

Work In Hand

By David Pincus

Originally from Israel, David Pincus came to England when he was 22 years old and attended Crabbet Park where, within one month, he passed his BHSAI examination. Following this, he went to work with an Irish dealer where he gained experience in show jumping and eventing and was able to have lessons from some of the country's leading instructors, including Robert Hall and Pat Manning. He attended a course in Warendorf and then returned to England to pass his BHSI before travelling back to Germany to spend time with Herr von Neindorf at Karlsruhe. In 1973 David also gained a diploma in horse breeding from Newmarket School of Stud Management, and has since furthered his experience and obtained qualifications in modern stud techniques.

David moved to Austria for further training and experience, following which, he took a job as an instructor on the outskirts of Vienna where he was able to access tuition from some of the riders from the Spanish Riding School. During this time he managed to fit in a two month long course with the Cadre Noir at Saumur, France.



Upon his return to Vienna, David was paid a visit by Colonel Albrecht, the Director of the Spanish Riding School, who was accompanying the owner of two horses that were being schooled by David. Colonel Albrecht was so impressed by the progress of the horses that he offered him a place at the Spanish Riding School.

After leaving the Spanish Riding School David worked and trained in Austria for another year before heading back to Karlsruhe for further training.

David then moved to the Westphalian State Riding and Driving School in Munster, under Herr Stecken. At this time the legendary Dr Reiner Klimke was looking for someone to help work his horses. Herr Stecken recommended David and after watching him ride, Klimke offered him the job. Although asked to remain in Germany David decided to leave and set up on his own, and in 1980 Sheepcote Stables became his base.

Since then David met and married Serena and together they have established Sheepcote Equestrian Centre where they breed and train horses. David has trained more than ten horses to Grand Prix, many of which were homebred.



Theory and principles

When one thinks of work in hand, or training from the ground, it is the piaffe that comes to mind. The classical schools use this tool to compliment the ridden work. Before one can tackle the practical aspects of training piaffe in hand, it will help to go over some theoretical principles that guide the general training of advanced dressage horses. Understanding the principles will ensure that the student trainer has clear in his mind the reason for employing certain training techniques.

When watching an advanced horse performing the advanced movements in training or in the Grand Prix test, not many appreciate the level of control the rider exerts over the horse and the level of compliance to the riders aids that is required by the horse. The two work as a partnership.

Some of the advanced movements

Canter pirouette of 6-8 equal regular strides requires complete control and influence over the horse's canter stride, speed, body position, head position etc.. Including a line of one time changes between the pirouettes increases the level of required control tenfold, in effect the rider controls and creates every aspect of every stride, one beat to many and you are over the centre line, overturning leads to the next movement facing towards the wrong marker. The same applies to piaffe, which requires regular, rhythmical steps and clear transitions into and out of it. This level of control is acquired and learnt through training. The horse becomes mentally compliant and physically strengthened to be able to accept this level of influence and control, in riding terms, he accepts and performs with the highest level of Collection.

Collection has two aspects to it, the mental and the physical, and they both complement each other. In recent years the psychological aspect of training, and in particular of collection, was somewhat neglected, many think that dressage is all about leg movement, the most extravagant extension originates from a balanced collection.

It is not enough to have a horse with perfect conformation who is biomechanically capable of performing the most difficult movements, the horse has to allow the rider to influence and guide him.

When training horses it must be remembered that we are dealing with a flight animal that evolved whilst roaming in open spaces. The natural instinct of a horse is to avoid a situation in which he cannot use his speed and power to get away from danger or frightening situations. Unable to flee from trouble, the horse will present his hind quarters ready to kick rather than walk head on towards frightening objects. For a horse to contain his natural energy in a relaxed manner, in a small confined space and offer it to the rider, requires him to have incredible trust and confidence to surrender to the control of the rider and not resort to his natural instincts. Our aim is to train the horse to such a level of response to the rider's aids that this will overshadow any other possible influence from outside distraction or natural characteristics.

When considering training techniques it is important to remember that all of the dressage movements and exercises evolved over the years as schooling and training tools, not for competition purposes. Dressage evolved for practical reasons, with each movement and exercise having a specific role in the development of the horse into a better riding animal, the evaluation of the movements in competitions came many years later.

Even in the days of Xenophon, horse trainers noticed the special effect that piaffe or piaffe like movements had over the general physical and mental constitution of the horse.

In the piaffe the horse surrendered all inclination to resort to the flight instinct. Although full of energy, the horse stays relaxed and tuned to the trainer, both body and mind are there for the rider, this is why then, and now, a good piaffe is so highly thought of.

The training of the piaffe is one of the most important lessons in the horse's education, and the result of a good piaffe is the most important indication of successful training.

To achieve a good level of piaffe requires time and practice due to the psychological and physical demands that it puts on the horse, and it cannot be hurried. On the other hand it must be started early so that the benefits from the piaffe contribute to the whole training program, and to insure that the horse learns to engage and collect and mentally accept the parameters given by a rider before he gets confirmed in a way of going that later will be difficult to change.

This is where working the horse from the ground beneficial.

It is possible to train the piaffe from the saddle without assistance from the ground and many do so, however this procedure has some limitations.

Training from the saddle requires an extremely talented, experienced rider (and horse), that can identify through feel how the work progresses, unnoticed mistakes can be compounded and difficult to rectify, e.g. the common fault of the double beat or hitching up hind legs are very difficult to notice or feel from the saddle but easily seen from the ground. Training the piaffe from the saddle is not recommended before the horse is completely acquainted with the seat aids and the half halts, which in most cases would be not before the age of 6 to 7 or even later.

Starting the piaffe from the saddle raises another relevant point to be considered. Is it right to request the first steps of piaffe from shorten trot or by activating the walk into diagonal half steps? The reader can make up his own mind according to the following explanation.

The piaffe is often described as trot in place, which it is actually not. Trot is the pace in which the horse moves his legs in diagonal pairs with a moment of suspension in between. Piaffe, in actual fact, has no moment of suspension and the horse can raise one diagonal pair of legs only at the moment that the other diagonal is supporting the body on the ground. The piaffe is actually the fourth pace of the horse, and in preparing this article I wanted to confirm this point to myself and studied many photographs and videos of the best executed piaffe, and could not find one that shows a horse in a piaffe with all four legs in the air. This is the reason why transitions from passage, which is a trot pace, to piaffe are so difficult, it requires the horse to change from one mode of locomotion to another.

The most universal technique advocated by the masters is to start the piaffe from walk into half steps (half steps are active short steps in a diagonal manner, but without the spring of the piaffe), into piaffe. In order not to confuse the horse and risk rhythm problems in the ridden work, it is preferred to go through this training phase while the horse is un-mounted. Any work without the rider's weight is physically less stressful and easier for the horse.

To sum things up:

Starting the piaffe in hand has many advantages. Un-mounted piaffe work does not physically stress the horse, as it is done for short periods of 5 to 10 minutes with only a few steps attempted at a time and without the riders weight, and it can be done from 4 years old onwards once or twice a week. It

introduces the horse to the required balance, collection and the technique of piaffing without the risk of confusing him with contradictory aids.

It introduces the horse to the idea of accepting a given parameter by the rider.

For the trainer, the ability to observe the progress is more reliable than relying on feel alone.

Practical work in hand

Our aim is to train the horse to respond in the following manner:

When the trainer activates the hind legs by use of the whip, the horse should not progress forward beyond what the rider permits. A horse that simply moves forward will never learn to be active in one place, with the hind legs stepping under the body, letting the energy slip through the front is like filling the bath without the plug.

Just as in the ridden work, the rein aids say stop or slow, the same response must be developed when led from the ground, (in practice the horse that learns it from the ground responds much better when mounted), the difficulty is the combining of active hind legs with little or no forward progression.

A well trained in hand horse develops the following characteristics; similar to a trained dog that remains by his owners heel without obstructing his movement or entering the trainer's space, the horse learns to concentrate on the trainer, as the trainer move forward the horse moves with him and when the trainer stops the horse stops, a step back the horse step back, all this without leaning or pushing his body against the trainer, the horse learns to stay on his own four legs respecting the



trainer's space (join up, or other similar ideas are undesired in a riding horse as they encourage the horse to cling to the trainer). The horse learns physical and psychological self-carriage. It is important to mention that the aim of our work is not to desensitise the horse, to the contrary it is to have the horse sharp, tuned in to the trainer, concentrating on his demands and respecting the trainer's space at the same time, indeed I have a lifelong aversion for being trodden on by a horse.

So how do we get to this stage?

In the first days of work in hand I lead the horse along the wall on the left rein, in most cases the horse will be wearing a bridle, roller and side reins, the horse will be led from the bit or from a lead rein attached to a cavasson, with me positioned next to his shoulder. The reins or lead rein are in the left hand, a long whip in the right, signalling the horse to walk forward for a few steps and then halt. This is repeated many times until the horse anticipates the transitions up and down. From time to time a short trot and back to walk or halt and later a rein back as well can be executed, and with time the horse starts to read the trainer's body language and in anticipation may put in the odd jog steps (first piaffe steps). You will notice this work is very similar to the ridden work of transitions and more transitions.

Be prepared for things not to go as smoothly as it sounds, the horse may pull, not respond to the hand, may barge through the trainer and basically be disobedient. Correct him and put him back on the intended line and reward for the slightest indication of positive response.

This work can be done by one person or with an assistant who leads the horse from the front and the trainer manages the whip and the hind legs.

The next lesson for the horse to learn is the correct response to the whip aid.



With the horse halted I touch the horse in different locations from the fetlock to the croup in order to identify his most sensitive touching points. I want a quick sharp lifting of the leg and flexion of the hip, stifle and hock forward under the body, without barging through the front or kicking against the whip. Any reaction that resembles the desired response must be praised immediately and the lesson ended. If the response is incorrect repeat the exercise until a correct response is reached. After a while the horse should react to the whip by lowering the croup while lifting the leg and taking it forward under the body. The horse has learnt the most important lesson of a dressage horse, the mechanics of engagement.

Controlling 750 KG of horse is not as easy as it sounds and if the horse uses his strength to push through the trainer then two reins can be used by the trainer who positions himself alongside the horse level with his hip.

As soon as the horse offers any steps he should be rewarded with sugar and patted.

At the stage that the horse starts to offer some recognisable piaffe steps I start to increase the demands by expecting the horse to be sharper to the whip. Just like when riding, the whip is employed first lightly, if the horse's reaction is not good enough, a sharp tap will be beneficial, eventually I expect the horse to react to just a hint from the whip. The horse now no longer needs a strong restraining aid and starts to carry himself. If the horse over collects, move him forward and don't practice the piaffe on the spot.

For horses that raise the croup and are on the forehand the rein aid will be used more like an upwards half halt in order to raise the head and lift the shoulders while at the same time hind leg activity is maintained.

At some point the horse will require little restraint from the trainer and I may work him between the whips, standing few feet away from the horse with a whip in each hand, one whip will activate the hind legs, the other I will signal to the horse not to progress forward. A horse performing the piaffe in this manner is in complete self carriage responding to visual aids, not physical aids.

When working the more advanced horse we can increase or decrease the volume of the steps, ask for very relaxed and not over expressive steps, and with a flick of the whip request sudden activity and expression and then go back to a soft piaffe, ask for different shape of piaffe, head a little lower or higher; all these changes act as gymnastic exercises and increase the engagement and activity of the hind legs.

Transitions from short steps or piaffe into trot and back into short steps will prepare the passage. At every stage the trainer must be aware of the horse's natural ability. Some horses will perform piaffe after one session, while others will take weeks and will show no inclination to piaffe and suddenly the penny drops and they will perform excellent piaffe.

Work in hand is not a magical cure all, it is a logical system that requires working on just like any other training technique, but if done properly it complements the ridden work and also increases the bond between horse and trainer.

