

# 'DRESSAGE WITH A DIFFERENCE'

by Caitlin Collins

For some time I've been wondering how to talk about the sort of riding I like to practise and to teach. I'd considered calling it 'gentle riding' – but then I thought that sounded too much like something a Victorian lady might timidly venture to try on a Sunday afternoon, which could limit its appeal! The new term, 'Dressage with a Difference', plus the strap line 'gentle, classically-oriented riding and training', is, I hope, better. It also has the advantage of prompting me to think about how to answer the inevitable question: 'What's different about it?'

So this article is an attempt to answer that question.

## Dressage

First of all, let's look at what we mean by the word 'dressage'. Let's start by looking at two uses of the term; then we'll go on to consider a third, broader application.

- ❖ The word 'dressage' is perhaps most often used nowadays to refer to a modern equestrian sport that can be found all the way from riding club to Olympic level. At the higher levels most of the horses are big Continental warmbloods with extravagant movement. Many people consider that competitive dressage seems to have developed into a discipline in its own right, distinct from classical dressage.
- ❖ 'Classical dressage' refers to a systematic training of the horse in accordance with a historical tradition that can be traced back to the Greek master Xenophon (who was a contemporary of Socrates). Classical dressage is nowadays popularly associated with the white stallions of the Spanish Riding School (which, confusingly, is based in Vienna), and with Iberian horses. There are Spanish and Portuguese schools of classical dressage, and also a strong French tradition. Classical enthusiasts maintain that their approach is more methodical and adheres more closely to the horse's natural aptitudes, and might criticise modern competitive dressage riders as having departed to varying degrees from these principles.

Sadly, there is a shadow-side to both modern and classical dressage. Critics of modern competitive dressage claim that the pressure of competition means that exaggerated, showy movements are valued, and that trainers are encouraged to take short-cuts and use harsh methods and forceful equipment to get quick and superficially spectacular results at the expense of the horses' well-being. Criticisms of harshness can also be levelled at some contemporary classical trainers and riders, and there remains an undeniable association between Spanish classical equitation and the horrors of bull-fighting. It is also a regrettable fact that the dressage training of the horse throughout history was heavily influenced and motivated by the military requirement for an efficient battle machine.

So let's turn now to what might be different about the sort of dressage I'm more interested in. My wanting to identify what I do as 'different' has been largely prompted by coming across views along the lines of the following two statements.

*'I don't like dressage because the horses look so unhappy; I think it's cruel.'*

*'I don't do dressage because my horse isn't suitable: he's the wrong type / the wrong shape / doesn't move well enough / hates schooling.'*

Comments like these are likely to be heard more often as increasing numbers of horse-enthusiasts turn away from dressage as a sport, either because they don't like what they see going on in the world of competitive dressage, or because they don't see any place for themselves in that world. Some of these riders will turn to classical dressage; however for others this doesn't appear to be a viable alternative, as they perceive it as an alien planet populated by people piaffing about on exotic Iberian horses, too far removed from the planet they live on with their pony, hunter or cob. (This is of course a misperception, as classical dressage is in essence simply the art of bringing out the best in any horse; but nonetheless it is a commonly expressed view.)

This is where it's important to remember that there is a broader, more inclusive application of the term 'dressage'.

- ❖ Dressage can mean any training of the horse that helps him to become a better riding horse, who is easier and more enjoyable for his rider to ride, and who himself finds it easier and more enjoyable to carry his rider. In this sense, dressage can range from the most basic education of horse and rider, all the way through a rich and fulfilling process of ongoing learning and development to an art form, like music or dance, and even a spiritual practice of yoga, meditation and awakening insight!

It would be a pity if any horse-enthusiast were to turn away from dressage in this broader sense. To ride a well-schooled horse who is moving freely and joyfully – light, balanced, supple, responsive, at one with his rider – is a delightful experience. To learn how to ride in such a way as to honour such a horse is to embark on a life-enhancing process of personal development that goes far beyond acquiring some technical skills.

So here we have one of the differences in 'Dressage with a Difference'. What I'm interested in practising, and sharing, is different from the popular images of both competitive dressage and classical dressage. It's this broader kind of dressage: the training of horse and rider as a process of learning and development, with the potential, if you want to take it further, to become an art or even a spiritual practice. It's gentle, in that the horse's well-being is absolutely, non-negotiably paramount. It's also classically-oriented, in that I am doing my best to honour the classical approach, with no short-cuts.

## Coaching

There's another difference to Dressage with a Difference, which lies in how I go about sharing it: I favour collaborative coaching rather than straightforward instructing.

While there is a lot of overlap between coaching and instructing, there are also some distinctions. To begin with, a coach encourages mutual participation in a shared process of exploring what works well for the client, rather than simply giving instructions from a position of expertise. The coach helps the client to take an active part in clarifying her aims, exploring new things, reflecting on what works well or could be improved, and coming up with creative ideas for what to do differently. You could say that a coaching session is more 'client-centred' (to borrow a term from the world of counselling), meaning that it's directed by the client's present-

moment requirements, as contrasted with a lesson in which an instructor who has a particular area of expertise teaches a specific skill.

Coaching is about helping you to learn how to learn, so it can have far-reaching effects in your life. It's empowering, encouraging and enjoyable – most people, whether humans or horses, learn best when interested and enthusiastic. It encourages you to approach problems constructively and creatively and to explore and experiment to find out what works well for you and your horse in your particular circumstances. Equestrian coaching is especially rich because it involves three participants: the client, the horse and the coach, and the key factors to explore are especially interesting: relationship, connection and communication.

In coaching riders and helping people with their horses, I find that a large part of the job is encouraging people to discover how they can enjoy their riding more by improving their connection with their horses. As this connection deepens, so it becomes more evident that the horse and rider relationship has to be genuinely non-exploitative, and the enjoyment must be genuinely mutual. This means that force is no longer the easy option, and even subtle coercion comes under critical scrutiny. Training changes from an overtly hierarchical model (whether of teacher and student, or boss and worker) to a more profound model of trust-based learning for both horse and rider. Feedback from your horse becomes your most useful teaching aid: if he is happy, inspired, enthusiastic, moving freely and joyfully, then great – you're progressing along the right lines. If not, you have some changes to make.

## Dressage with a Difference clinics

At Dressage with a Difference clinics we take the six scales of classical training as our basic framework. The six scales are: relaxation, rhythm, contact, straightness, impulsion, and collection (the order varies slightly according to the different traditions). We explore how they apply not only to the horse but also to the rider; riding is a collaborative process, not a matter of imposing a form on the horse.

- ❖ You have a chance to experiment and learn new things in a kind, encouraging, supportive environment
- ❖ You and your horse are encouraged to inspire each other to bring out the best in both of you
- ❖ You watch other people, both learning from them and supporting them in their learning
- ❖ You gain coaching skills that you can take home, enabling you to continue your progress at home
- ❖ You meet like-minded people with whom you can share knowledge and ideas
- ❖ Most of all, you and your horse have a great time, enjoy yourselves, and find out how delightful dressage can be!

I look forward to seeing you at a Dressage with a Difference clinic soon for some gentle, classically-oriented riding and training. Meanwhile you can find lots more about coaching for riders in the book *Heart to Heart with Your Horse*, available from Amazon, and also on the website [www.theconfidentridercoach.com](http://www.theconfidentridercoach.com) .