

## Why is Rollkur Wrong? (part three)

*The conclusion (appendix) of observations on the Report of the FEI Veterinary and Dressage Committees' Workshop on 'The use of over-bending ("Rollkur") in FEI Competition,' January 2006.*

### PART VII: APPENDIX

I like reading with a pencil in my hand. Unfortunately, when reading the FEI report, the margins failed to provide me with sufficient space, so I switched to making these notes on a Word document. Perhaps these extended marginalia notes will add something to the article.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1: From the nature of the report and the discussions that took place it is apparent that the central and painful role of the bit in production of over-bending was not recognized. The focus of attention at the workshop was directed, incorrectly in my opinion, to looking for primary pro and con evidence on over-bending in the neck, rather than in the mouth. The neck is certainly involved in a secondary way but the primary source of over-bending evidence should be looked for in the mouth. Failure of speakers at the workshop to look the over-bent horse in the mouth and acknowledge the pain and fear that it causes explains why irrefutable evidence of welfare abuse was not collected or discussed.

### 1.2-4: DEFINING OVER-BENDING

As over-bending can only be brought about by taking cruel advantage of the pain caused by the bit, a definition of the practice should - I suggest - include a reference to this tool.

1.5. If, as stated, "delegates were unanimous in their agreement that horses must not be seen to be put under pressure by this or any other training techniques" they were justified in also concluding that any over-bending should be banned, regardless of duration or degree. The amount of painful pressure that the standard use of a double bridle can place on the horse's mouth has not yet been fully measured but pilot studies already completed indicate that the force must be considerable. The force generated during over-bending must certainly be unacceptable. The likely force in terms of pounds per square inch of pressure that two metal rods under relentless traction apply to the bars of the mouth (two knife edges of bone) hardly bears thinking about. The actual area of contact is extremely small. Images come to mind of the imprint that a high-heeled shoe can make on a wooden floor. If "the welfare of the horse must remain paramount" only one conclusion is possible; an outright ban on over-bending, by all riders and regardless of rider's experience or the duration of its application.

1.6 As reported "Evidence presented at the Workshop indicated that in experienced hands there was no apparent abuse, improper welfare or clinical side effects associated from the use of hyperflexion." I must simply repeat here the well-established medical adage that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." The evidence I have outlined indicates that even the standard use of a bit is potentially abusive, and a welfare problem with a huge number of clinical side effects. Use of the bit to bring about over-bending amounts to an extreme version of such abuse. Over-bending cannot be "practiced correctly" - the phrase is an oxymoron.

1.7 I endorse the delegates' conclusion that "Stewards be briefed to take action and prevent abuse" but- to continue with the quote - they cannot prevent "abuse of the technique." The technique (in any form, for any period of time, and regardless of who practices it) is beyond redemption. Education of stewards, judges and all other officials is imperative and crucial to reform. For example, judges must be provided with revised guidelines to ensure that welfare abuses are recognized and riders are penalized rather than rewarded.

1.8 Predictably, the familiar cry "more research is needed" surfaced in the discussion. "The Veterinary Committee should now identify what research is required to confirm unequivocally whether or not there is a welfare issue involved in training techniques using hyperflexion." I agree that further research could be helpful. For example, many new lines of enquiry have been opened up in the last eight years, since my evidence regarding the welfare advance offered by use of the cross-under bitless bridle has become available. There is certainly a need for more work to be done to quantify rein tensions and to measure the force that is applied at the bit/bar interface.

But I do not agree that no action is possible until the results of this research are in. Ample information is already available to justify a ban on over-bending. Cruelty is a welfare issue. Cruelty is defined as the infliction of avoidable pain or suffering. Over-bending during warm-up is cruel because the pain and suffering inflicted is undeniably avoidable. It should be banned forthwith. Any transgressions would be grounds for elimination. The definition of over-bending that I have employed in the accompanying article allows for the production of video evidence to back-up any borderline decisions. To ensure that head positions were never unnatural, a warm-up rule could be passed that prohibits "behind the vertical" unless the horse was practicing a piaffe.

Such a reform would have a number of positive side effects. First and foremost, the horse's welfare would be improved. Secondly, it would encourage riders to depend less on their hands and more on their seat and legs. Thirdly, it would foster better balance of both rider and horse. There would, in addition, be significant public relations advantages for the FEI.

## 2. REPORT OF THE SCIENTIFIC SESSION

2.1: INTRODUCTION. The Chairman of the workshop, Professor Leo Jeffcott, outlined a number of aims for the meeting, among which was a wish to "establish a list of 'Pros' and 'Cons.'" No such list was forthcoming but I respectfully submit that if a rule to ban over-bending was implemented, this would bring about an abundance of well-substantiated welfare 'Pros' and an absence of sustainable 'Cons.'

#### 2.2: AN INTRODUCTION FROM THE WELFARE PERSPECTIVE

Dr Andrew Higgins reminded delegates that the FEI Code of Conduct prohibits any training methods that are abusive or cause fear. I rest my case. Later in his introduction, Dr. Higgins stated, "Although there appears to be a lack of reliable scientific or veterinary evidence that the technique causes lasting damage to a horse, there should be a thorough review of any effects the technique may have on the musculoskeletal, psychological, and physiological systems." I believe I have shown that there is ample evidence for the existence of both short and long-term effects of over-bending, i.e. not less than 100 behavioral signs of fear and pain, and approximately 40 bit-induced diseases. This evidence has been documented during what may be called the standard use of the bit method of control. Undoubtedly, an even longer list could be compiled from its extreme use in over-bending.

#### 2.3: EQUITATION AND LEARNING THEORY & POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT.

I concur with the recommendations of Drs. McLean, McGreevy and Jeffcott

#### 2.4: THE TRAINER'S VIEW ON OVER-BENDING ("ROLLKUR") AS A TRAINING AID FOR DRESSAGE COMPETITION.

Mr. Sjeff Janssen made a distinction between what he regarded as acceptable short periods of low deep and round (LDR) and unacceptable prolonged periods of "Rollkur." He conceded, however, that the copying of LDR by unskilled riders might involve "disadvantages." With all due respect, I disagree most strongly with the suggestion that a training aid contraindicated on welfare grounds and, therefore, fundamentally wrong, can in some way become harmless when applied by an experienced rider. Apart from the fact that it is not harmless to that particular rider's horse, experienced riders who use the technique are taken as role models and are setting a bad example.

#### 2.5: FUNCTIONAL ANATOMY OF THE HORSE AS IT RELATES TO OVER-BENDING ("Rollkur").

Dr. Gerd Heuschmann mentioned the problem that some judges were "more interested in rewarding the 'wow' factor."

#### 2.6: RADIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE CERVICAL REGION IN RELATION TO OVER-BENDING (OVER-BENDING).

Dr. Emile Welling found no radiological evidence of neck lesions in a couple of retired Grand Prix dressage horses. But again, absence of evidence in two horses on the basis of one type of examination is not evidence of absence.

Neither Dr. Welling nor anyone else at the workshop mentioned the importance of examining the mouth with regard to evidence on the over-bending issue. My own recommendation is that the mouth should be examined in depth and with every aid to diagnosis there is. After reviewing the history, a physical examination is obviously a starter, but radiography, ultrasound, thermography, and endoscopy are all potentially rich sources of information. Examination of the lungs should not be forgotten, as asphyxia-induced pulmonary edema is a real possibility. After 20 minutes of over-bending training, bronchoscopy might reveal lung hemorrhage. Radiography of the chest, if carried out immediately, might reveal pulmonary edema. Horses should obviously be examined under saddle and, in order to demonstrate which behavioral signs are caused by the bit, the horse should be re-examined again after a period of cross-under bitlessness and freedom from pain. A behavioral profile questionnaire that I have developed can be completed by the rider for her horse when ridden in a bitted bridle and then, again, after two months of being ridden in a cross-under bitless bridle. The before and after comparisons are illuminating and the number of behavioral signs of fear and pain that disappear after removing the bit can be tallied and a percentage figure arrived at to document the degree of success. From the list of 100 possible problems, it is not unusual for a bitted horse to exhibit, say, 40 problems and for 37 (92.5%) of these to have been solved after two months of painless riding. Video recordings of before-and-after behavior are also useful. Finally, post-mortem examinations are invaluable, as are osteological surveys of domesticated horse's skulls, comparing them with skulls from feral horses or zebra.

## 2.7: SCHOOLING PRINCIPLES AND WELFARE - THE SITUATION OF "OVER-BENDING" IN THIS CONTEXT

Professor Frank Odberg made an important point about the alarming state of early wastage of horses in Germany. The average age of horses slaughtered was 8-10 years old. He cautioned "against being too reliant on photographic images of abuses which could be misleading as the split second timing of a photograph could show an image that was in total contrast to one taken immediately before or after." I agree that behavioral signs vary from minute to minute but I believe that photographs, nevertheless, constitute useful evidence of abuse. It only takes a split second for bone damage to occur in, say, the bars of the mouth when, for example, a rider loses her balance and throws her whole weight against the reins. The same would apply to over-bending, whether short or long in duration.

Readers of the FEI report will, I hope, be suitably alarmed by Prof. Odberg's comment that, "There are even instructors who require the horse to lean hard on the hand (the so-called "5th leg")." Equally, they will agree with his comment

that, "It is always wiser to wipe one's own doorstep before other people do so." The FEI need to consider the collective cost to the horse and themselves of not changing the rules and guidelines.

## 2.8: FUNCTIONAL ANATOMY AND DIAGNOSTIC IMAGING OF THE CERVICAL SPINE

Professor Jean-Marie Denoix focused his comments, as others did, on the neck. He did not mention any over-bending examinations but he did remark about neck lesions in general that "a rider was often totally unaware of any injury to the horse." One might add that so too are the judges likely to be unaware, in which case the competitor would not be penalized.

## 2.9: THE EFFECT OF DIFFERENT HEAD POSITIONS ON THE THORACOLUMBAR KINEMATICS IN THE UNRIDDEN HORSE..

This sounds like an interesting study but not being present at the workshop myself, I am unable to offer any comments based on the brief report of Professor van Weeren's team's research.

## 2.10: EXERCISE PHYSIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF OVERBENDING (OVER-BENDING).

Professor van Breda spoke of the need for an equine athlete to be "calm, relaxed and happy." Sadly, a bitted horse is rarely free of fear and pain, except perhaps in the hands of a true master. If we are into definitions, I might define a true master as someone who would never use a bit in order to place a horse's head "behind the bit" though he might rely on seat and legs to do this. As "calm, relaxed and happy" is a state that is uncommon enough with the standard use of a bit, I submit that when a bit is used to bring about over-bending such a state is out of the question. Over-bending is just not compatible with "calm, relaxed and happy."

In further written comment (Appendix 4), Professor van Breda described studies that depended on measuring post-exercise stress as judged by heart rate. Based on these studies, he concluded, "over-bending does not pose a serious threat to the wellbeing of horses." My comment is that stress detection by objective and quantitative means is notoriously difficult. It must be recognized that the inability of any test to measure stress does not mean that no stress was incurred.

## 2.11: RESEARCH TECHNIQUES FOR STUDYING OVER-BENDING (OVER-BENDING)

Professor Hilary Clayton spoke about various research projects that could be undertaken to examine the neck and its relationship to over-bending. She made no mention of the pilot study she has carried out on rein tension but I hope that she will pursue this line of inquiry, as I believe it to be a crucial part of the story. An extension of this line of research to measure the forces at the bit/bone

interface would be valuable, especially if this was compared to the forces applied to the skin of the head by the cross-under bitless bridle.

### 3. SYNOPSIS OF THE DISCUSSION

#### 3.1: DEFINITION OF OVER-BENDING

The discussion centered apparently on distinguishing between the term "Rollkur" with its connotations of abuse, especially when prolonged, and the term "hyperflexion" which was thought by delegates to be an acceptable training technique when used for short periods in skilled hands.

My own feelings are that using an alternative name for what is essentially the same technique does not alter the basic facts. As the techniques described by both names are essentially the same and both are abusive, neither should be endorsed. If a particular practice is abusive it does not become non-abusive and acceptable if only practiced for short periods, or if only applied by a certain group of privileged riders or if given a different name. The leopard has not changed its spots.

#### 3.2: GENERAL DEBATE ON HOW THE ISSUE SHOULD BE MANAGED

A breakdown of the sixteen bulleted points recorded from the discussion indicated that there were more questions than answers. I counted only one suggestion for action, which was "Why not train stewards to identify the problem and brief them on control?" I agree - why not?

Otherwise there were eight statements and eight questions.

Whenever I hear of a problem being "managed" rather than "solved" I know that the cause of the problem has not been removed. In this particular case, the cause of over-bending is the bit. Without the pain and mechanical advantage of two bits and a chain, a dressage rider would be unable to over-bend her horse's neck. As there is now an acceptable alternative to the bit, the logical solution is to ban the bitted bridle and replace it with the cross-under design of bitless bridle. A welfare opportunity of this magnitude has not occurred in 5000 years of equine domestication. A less courageous step would be for FEI judges to eliminate a competitor who, either in the warm-up ring or the arena itself, places her horse's head behind the vertical, except perhaps during piaffe. Alongside this step, the FEI could update their rules and improve the welfare of the horse and the safety of equitation by accepting the cross-under design of bitless bridle as a permitted bridle for International FEI competitions. This would at least provide competitors with the option of using a more humane and safer method of communication. A further essential step is for the FEI to issue revised guidelines to their judges and stewards.

#### 3.3: SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Understandably, in view of the evidence that had been presented and the focus of the discussion, the summary made no reference to the horse's mouth.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM THE WORKSHOP

The Chairman, Professor Jeffcott, referred to the following points. I have added my comments in parenthesis:

- The need for a definition of over-bending [I have submitted a suggestion]
- The evidence presented did not indicate a welfare problem when over-bending was in experienced hands [The evidence presented was incomplete; over-bending is undeniably cruel]
- Horses must not be seen to be put under pressure [Over-bending puts a horse under pressure (fear, pain and stress) and the evidence is abundantly visible]
- Evidence is needed to guide the Stewards in preventing abuse [The evidence in my monograph represents a response to this need]
- The Dressage Committee would consider the findings of the Workshop [I hope they will also consider this additional evidence]
- The Veterinary and Welfare Sub-committees should identify what research was required to answer the question of whether or not Over-bending was a welfare issue [I respectfully submit that this monograph presents ample evidence that over-bending causes fear and avoidable pain and is, by definition, cruel. This being so, the practice of over-bending should be banned forthwith. No amount of additional research will absolve the abuse.]
- A draft proposal would be presented to the Dressage Committee for consideration prior to submission to the FEI.