



Seeking Connection

The mental connection we have with our horse results in a willingness to be our partners, to go that extra mile for us, to take the lead when needed but to accept the need to be led if required.

Seeking Connection

One of the things we all seek in our dressage training is connection. Whether we ride with or without a bit, bridle or saddle that connection between horse and rider/handler is going to underpin all our work.

So what exactly do we mean by connection?

In the Baroque tests the mark for connection indicates that later in the training this will be termed collection so does this mean connection is entirely a physical aspect of the training? Connection goes further than the purely physical and is like a backstage pass to your horse's mental and emotional centres. There is such a fundamental link between the mental and physical aspects in most of our interactions with horses that it is hardly surprising that it impacts on our dressage training.

The mental connection we have with our horse results in a willingness to be our partners, to go that extra mile for us, to take the lead when needed but to accept the need to be led if required. It involves trust on both sides of the partnership, a willingness to listen and be ever patient but most of all it demands of us respect for and understanding of our horse. Connection should permeate every cell of our being and truly unite horse and human.

Physical connection can be considered as the intrinsic relationship between the back and front of the horse, it's the balance from side to side, diagonal to diagonal; becoming an elastic band that maintains the physical associations and ultimately straighten our horse. Seeking connection requires us to reach inside and *feel* our way to straightness; identifying where to aid, balance and influence to have the best effect in terms of suppling and strengthening. So in dressage terms connection could be seen as the relationship of the inside hind to the outside forehand, the inside leg to outside rein in order to ultimately balance the horse evenly over his four feet. In essence connection gives us the ability to place our horse where needed whilst he adopts whatever posture is required for him to carry us in any arena from dressage to hacking.

Contact versus connection, that's a conundrum for me. In years of teaching I have rarely found a student with absolute confidence in their knowledge of contact and how it should feel; indeed I've struggled with it myself. No doubt we have all read the books and maybe watched the DVDs but we are often left with words and are unable to translate them into

It involves trust on both sides of the partnership, a willingness to listen and be ever patient but most of all it demands of us respect for and understanding of our horse.



...in essence connection gives us the ability to place our horse where needed whilst he adopts whatever posture is required for him to carry us in any arena from dressage to hacking.

any form of reality when sat on a horse. We can relate the time honoured mantra of the energy being created behind and it being recycled via our hand but when faced with the physical enormity of it we resort to all sorts of random movements of our bodies whilst trying to achieve that perfect harmony. Even those lucky few being able to have lessons on schoolmasters won't necessarily find that there is an instant correlation between what they feel on an accomplished horse and what they seek to train in their own horse. What we need is a mind's eye picture of where we're heading, what the finished product will look like and then a minute breakdown of the component parts.

So how do we achieve connection? Well the important prerequisite for any training has to be relaxation, before we can even walk one step at the side of our horse he needs to trust us and desire to be with us and do so in a relaxed manner. If we have mental and emotional relaxation then we can begin the work of suppling commencing with the neck. Beginning in-hand with massage and flexions we can release the tension carried in the neck and introduce the idea that a mere feel on a rein means release your neck this way please. If he releases his neck without twisting his head then we are automatically releasing the tension held therein and in turn allow the poll and topline to release too. If we fix our hands then this release of the neck is impossible. Only living, reactive hands can

encourage the release and always with a light upwards feel without a thought of backwards or down.

So if we have released the tension in front we can let the horse find its natural rhythm. No pushing to the bit just a suppling of neck and topline and simple changes of direction and pace. This early work can and should be achieved quietly at the walk, with or without a bit.

So we release and supple the topline, perfect changes of direction and pace and use correctly performed lateral exercises to help the horse step under his centre of gravity better and thus we begin to connect back to front, side to side and diagonal to diagonal. Reinback, hill work, pedestal work, pole work...the list of activities that encourage a horse to regain his natural balance with us atop is endless; be adventurous. At all times we are thinking of raising the base of the neck with the head and neck rising up and out into a fine arch. The throatlash area is open so that the nose appears to 'seek' forwards and out allowing the hind leg room to engage under the body and all this in walk!

The rider too needs to be physically prepared for this connection. We need to develop a strong core that enables us to sit balanced in the saddle while moving with the horse. This balance from within our core means we are able use our hands and legs to communicate with the horse without using them to balance ourselves.

The InterDressage Baroque tests have been specifically designed to bring out the best in the early training of the

horse for dressage. Lateral work is included to help encourage the connection and give ample opportunities to release/supple the topline and reinback to encourage the hocks to flex and the pelvis to tilt. Moreover they are designed to encourage the rider to get a feel for the areas that need connecting and offer the tools to help connect them. The movements aren't there to trip you up but to set you up, allow the movements to flow (most movements aren't too rigidly set to markers) and ask what you know is achievable at your stage of training in terms of each movement.

Connection is within your reach, become aware of it through each stage of your training and develop it to its full potential so that you can reach yours!