

## WARMING-UP:

### An open letter to the FEI about the role of the dressage steward

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#### ABSTRACT

*Over bending, by whatever name, is inhumane. Whether it is produced by force or - as some would claim - without force, it frightens and hurts a horse, unbalances him, limits his vision, partially suffocates, prematurely tires and makes it painful for him to move. Over bending, defined as any position of the head behind the vertical, if practiced at any stage in a horse's lifetime, transgresses the FEI Code of Conduct and Dressage Rules. Over bending is a welfare scandal, a disgrace to dressage, and - for as long as its rules are not enforced - a blot on the escutcheon of the FEI.*

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The purpose of a warm-up for an athlete, whether human or horse, is to prepare him for the performance, both physically and mentally. The preparation should be peaceful, gradually progressive and painless. The athlete (two athletes in the case of dressage) should be happy and it should be fun ... after all, this is a sport.. A suitable motto might be *train without pain; 'dress' without distress*.

The physical and mental preparations proceed in unison. Physiologically, the warm-up transitions a horse from a standing (stalled) metabolism to a flight metabolism. It shifts a horse from a status in which eating-and-resting are dominant (parasympathetic nervous system) to a status in which alertness-and-action are dominant (sympathetic nervous system). Hormonally, it is a shift towards adrenaline. Shakespeare's Henry V gives good warm-up advice to a standing army:

- *Imitate the action of a tiger,*
- *set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide*
- *stiffen the sinews*
- *summon up the blood*

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Shakespeare invokes all the major bodily systems required for action: nervous, respiratory, musculoskeletal and cardiovascular.

It is especially appropriate that an exercising horse should 'summon up the blood.' A horse has a large spleen that acts as an organ for both manufacturing and storing red blood cells. Under the influence of adrenaline, the spleen contracts and provides the exercising horse with a natural blood transfusion. The circulation can now carry more oxygen to the limb muscles and this, together with the hugely accelerated heart and breathing rate, gives the horse its 'second wind.' To 'warm-up' is, as the phrase suggests, to increase the core temperature of the body, a process that fires up the metabolism and renders the work of breathing and locomotion more efficient. Muscles ('sinews') work better when they are warm and are less likely to sustain injury. Muscles become toned-up rather than stiffened. They actually become *'loose, supple and flexible.'*

Stewards might commit to memory, the first paragraph of FEI Article 401, Object and General Principles of Dressage:

*"The object of dressage is the development of the horse into a happy athlete through harmonious education. As a result, it makes the horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with the athlete."*

Building on the first syllable of the word 'harmonious,' stewards might also reflect on Hippocrates' advice to physicians, *'First, do no harm.'* A rider cannot comply with Article 401 unless her 'patient' is calm. *Harm* and *calm* are antithetical. Stewards must ensure that riders do no harm. For example, a horse ridden in a crank noseband is harmed. The very name 'crank' condemns it and its use must stop. Article 428 on Saddlery in the 2009 rules clearly states, *"A cavesson nose band may never be as tightly fixed so as to harm the horse."*<sup>2</sup>

Stewards should keep in mind the purpose of a warm-up. Nothing should be going on in the warm-up arena that does not promote proper preparation for performance. Following widely accepted advice on warm-up routines for human athletes, stewards might expect a competitor to first walk their horse for a while on light contact or even a loose rein. This might be followed by several minutes at the trot with no attempt at collection; a return to the walk; and then some further trotting, with perhaps a little more

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<sup>2</sup> The USEF have this year introduced a rule to ban tight nosebands. Article 121.6 in the 2010 rules states, "At any level of competition, a cavesson nose- band may never be so tightly fixed that it causes severe irritation to the skin, and must be **adjusted** to allow at least two fingers under the noseband on the side of the face under the cheekbone...."

contact. Such a pattern might be repeated for a while before a horse is put into a slow canter, with downward transitions at intervals and so on.

When a rider considers her horse to be properly 'loosened-up' and into its 'second wind,' now would be the moment to start introducing sport-specific exercises. For dressage, these would include some of the movements that will be expected of the horse in competition. At the discretion of the rider, short periods of collection at all the paces would be appropriate, transitions, shoulder-ins etc.;

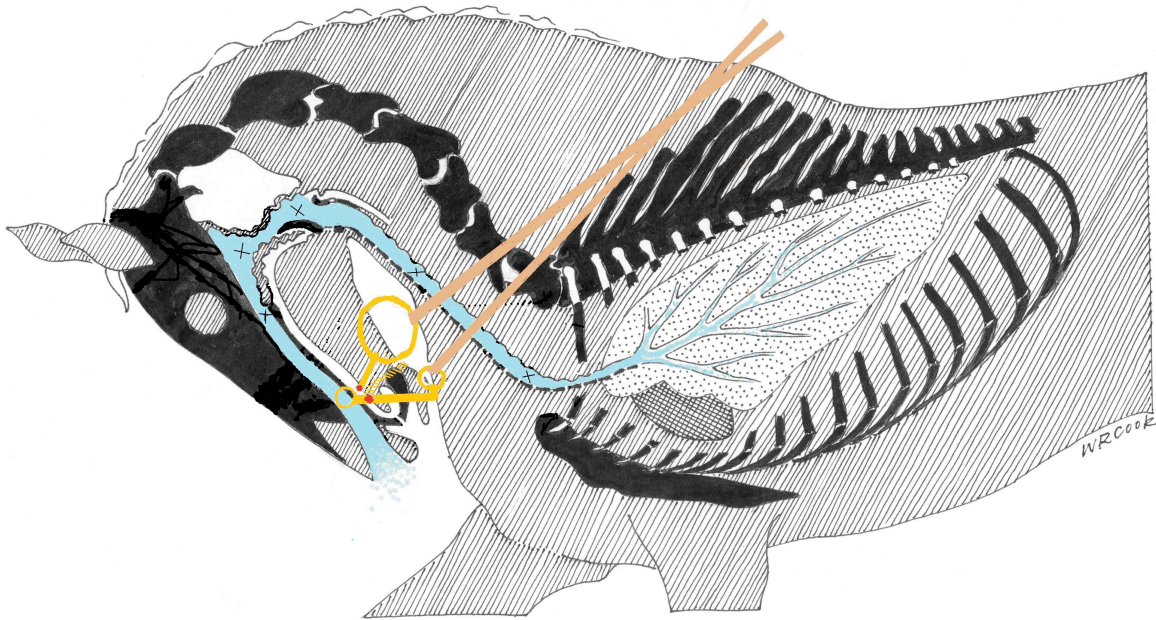
Human athletes might at this stage introduce some stretching but there is doubt about the wisdom of such exercises. Even when stretches are less than extreme and only maintained momentarily, there is a risk of injury. So stretching exercises are an optional extra for human athletes. If they are done at all, they are not done 'on the move.' Stretching exercises for the ridden horse in the standing position are best left well alone.

Stretching a horse's neck and back at ridden exercise, by over bending, is dangerous and profoundly unnatural. Except perhaps for the most fleeting of moments, no horse at liberty ever walks, trots or canters with its head behind the vertical. Such a default position would be inhumane in a domesticated horse, even if it was only being lunged. When carrying a weight on its back, the practice is even more egregious.

If over bending (i.e., anything behind the vertical) is achieved by means of bit pressure in the highly sensitive mouth, it has to be acutely painful. The pain frightens a horse and the position unbalances and makes it difficult for him to breathe and move. If, as some would claim, over bending can be achieved without bit pressure, the position may not cause pain in the mouth (unless the Houdini horse tried to 'escape') but it undoubtedly causes pain in the neck and back and probably in many other parts of the body.<sup>3</sup> Even if, unbelievably, there was no pain, such a horse would still be frightened, unbalanced, and partially suffocated. So regardless of any spurious definitions that aim at differentiating 'hyperflexion/Rollkur' from 'Low, deep and round' on the basis of how each is brought about, stewards must apply the FEI rule and caution any riders that warm-up with their horse's head behind the vertical. With regard to welfare, there is nothing to choose between Hyperflexion/Rollkur and LDR: both are deeply unkind. In human terms, it would be like asking a victim of torture to choose between the thumbscrew and the rack.

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<sup>3</sup> Ask any human athlete to run with his chin on his chest and see what a short answer you get.



*Fig 1. When maximally over bent, the airway is twisted into a 'U' bend. This, in itself, renders breathing difficult but it is made even more difficult by crimping at the points marked with an X. From front to back, serious bottlenecks occur at the junction between nasal cavity and throat; at the point where elevation of the soft palate (the floor of the throat) coincides with collapse of the roof of the throat; at the voice box; at extended points along the windpipe in the neck; and especially at the point where the windpipe enters the chest. Apart from making it difficult for a horse to breathe, causing distress and triggering premature fatigue, such obstructions expose the lungs to damaging negative pressure at every intake of breath. This in turn causes negative pressure pulmonary edema (NPPE), a common problem in the horse, incorrectly named exercise-induced pulmonary hemorrhage (EIPH or 'bleeding')*

The physical laws governing the flow of gases and liquids along tubes are the same for both materials. If stewards wish to test for themselves the effect of bending and crimping on a horse's airway, a simple experiment can be carried out. Take a standard drinking straw; bend the far end into a 'U' shape; and try to drink from a glass of water.

FEI stewards in the warm-up arena are the first line of defense in the prevention of cruelty to dressage horses. They become accessories to cruelty if they fail in their duty. Over bending is not 'harmonious education,' it is harmful and odious. Over-bending of whatever degree is expressly forbidden by FEI rules. Paragraph 5 of Article 401 states, *"In all the work [emphasis added]... The head should remain in a steady position, as a rule slightly in front of the vertical, with a supple poll as the highest point of the neck, and no resistance should be offered to the athlete."* In case a devil's advocate should interject that this rule only applies in the competition arena and not the warm-up arena, let me say that exercising with a horse's head behind the vertical is inhumane, regardless of when this takes place. Paragraph 1 of the FEI Code of Conduct, 2009 makes clear that *"At all stages during the preparation and training of competition horses, welfare must take precedence over all other demands. This includes good horse management, training methods, farriery and tack, and transportation [emphasis added]."* 'At all stages' means that over bending is prohibited by FEI rules during competition, in the warm-up ring and at all other times in the horse's life. Draw reins, for example, if used at home to teach a horse to subsequently bend voluntarily (?) into the LDR position during warm-up, would still transgress FEI rules.

The word 'dressage' means training and this involves learning. A horse that is in pain cannot learn. A horse in pain, short of breath and distressed is not going to be calm. The FEI has a choice to make about a problem that has reached flash point in the last few years. They correctly ask, in Article 401 for a horse without tension or resistance, that exhibits lightness, ease of movements, and willing compliance. They look for a horse that is calm, and confident, and one that is *"accepting the bridle with a light and consistent, soft and submissive contact."* In a word, they look for harmony, not hanky-panky and cranky. No rule change is needed.<sup>4</sup> The problem can be solved if the FEI simply abides by and enforces its own rules. The stewards role is crucial to the solution and they must be given every support.

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<sup>4</sup> The FEI might, however, consider changing its logo depicting an over bent horse