

The Positive Riding System

Introduction

By Henrik Johansen



Would you like to ride for a trainer that starts the lesson by asking you to ride around to see how your horse works, and teaches you by saying “No! That’s wrong! Stop doing that, that’s not right either!”? I don’t think it would take long for you to stop your horse and ask the trainer if it wouldn’t be better if he or she were to explain to you what you *should* do, instead of continuing to tell you what *not* to do. This is also something that the horses should be able to demand of us as riders.

When we educate a horse, it is important to consistently and clearly explain to him what he is supposed to do, to help him, to show him how. To pick up the reins and just ride forward without clearly telling the horse what we want him to do is to set up a trap for him. In this case the horse must guess what he is supposed to do, and can easily guess wrong, which then leads to him being punished. The end result of this is that the horse is then doing things to which the rider has to respond and react, instead of the opposite. We call this kind of riding ‘correction riding’. It is very negative and creates a seriously frustrated horse. It is important that, before we even get up on the horse, we have set a goal for his education, and that we also have a plan that leads to that goal.

To reiterate, it is important that the training of the horse goes according to a plan, that we have a clearly defined goal and a path that leads us to that goal. **It must go well from the first step.** This demands that we have a thorough understanding of the theory, and that we have a clear understanding of how the horse should use his body when he carries a rider. We must know how the aids are applied and how the horse should respond to

every single aid. We must develop an understanding of how the movements (exercises) affect the horse physically, because every movement has a purpose and can be used as a tool or language to achieve our goals.

Does this sound tedious and difficult? It definitely does not need to be! Does it sound confusing? Perhaps, but it is not. You will see that quite often the same ideas and theories turn up again and again during the various stages of the horse’s education, and that a common golden thread runs throughout. **Most importantly, we must arrive at a point where we are able to simplify, because only then will we be able to achieve that overview that is so essential.**

The horse is a fantastic animal with many amazing qualities that we can develop and take pleasure in. But sadly, the horse can also be ruined... **we owe it to the horse to dedicate the time to really learn to understand how to educate him.** This will naturally also give us much more pleasure and enjoyment in our riding and also lead to better results, not to mention that the horse will stay sound much longer.

Long ago, when people decided how a horse should be ridden, they started by studying the horse. They then asked themselves what would be best, what the laws of nature dictate, and how they could work with, and not against these laws; with, and not against the horse – in other words, how to educate the horse so that he, even with a rider on his back, can do everything within his abilities.

The whole training process is designed with an emphasis on what is best for the horse and

not just to make it as comfortable as possible for the rider. Fortunately, when the horse works correctly, it also feels much better for us. This is what makes dressage such a compassionate sport, and thus allows us to teach horses with a clear conscience. A well trained horse feels better – has a better relationship with humans – is stronger, more supple, better balanced, has more self confidence and so on compared to one that is untrained.

I wish that we could find another word to use other than ‘basics’. Many think that this is something for beginners, but the truth is that, when the horse really understands the basics and has the ability for it, he is close to Grand Prix level. **A rider who does not want to work with the basics should not get involved in this sport.** It is only when we understand the basics that it is possible for us to educate the horse in a well-informed way, and only then is it possible to achieve good results.

It is extremely important that we all develop a philosophy that suits each of us personally so that we can feel at home in the way we ride. No two riders ride exactly the same way and have exactly the same opinion on all matters. If we were to study the very best riders in the world, we would find that they are all good, but that they ride and train their horses rather differently. And while there are rules that apply to all of us, for example the laws of nature, there is also room for us to develop our own individual philosophy and style. Therefore, the trainer’s task is not only to study the horse and his capabilities, he or she must also take into consideration that the rider’s opinions and abilities must be respected in order to achieve a good result.

By becoming more organized in our work we accomplish the following: Everything is included – we realize when something is not right – we know how to correct or improve it – we reach our goal more quickly. We are able to keep an overview and the horse does not get overworked. The horse is able to keep up, and everything is more fun!

When we talk about dressage we use a lot of words: **Half-halts – Collection – Self-carriage – Correct Frame – On the bit – The horse should go to the outside rein** – and so on. So often when we hear one of these words, we understand the word itself and therefore believe that we also understand what it really means. It is not unusual however that, many years later and seemingly by accident, we find ourselves in a situation where we have an experience that makes us think “Aha! Now I understand! And I thought I knew...” or has this happened only to me?

It is my hope that this book can help you achieve a better understanding of all the many expressions that we use, with the result that you will derive much more pleasure from your riding. But first we must study riding and all this theory very thoroughly. Only then can we form an opinion, a philosophy that suits us, which can lead us to our goal. Without doubt, we learn new things all the time, and our pictures of different situations change through the years. But one thing is very important, and that is that we reach a point where we can begin to simplify the way in which we think and the way in which we ride. Only then can we begin to have an overview.