s impulsion and desire to

go forward is eliminated when he is forced to go in this short and deep frame.

In time, the gaits lose their expression and freedom and soon are made shorter—particularly the walk, which has no impulsion naturally. This is the reason that almost no clear four-beat walks are seen in modern Grand Prix dressage competition. The walk has been completely “ridden away.” What is intended to be the collected trot is actually working trot, because the rider knows that he must avoid a trot that is too passage-like because such a trot would be criticized. The canter is choppy from having been collected prematurely. The transitions are poorly done, and the horses’ necks are too short. The judges must be strong in their scoring to reflect these mistakes when they occur.

The horse is made a slave without a soul by this training. He produces exercises that are mechanical and totally lacking in expression and appeal. His shoulders are blocked by the short and deep frame. Despite increased driving aids, his hind legs cannot step under himself sufficiently to strengthen and supple his back, which has to carry the added weight of saddle and rider. His back is driven down and away from its purpose: to transmit the impulsion over the withers and through the neck, poll, and mouth into the rider’s hands, where it is recycled through the driving aids.

The horse’s hind legs, which are being driven forward, cannot step under his body in this short and deep frame and therefore must step higher or wider. The effect of the rider’s hands cannot be directed correctly back to the horse’s hind legs in this situation. Every half-halt or full halt done when the horse’s neck is too short “escapes” through the third vertebra in the neck. Every subsequent half-halt shortens the neck even more. In addition, this short and deep

neck position restricts the horse’s freedom to breathe. Horses ridden in this position become frightened and panicky and sometimes develop respiratory diseases.

Many horses will resist and fight against this technique. As with all fights with our horses, the rider is always the loser, even if it appears that the rider won. The horse will remember the fight and begin to resist again when the rider least expects it or needs it. Every use of force should be avoided in the training of our horses. For this reason, many other riders and I reject this kind of training. I would like to warn those who would sacrifice our poor horses in trying to achieve quick success not to be blinded by the success of a few who use this “short and deep” method of training. It is a violation of our horses, whose well-being should be our first responsibility.

Many of the great masters would “roll over in their graves” if they could see what has happened to their training principles and to the horses. One would do well to recall the motto of Colonel Steinbrecht (1808–1885) and General L’Hotte, which states that, throughout the entire training and from the beginning of every daily lesson, we should ride our horses “calm, forward, and straight.”

Do not take away your wonderful horse’s beauty and pride. As in any partnership, each must respect the other. Only the horse that trusts his rider will accept him as his leader. Avoid anything that would destroy this trust. As in every partnership, if trust is violated, it is either impossible to reestablish or can only be rebuilt with great difficulty. ▲

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