

# Training for Courage

by Paul Dufresne

## THE ART OF COLLECTION AND NEW AGE HORSEMANSHIP

**A**chieving quality collection is always a worthy pursuit. Collection is imperative to maximize a horse's performance and well-being, whether for competition or just for pleasure. Good posture with a proper relaxed and engaged carriage facilitates a happy long-lasting relationship between horse and human.

Centuries ago, the great horse trainers were highly esteemed for their art, and they dedicated their lives to maximizing equine performance for the love of the work rather than specifically for financial or competitive goals. These great classical trainers studied under other great tutors, observed and experimented and, in doing so, learned from their horses which techniques were most effective. Often, they came to similar conclusions independently because each listened to what their horses told them and responded by refining and changing their methods until they found what worked best. The great trainers of today who study arduously and experiment in the same way tend to re-discover many of these same answers, if they are able to listen and adapt to their horses' needs the way the old masters did.

**Both natural horsemanship and classical horsemanship have strengths and weaknesses.** If we study both, we can combine pieces of each to maximize our performance and our relationships with our horses, and make the best of everything available without re-inventing the wheel. The term New Age Horsemanship refers to the present-day fusion of these classical techniques with modern horsemanship techniques such as endotapping and aspects of natural horsemanship.

Although as riders we tend to separate ourselves into disciplines, good horsemanship techniques apply to all horses in all disciplines. Though riders of various disciplines may keep the poll at different heights, there should always be relaxation throughout the horse's topline to engage the ring of muscles on the bottom line and maximize their shortening, whether in dressage or western pleasure or ranch roping or any other discipline. If, in collection, the topline does not stay relaxed - or stretched in positive tension - this will result in negative tension created by muscle tightening of the topline, which restricts engagement of the bottom, and compromises the physical and emotional integrity of the horse.

**Most people have heard that you must get lateral flexion before you can get vertical flexion.** Why? Horses need to bend laterally with relaxation to prevent an inverted neck position which, in turn, prevents tension from a tight and contracted topline. Just as a human gymnast can't learn to do side splits in a day, horses need to build this flexibility progressively!

To ask a horse to bend, the rider or handler must exert lateral pressure on the lead line or rein. I would caution to watch the positioning of the horse's head; for the purpose of this article, in any circle a horse should not be counter-flexed, as this is counter-productive until he has been taught to soften in the bend (and then, yes, you can move in a counter-bend).

Once a horse can achieve soft lateral bend, he is ready to learn, through a series of exercises, how to raise the poll, soften the mouth and jaw, and apply forward from the hindquarters. These ingredients combined create a collected frame. In order to do this well, a horse must be soft and feeling good and relaxed about using its body in a collected manner. Although it is possible to teach a horse to be light in the reins by learning good cues, true lightness comes only when a horse

can remain soft in its body and its emotions while applying itself in a collected fashion to whatever degree we choose without ever getting heavy on our aids, whether reins, seat, or legs. Often, the best way to teach a horse to move in a collected frame is to first teach the aids separately, and then to combine them using no more than what is necessary to communicate clearly with the horse.

**Two of my favourite horse trainers** who practice achieving collection while minimizing resistance from the horse are **Buck Brannaman** (important influences: Ray Hunt, Dorrance brothers) and **Philippe Karl** (important influences: Cadre Noir and French Classical greats). Though these trainers come from entirely different worlds and experiences, their techniques share a great number of similarities.

In watching Brannaman and Karl train a few horses, I noticed both took the time to create good bend before they started to elevate the poll. Once a horse understood to offer bend without apprehension, both trainers caused the horse to raise its poll without inverting. They also created a softening effect with the bit or halter so the horse could salivate and lick, eventually offering a more raised poll and a vertical flexion.

Karl would begin to teach a horse to soften its jaw in an isolated manner. He would stand facing the horse with one ring of the bit in each hand, raise the horse's head position, and apply backward pressure on the bit in line with the lips, in the direction of the ears. This technique applies pressure to the back of the lips but not the tongue, the teeth, or the roof of the mouth.

By exerting an uneven pressure with some vibration and then a release, Karl caused the horse to begin to soften the muscles of its poll. The relaxation of the poll is a result of a higher head position and the softening of the jaw, and is expressed at first in the relaxation phase upon the release of pressure. Later, in a more schooled horse, it is possible to achieve a raised poll and a flexion simultaneously.

(As a side note, JP Giacomini would add endotapping to help soften the horse in these exercises. Endotapping causes the muscles to cease tightening and allows them to stretch. It also increases the salivating, relaxed, licking response.)

Once a horse was able to soften its jaw, Karl would stand beside the horse and apply drawing pressure on the bit to cause the horse to bend its neck to the inside, and then he would raise the horse's head to create a vertical flexion. If the horse attempted to twist its head, Karl would apply enough pressure on the supporting rein to prevent this. When the horse learned to raise itself and not lean on the bit, Karl would release the pressure.

Upon the release of pressure, the horse would salivate and lick



Standing jaw flexion, pressure upward in line with headstall side straps



Head shot of horse salivating after jaw flexions in elevated position

# Training for Courage, cont'd

and later offer more relaxed vertical flexion in a downward position. If the horse leaned, Karl would apply a stronger pulse upward to stop the horse leaning and teach it to begin to learn to hold itself. It is important to note that a horse needs to learn to raise itself progressively, as different breeds learn to do this with varying natural ability, but all horses can and should do it.

When Brannaman first had a horse moving forward under saddle, he would allow and encourage the forward movement, and then begin to introduce bend. Once the horse had learned to bend, he would apply a slight upward pressure on his inside rein causing the same effect of the relaxation of the jaw and salivating response as Karl achieved in-hand.

The position Karl used in-hand was very similar to the position Brannaman used while riding to prepare the horse for the roll-over. Once Brannaman had achieved bend, he would add simultaneous heel pressure to the hindquarter to cross under, engaging the hindquarter as he raised his hand in the same direction of pull as Karl did in-hand. Brannaman then released the pressure of the upward lift of the rein as the horse engaged its rear, with the horse driving itself around and forward on a looser rein, salivating with a soft poll. Both trainers taught the horse to move forward while not tightening the topline, and both helped the horse to develop passive tension of the topline through the stretching effect of relaxed muscle caused by contraction of the muscles of the bottom line.

Brannaman's roll-over has many similarities with the start of Karl's shoulder-in on a circle. Both use a circle with bend to facilitate the horse to drive from behind. The horse learns to take a larger step behind while raising itself on the fore from the driving action, and shortens the neck lever by rounding upward, shifting the centre of gravity to the power-train of the rear. Both trainers also teach the horse to collect by driving the hind and keeping the topline relaxed by having the horse in lateral bend. As the horse pushes forward from behind, both trainers ask for a raising of the poll and give the horse an opportunity to offer a vertical flexion, and offer a decrease in pressure as the horse does so. First the horse raises its neck and later offers a softer poll as it becomes more comfortable and relaxed from the jaw flexions. Also, as the horse drives forward with an elevated rein in a training position, the horse is more naturally inclined to lighten its own forequarters.

Where they differ somewhat is that while Karl will have a lighter pressure on the rein, he will allow the horse to go into a lesser raised position with a softening of the poll but with feel in the rein which allows the horse to lower its head somewhat but maintain contact. Brannaman has, at first, a more definite release, but sometimes it may only appear this way because of the difference in the type of rein he uses, though he, too, maintains feel. He encourages the horse to elevate himself as a natural relaxation from bend and jaw flexion, then the horse engages the rear where the horse offers to raise its own poll. Personally, I prefer feel over direct contact. When a horse holds a more collected frame on its own, I believe the rein should show a reduced tension, thereby passing the responsibility to the horse to maintain collection. It is then up to our seat and our feel to maintain the intent of the desired length of our suggestion. It is also important to note that both also have their hands more forward, drawing upward and center neckline when asking the horse to raise itself, whether in one hand or

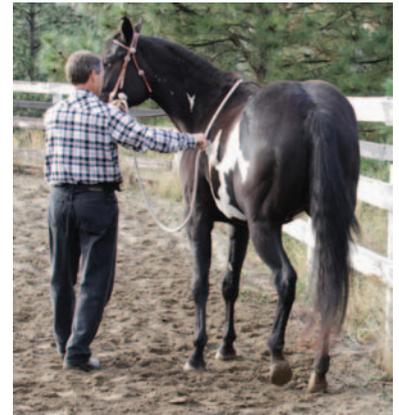
two - this is a training position; the hands settle to a finished riding position as the horse offers to hold itself collected on its own accord, but they are always ready to remind the horse if needed by going back to a training position.

Phillipe Karl and Buck Brannaman are both very good students of the horse and, although they differ in some of their approaches, this is but a brief look at some of their techniques. In my opinion, the qualities which allow both men to be successful have many similarities. It is easy to get hung up on differences, or we can choose to focus on opening our minds to whichever techniques are effective in the education of the horse, regardless of their roots. If it makes horse sense, we can leave our egos in the closet!

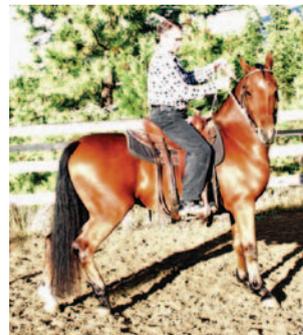
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Standing to side of horse obtaining bend and then upward elevation with a jaw flexion using a single rein, but can also be done with supporting rein if horse tries to twist the poll



Moving in Shoulder-in on rail with bend and jaw flexion



Stationary start to Roll-over with bend, jaw flexion, and start of application of heel pressure to start quartering with the hind



Full engagement in the Roll-over (bend and jaw flexion facilitate a large reaching step by the hindquarters)