



Balance Part III – Physical Balance, A Classical Fusion

"Look after the basics and what follows will look after itself!"

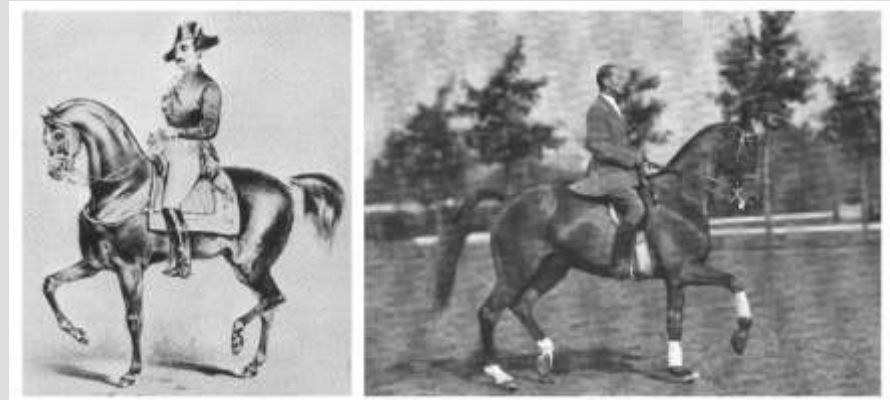
It may have been said many times but it's worth repeating that if you **look after the basics then what follows will look after itself!** I doubt there is any chance like the first chance with a horse, sure we can go back and start over but as John Wooden says 'If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?' It really is much easier and far more productive to take the time to get it right at the start.

I'm guessing everyone is nodding along here, maybe even thinking that yet again someone is stating the obvious. If that is so why do I read in magazines, on forums and FB groups the same questions about problems with transitions, heavy forehands, running through aids etc? More to the point why is the advice seldom to get off, go back to the basics and get them right? Are we so tied up with results that we can't or won't go back, start over and try to get the simple things right?

Currently I'm training piaffe with my horses, probably most of you reading this are too as the training for advanced movements begins with the simple things...stop, go, turn, back...without these perfectly in place our work (at any level) becomes forced and full of effort instead of light and willing. If you pick up nothing else from this piece make it this '*pay great attention to the seemingly basic and mundane first steps*', I refuse to apologise for repeating the obvious.

The earliest work with our horses teaches them the very basics of stopping and starting, turning and backing and generally how to be

when we're together (**see the quote from Part I of Balance at the end of this article). As we continue the quest for balance there remains no need for restraint, no need for gadgets and certainly no need for great exertion on either human or equine part. These first steps are quiet and considered we are looking for calm and rewarding it; the slightest try enables us to say YES. With consistent work and consistent responses to each other's questions we can expect our horses to discover this balance with relative ease.



LEFT, FRANÇOIS BAUCHER UNIQUELY FRENCH AND ON THE RIGHT, MY CHILDHOOD INSPIRATION, RICHARD WAETJENAN IN THE GERMAN TRADITION

Classical dressage training offers two pretty distinct routes to the next phase of balance; send the horse forwards in all paces to balance within their own energy (German) or teach them to find balance through suppling work at halt and walk (French). This is an

overly simple way to distinguish between the two; both methods might have their relative merits depending on the horse in front of you although some exponents of these methods appear to be inclined to favour only one.

In our modern time of 'fusion' foods and lifestyles it is common to find 'fusion' classical dressage where the two methods have blurred their edges and overlapped; sometimes considerably. In fact I'm sure many modern dressage competitors are unaware that classical dressage has two quite diverse creeds at its heart! Dare to mention in-hand flexions or leg without hand and you'll be branded a Baucherist (most definitely French) but send him forwards to your hand from inside leg to outside rein and you'll be stepping into the German arena! More modern trainers have *interpreted* these methods and often added or subtracted to arrive at their own *personal* method. The one thing I feel sure of is that there is nothing new about training horses in either of these methods; through history some have helpfully published their methods but many more haven't. Astride our horse, perhaps perplexed by a particular movement, we can be sure that we have counterparts not only all over the world but also throughout history. The marvel of the internet means that today we can make that world smaller and share so much information.

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My own *fusion* is a fuzzy blend of both schools but with perhaps a more French accent to it. Don't begin to think that this French flavour was added as a result of ten years spent in France, there is sadly only a hint of that heritage left in France today. My fusion really developed once I started owning and training Iberian horses and struggled to apply my previous German based methods. As we develop a style and substance in our training we must dare to create our own fusion; not for the sake of the alchemy but because we understand the science of training and how we can apply it to the particular horse in front of us in order to create a more perfect partnership. I would urge caution when blindly following methods that don't make sound common sense; we must find courage to ask the difficult questions, not only of others but of ourselves too.

It could be dangerous to start creating a *scale* of training such as that used by the German Dressage Federation (and adopted by many other federations) BUT it has a place, just so long as it is used as intended and not fanatically adhered to without understanding the complexities within.

The following are just some of the factors that I like to consider when helping a horse find its basic balance. No scale, no order of importance...they are all important but some require more work with certain horses and all require patience and time.

- We must understand and appreciate how equines learn and consider this and their welfare above all else; trying to use positive reinforcement techniques whenever possible.
- Cues/aids begin and end; if we need to maintain a cue to achieve a movement/action then the cue is not properly understood. Always wait for the response; if we are too busy asking again then we'll never hear it!
- The culmination of this early gymnastic work, in-hand and ridden, is *connection and partnership*; both mental and physical. Look for calm first rather than smooth over the cracks only for the bubble to later burst.
- Lightness is earned through careful preparation ANY horse can be light once they are strong enough to carry themselves; every horse needs its own time. Transitions within and between paces will develop the ability to flex and step under with the hind legs.
- No two horses will be physically, emotionally or mentally the same; we should try not to treat them as such.
- Pay equal attention to both sides of a horse even if they are not the same; work evenly on both reins.
- Lateral bend stimulates longitudinal bend; soft inside flexion *will release* the neck and allow the back to work enabling the inside hind to step under the body mass when asked.
- Plodding around the arena in straight lines will not develop balance; if we are bored then our horse will be too! The flex, turn, back, bend and yield fusion dance will improve balance, posture, connection and harmony. Add pole work and agility obstacles to break things up.
- Hacking is great for building confidence and balance.
- Warming up is essential, cold minds and muscles are more likely to be easily stressed and injured. Give regular breaks.

Where should our fusion dressage lead us in terms of basic balance? Well if it's done correctly you will be in the position where balance, throughness, relaxation, decontraction come together and you feel at one with the mind and movement of your horse; that feeling where it is effortless and all you need to do is think it and it will happen. The German method describes this as *losgelassenheit* but it is often said that the word has no direct translation to English. It may not have a direct translation but believe me it doesn't require one, once you feel it you will never forget it and will forever know where your training is going.

***“The early physical balance that we can realistically expect from any horse is achieved from the ground. Teaching them to lead ‘away’ from us, not leaning on a rope (or hugging close at liberty) and just carrying themselves in their own space. No horse I’ve met yet has an innate sense of where my feet are; we both need our space and we should learn to understand each other’s space (and the need for it). With the addition of stopping and starting (on quiet cues) we can progress to working on turns and circles, walking up and down hills etc. To further improve balance we will use gymnastic training.”*

From the first article on balance <http://www.creativeequinetraining.com/articles.html>