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ESTABLISHING EQUESTRIAN IDEALS

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This article presents a general guideline of concepts and observations aimed at exploring the diverse aspects involved in charting our equestrian ideals, the guideposts by which we can navigate towards higher standards of excellence in practice. The following points are presented to bring structure and tone to this objective.

* Why are ideals important?
* What constitutes excellence in horsemanship?
* How can we attain higher quality horsemanship?
* Is true horsemanship restricted to any one form of riding?
* Is there an unprejudiced authority by which riding can be judged?
* How can we assess the correctness of our own work?
* Is there a place where true horsemanship is practiced?
* In the spirit of cooperation.
* A personal quest.

Let's proceed without further ado.

Why are ideals important?

Contrary to what one might think, ideals are not some form of wishful thinking, nor are they even remotely impractical. Rather, they are essential beacons which help us to keep our activities on a valid course, and to draw our desires ever upward - extending our efforts beyond that which we might ordinarily do. Short term ideals are those by which we test ourselves on a daily basis. Long-term ideals could well serve us for many years, if not a life time.

Interestingly, the establishing of ideals always remains a uniquely personal matter, being wholly dependent on our individual outlook and level of awareness at any given stage of our unfolding. It is therefore important to reset them every now and then as new horizons of insight develop through the knowledge and experience we gain over time. In this way, through our ideals we have the ongoing opportunity to define and express our ever-evolving vision of the excellence we hope to manifest in our riding and in our lives.

What constitutes excellence in horsemanship?

Just as the ageless Pyramids of Egypt have been laid down on a footing of gigantic monolithic blocks, so excellence in horsemanship rests on a foundation of enduring love and respect for the horse, and reverence for the life which it represents. These bulwarks of riding originate not from the intellect but, as with genuine friendship, they are an outpouring of the human heart. It is this which fosters in us a deep sense of moral obligation for the horse's well being, and spurs us on in search for an ever deeper understanding, and wholehearted effort to find living harmony with it.

Indeed, harmony is an indispensable element of the Classical ideal. It is a symptom of 'resolved truth', exemplified by spiritual, mental and physical unity, by which excellence in horsemanship can always be confidently measured. Harmony is built especially on a foundation of loyalty and trust, and secondarily on the development of physical dexterity and suitable technicalities.

Excellence is further embodied in the benign cultivation of horses' raw, undisciplined energies through which they grow in beauty and nobility; qualities which are only revealed when we in no way diminish their nature. The better the riding, the more fully present horses are with all of their natural faculties, talents and unique personality wholly in tact. This state is brought about not only through careful gymnastic work, but notably through our ability to encourage horses to contribute to the performance with their own talents and innate enthusiasm. This, in turn, produces a work which is not only practical in its application but because of its benevolence nurtures the horses' good health and calm disposition, resulting in their prolonged, useful life under saddle.

If we were to view these concepts from a broader perspective, through the eye of our intuitive understanding of the interdependence of all life, we could see how our ability to produce 'excellence in horsemanship' is truly a living expression of hope for us - being a tangible embodiment of our capacity to generate harmonious beauty here on Earth . . . that is, if we truly want that. If we were sufficiently inspired to use the momentum of such a realization, and carry its vibrant good will into every aspect of our lives, the combined creative potential would have the power to transform the face of the Earth ever more towards its original harmonious, balanced state once again. I believe that the outcome of such matters is far more in our own hands than is commonly thought.

How can we attain to higher quality horsemanship?

The pathway to the 'Equestrian Rome' is indeed a deeply personal one. In fact, before we can influence the horse positively, not only must we get our bodies and the aiding technicalities under control, but we need to set about cultivating the more noble characteristics of our inner being. The importance of this aspect cannot be over stated, because especially horsemanship can be so readily impoverished by the corrosive effects of our unruly egos, lack of control over our emotions, and the weaknesses in our character and personality.

Inextricably entwined within the above points, not to be overlooked, is motive. What is the true reason for doing what we do? Are we truly developing our work on substantial intentions: those which aspire to have high quality, nature-harmonious riding manifest through us, based on nurturing the horse's willing participation, and tireless watchfulness against any repression of his spirit? The horse unfailingly, almost magically discerns the true heart - our actual intent.

Is true horsemanship restricted to any one form of riding?

The question could be answered either 'yes' or 'no'. But because the issue is quite complex, it is important that we take a moment to consider carefully the various factors involved. Clearly, so much depends on an individual's capacities: whether the rider possesses truly exceptional natural talent - has a highly intuitive 'feel', respect, and love for the horse; or whether a thorough study of horsemanship has been undertaken with an accomplished teacher. But almost more important than these, is whether the person is of inherently mature and honourable character, exemplified in virtuous purpose which is carried out in right action. Under such circumstances, good horsemanship can *potentially* flourish at any time and in any equestrian discipline wherever such noble interaction with the horse occurs.

In the very same breath, unworthy riding can also show its face virtually anywhere and at any time - sometimes for just a few brief seconds, comprised of small, inadvertent lapses that may occur to anyone, even those with fine intentions. At other times, however, considerable equestrian privation may appear when humanity's less noble characteristics are allowed to gain the ascendency. Merely studying with an accomplished horseman, or at a famous school, does not automatically ensure that the pupil will be an excellent rider who will ultimately develop into a true horseman. Irrespective of the good quality of the teaching, when a rider's equestrian desires are not discretely tempered by those finer personal qualities mentioned earlier, the good philosophy expounded by the teacher may never actually take root in the individual's heart. Consequently, once that person is no longer under the thumb of the master, the perfectly sound teachings may end up being misapplied, or even used as weapons against the horse.

Sometimes the obvious needs to be stated - good riding is good riding, and poor riding is poor riding, irrespective of the equestrian discipline.

Since excellence in horsemanship has to do with the quality of our interaction with the horse, and dedication to serving the creature's welfare above any personal ambitions, surely we need to remain uncompromising about the following points: - any approach to riding or training which, a) deliberately alters the *natural* sequence of the footfall of the three gaits; and/or b) routinely lames horses; and/or c) causes the creatures mental distress and psychological warping - must be regarded as a grave transgression against the spirit of true horsemanship.

Of course, there are certain some forms of temporary lameness that may occur with any horse, even those that are worked carefully. But the direct interconnection between chronic hock lameness, for example, and forced dressage training is irrefutable; much like navicular disease can often be traced to excessive jumping. In both cases, horses thus afflicted are usually physically (if not mentally) wrecked by the time they reach their early to mid teens. Whereas horses that are thoughtfully worked - in harmony with their nature - may generally enjoy healthy, useful lives well into their mid to late twenties. Correct dressage riding, by its very definition and mandate, so well delineated in any worthwhile literature on the subject, should be the most loyal custodian of well being for the horse - a bastion for its care, protection, and enhancement - but sadly, because of unknowingness, it so often is not.

As a matter of general observation, I believe it is surely important for us to acknowledge that just as there are good people and not-so-good ones in every nation, race, religion, and profession, and good and not-so-good riders in *every* equestrian discipline, so too there are some good and some unwanted traits in any one of us. With this is mind, it is therefore also likely helpful to avoid falling into the trap of self-righteousness, thinking we are better than others or immune to making errors. Though our heart may be in the right place, which is a very good start, we nevertheless all have feet of clay, and without extreme care, any one of us may find cracks beginning to show in our plaster.

Is true horsemanship restricted to any one form of riding? I believe the answer is no. Though some equestrian disciplines, by virtue of their inherent, wholesome, 'nature-oriented' objectives, (*true*, correct classical riding, for example) are definitely more conducive to harmony with the horse than some others, good work is, nevertheless, not limited to any one field of equestrian endeavour. It is clearly up to each one of us, individually, to assume the responsibility for generating good quality work to the best of our ability in our own chosen riding discipline, which ever that might be.

Is there an unprejudiced authority by which riding can be judged?

Just as aeronautical engineers need to work within the laws of fluid dynamics in order to design aircraft that fly safely, it is incumbent on us horsemen to study and adhere to the laws of the horse's nature if we are earnest about creating a truly viable form of riding. This matter is beyond opinion. To produce excellence we need to respect unequivocally the horse's nature as the sole authority by which we appraise our work in the saddle.

It is important to appreciate that the horse's nature is just as clear, structured, and constant as the laws and forces which govern physics and chemistry, though this fact may at times be difficult to apprehend, veiled as it is under layers of ancillary elements such as temperament, athletic ability, conformation, and the degree of sensitivity. It is certainly not the intention here to be dismissive about those very real factors, but the experienced rider knows that underneath those interesting variables all horses are indeed the same. This holds true regardless of the breed. The importance of taking variables into account does, of course, become useful as a guide to help determine for which kind of work a particular horse might be best suited. Though a Clydesdale, for example, certainly can piaffe, its talents are likely better used in front of a plough; and though an Andalusian could pull a plough (a little one), it likely makes a better dancer.

The greater the variety of horses we have the privilege of working, the more solidly the oneness of their underlying, common nature becomes evident, and the better we become at unlocking their amazing athleticism under saddle through intelligent implementation of gymnastic work without in any way violating nature.

How can we best assess the correctness of our own work?

If we take the time and care to listen to the horse, we will be able to see how our work is constantly being either ratified or denounced, as reflected by the creature's mental and physical demeanor as well as in the quality of the gaits. For example: if a horse's front legs show 'goose stepping' during trot extensions, it is a sign that the horse is likely tense, or broken apart. At times such a horse will show a dropped back, and a neck which has gotten too short relative to the size of the stride, whereby the front legs extend straight and stiffly well beyond a line drawn down the horse's face to the ground. Further, horses' assessment of the work could also be read by the frightened, wild, or angry look, or the lifeless, resigned or dead expression in their eyes; or by the pinned ears, pursed nostrils, snarling lips, or grinding of teeth - these are often also associated by unquietness of the tail. Such signs show up rarely when horses are conscientiously ridden.

To elaborate on the final point mentioned earlier, much of the time-honoured literature warns of the importance of maintaining purity of the gaits: walk four-beat, trot two-beat, and canter three-beat. Yet all manner of study is afoot which is trying to fit four-beat trots into the realm of acceptance. Indeed, horses may well show a four-beat trot and even a pacing walk or stiff-backed 'deer-like' canters while out in pasture, but we recognize that it is then usually a manifestation of tension. One might therefore deduce that since displays of such things are 'natural', that therefore tense, broken gaits under saddle should also be considered acceptable. But, should be our view, haven't we then forgotten what the prime purpose of dressage, and more specifically, classical riding is? Isn't it meant to help direct horses' raw energies in a more thoughtful, disciplined way, whereby the creatures are enabled to demonstrate the elastic beauty of pure, balanced gaits while carrying the rider - and that our work accordingly takes on the deeper characteristics of a truly ennobled art form? Isn't it the constant aim of ballet dancers to be free of tension, so that their performance takes on those coveted light and airy, gravity-defying qualities? Do we as riders also not recognize that tension anywhere in our own bodies is one of the foremost adversaries we need to overcome?

Truly, we need to consider this point seriously: just because we ourselves may not be able to bring horses to such genuine elastic suppleness under saddle - which would enable them to demonstrate pure gaits - should we therefore seek to degrade the time-honoured standards to fit our ineptitude, instead of striving to improving ourselves and our training approach?

Though, without a single doubt, the surest path to developing exquisite horsemanship lies in listening to the horse, a good human teacher is also initially indispensable to making reasonable progress. Through the teacher's guidance, and riding well trained horses, we become better able to understand what the horse is trying to tell us, and to find ways of approach which the creature can understand and accept, whereby the commonly-known exercises are able to produce the useful gymnastic effects they are meant to have. On the other hand, dictatorial forms of riding use those same exercises as avenues to strip the horse of what is seen as 'willful resistance', but, actually, the latter is most often merely a sign of the horse revolting against what it senses as violations of its nature. The horse is seldom wrong.

An old maxim states, "Every journey begins with the first step". Indeed, it is never too late to take that all-important first step in the right direction. If we aim our ideals towards harmonizing with natural principles, we will already be on the right path. Then, over the years, we can work joyfully toward perfecting our skills and drawing closer to our goal of finding ever deeper levels of compatibility with the horse.

Is there a place in the world where true horsemanship is practiced?

Needless to say, neither bricks and mortar nor location, in and of themselves, determine the presence or absence of horsemanship. Any place can be a good place, and any place can be an equestrian desert - and this can change to a greater or lesser degree at any time, either way. Only in that place, where and when an individual with the right heart towards the matter *practices* truth, by striving earnestly to interact kindly and lawfully with the horse - there horsemanship lives. Whether this is in a palatial riding hall, or somewhere in a field out in the middle of nowhere, or whether at a rudimentary or advanced level, is patently immaterial.

A well-based assessment of a school's 'direction' needs to be made over a period of years ... even decades. The soundness of the philosophical base; the steadfastness of the leadership; the quality of the individuals attendant over such extended periods, together with the inevitable ups and downs in their lives; and the tenacity with which the equestrian ideals were sought and brought into living manifestation in daily practice, all need to be taken into account.

The larger picture of a school's viability operates on the same principle as on the individual level: an occasional bit of good riding does not a good school make, nor should a bit of poor riding or some unusual incident elicit wholesale condemnation. It is the over-all 'flavour' and consistency that needs to be measured if a significant evaluation is to be made. It is that single-minded desire toward 'nature-oriented' work that needs to be carved out with unflagging effort, day-in day-out, over extended periods that ultimately makes the good horseman. It is this which similarly gives a worthwhile direction, that certain 'stamp', to a good school.

The most distinguished schools in which the spirit of classical horsemanship has been fostered over extended periods, and whose influences have reached even to our present day, are at Saumur, France; Reitinstitut von Neindorff, Germany; The Spanish Riding School, Austria; and not to be over looked, was the fine spirit of horsemanship demonstrated by the late Nuno Oliveira of Portugal. Further, there is likely a small sprinkling of horsemen and women, here and there, who in their own private facilities attempt to propagate honourable horsemanship in the classical tradition. But in riding, as in any field, the truly great - those who are Masters, in the truest sense of the word - are extremely rare. To quote Waldimar Seunig, in his book *Horsemanship*, "If we're lucky there may be just one or two in any given century".

In the spirit of cooperation.

There is an old German saying, "We all cook with water". Indeed, regardless of our country of origin, in which equestrian discipline, or with which teacher we work, we must all come to grips with the fact that our 'water' is the horse. Metaphorically speaking, it freezes at 0ºC, and it boils at 100ºC...and we all need to come to grips with the laws under which that 'water' has its existence.

Each of the major traditional riding methods, inevitably 'flavoured' by the mentality and culture from which it originates, has some useful contribution to make to the over-all portrait of horsemanship, and we can mutually benefit from certain aspects of each others' spices and cooking methods if we care to remain open. There may be some dishes we prefer, and others we aren't so fond of, that doesn't matter. As long as we always keep the horse's archetypal nature as our guide - embracing all that is truly horse-friendly, and horse-harmonious in what ever equestrian discipline we may be partaking - we will not stray too far off course, while yet expanding our perspective and capacities, and hopefully end up making viable contributions to the world of horsemanship.

An essential part to success, however, is that we take the reins of responsibility into our own hands, each one of us, individually, and not rely on any external influence as a constant source of motivation, nor especially to keep us 'in line'. Clearly, if we only set about improving ourselves when some external authority has to cajole or threaten us, I'm sure the reader would agree, we have some considerable way to go in our state of development. On the other hand, what an unspeakably wonderful world it would be if we each were to strive to master ourselves, willingly taking on individual responsibility for all of our thoughts, words, and actions - each carrying our own 'column of air', our own portion of the sky above our heads, so to speak - doing our part as well as we possibly can so that our world may be healed and become an ever more joyful and beautiful place to live.

A personal quest.

Since horsemanship is a tangible representation of our physical deftness and spiritual qualities, we could see the challenges of our daily riding, as our own personal Olympics, which gives us the opportunity to be 'in the medals' each day again through striving for self-improvement, and by choosing wisely and well as we make the numberless small decisions towards finding ever greater harmony with the horses, our fellow man, and our environment.

We who love the horse are indeed fortunate, since riding is a most delightful avenue through which we can hone ourselves towards that end - in fact, seen in that light, horsemanship itself becomes a living pledge towards that ideal.