If a horse is perfectly at peace with his role, he is shining and his expression draws attention. He is in good psychological balance, he concentrates and he listens to his rider.

Charisma & expression

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Diverse training of horses in a natural environment has a positive influence on their performance, and draws out the best in them. Much has been written about riding techniques, exercises and methods, but in this article we will look at another factor that is no less important - the training of physical strength and psychological balance, so the talents and the beauty of the horse can be enjoyed to the full.

Sometimes it is said about people that they shine with well-being, health and stamina. Such a person is in good balance and his physical health is very visible. This description can equally well be used for horses, since the charisma and expression of a horse reflect his inner peace and physical strength in many ways. Apart from the leg action, head carriage, speed and beat, horses please our eye in different ways. Sometimes you hear people say, “He is just lacking a little bit of...” Or simply: “Even though he is pretty, he has never charmed me.” Such sentences usually refer to a horse’s charisma. This not only affects the way a horse looks, it also influences the rider who senses a horse’s well-being simply through the contact he has with the horse, and through his movements under saddle.

When a horse under saddle has visible charisma, it is obvious that he can easily handle the tasks we set before him. He needs little help from the rider, and does not need a lot of corrections. He clearly is well concentrated and well on the rein, his neck is bent softly, his upper line is domed and he makes himself look wonderful. All movements are light and strong and it is clear that the horse is supple and soft everywhere. He is perfectly at peace with his role and his task - he is strong and robust. His psychological balance is good, he concentrates and he listens to the rider. His ever-moving ears, mostly pointing forward, and his glad eye bear witness to these facts.

There are many things that combine to create the overall look of a horse, which are reflected in his charisma. Some parts are inherited; nature has given horses varying charisma and the character and personality play an important part here. Other factors, on the other hand, are in the hands of those who care for and train them. A lot can be done to improve this important factor, and the psychological well-being of a horse is a very important part of his total performance. In this article, I plan to concentrate on those factors that are in the hands of the riders.

PHYSICAL STRENGTH

Immediately when you start a horse - or as soon as possible - it is important for the horse to learn to carry himself correctly in the gaits. Then, all muscles of his body will be trained correctly, and they maintain their suppleness and elasticity. If a horse learns, when he is being started, to avoid the rider's aids, for example by raising his neck too high and thus destroying the rein contact, he will not be trained correctly. He will be weak and will not carry his body well, because his back- and belly muscles are weak. The same happens if a horse learns to avoid working correctly by not walking straight. These are only two examples, which are used to point out that if the training is not well organised and every step is prepared with good training during the step before it, many things can go wrong.

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The problems that are caused by incorrect or badly organised starting can become a red line throughout the horse's career. It can mean ever-lasting trouble that possibly never gets fully corrected. Keep in mind that it is not possible to erase memories from a horse's mind. Old problems often turn up again at the worst moments, not least when demands are made on a horse.

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STAMINA

Training stamina is a very important part of preparing a horse for the competition season. The horse needs, physically, to be in top form if he has to work to the best of his ability - and stay light and soft. Stamina must be built up slowly and easily, just as with people. The demands on lungs, heart and muscles must be increased step by step. One must take care not to overdo things physically, and you must consider a horse's legs. It is important that the training is varied, because if you only train a horse on riding tours, in tölt or trot at middle or high speed, he will be built up in only one way and the different parts will not be strengthened equally.

If things are done correctly, it is possible to ride long on a horse that has only been trained for a short time. Riding a lot of walk, alternated with short tölt or trot distances in a slow middle tempo, usually produces very good results. Such exercises are easy for the horse, and they are very good training. In this way, it is possible to train a horse for 40-50 minutes, even though it is still early in the training season. In walk, it is easy to work with aids, help the horse to walk on parallel tracks, which means that he walks straight, and make him soft and responsive in the neck. As a result, it will become easier to lengthen and shorten his steps. This work provides a good basis for collection later on during the training period. Also, it gives a basis for a strong psychological balance, which is necessary for the horse to become free and light in his movements.

If possible, the rider should use the natural environment for his training. Climbing up slopes of different gradients and sizes, in the middle of a riding tour when the horse is well warm, is a very effective and strengthening exercise. For a short time, the horse works very hard, and then he rests on the way down, until the next slope, and so on. In many places, particularly urban areas, the riding tracks are flat and undemanding - but it is always possible to find a slope somewhere that you can use to this purpose. In all cases, it is important to check the riding tracks and what is underneath. When there has been frost, many tracks are hard and not bouncy. In such circumstances you must take extra care. Riding a lot of tölt on hard tracks takes the finest out of every horse - he will be sore and his legs might hurt, so he will start to hold back. His movements become stiff and the horse can even become anxious.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BALANCE

When we are talking about the psychological balance of a horse, and the influence a rider's aids can have, I think it is best to use a human example. Imagine a man who starts working on a new job. He works under the management of a boss who is very unclear and badly organised. However, he expects a lot of his personnel. The boss usually is very busy and does not explain to the new workers what rules are valid in the work place, or how they are expected to perform their tasks. But the new worker is supposed to do his work, which he tries as best he can, without any clear guidance.

One needs to organise the training pleasantly. It must be a combination of entertaining tasks and stamina training to maintain the horse's pluck and vigour.

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At the end of the day, it turns out that the worker has done the job incorrectly. The boss becomes angry and blames his underling. Instead of looking at himself, instead of explaining the correct methods, the boss becomes upset and blames the worker for his mistake. To make things even worse, the criticism is unclear as well, and the new worker goes home tired and disappointed because he did not know, at the beginning of the day, what was expected of him, while by the end of the day he never found out what he actually did wrong. He gets confused, hesitant and perhaps even anxious about his next workday, On the long run, he will start to find defences, to learn to ignore the behaviour of the boss. He will stop listening, become insensitive and even irritated.

Next, let's imagine that this man gets himself a new job. At the new place, the boss explains everything exactly, both how things are organised and how he is expected to do the job. If the man feels insecure, the boss helps him to find ways, and he praises him when things go well. The mistakes the man makes are discussed and ways are found to correct them. Certainly, the man will go home tired, but he will be happy and in good balance. He looks forward to the next workday, he becomes ambitious and will want to do a good job. His boss's pride in a job well done will be his joy.

If you keep these little stories in mind, it is easy to put yourself in the place of the horse. First, the horse needs a strong and undisputed leader. This leader must not be harsh, he needs to provide organised and positive work where all the messages are clear. A good leader is decided, reacts fast and knows how to reward a horse correctly. A horse must learn step by step, and you must make it very clear to him by reward when he is doing things right and when he is not. The horse must always have a reason for what he is learning, and if you give him a reason he will maintain his joy and his psychological balance. A well-organised training programme, where the horse learns every step by natural preparation, will not only be easy for the horse, it will also be interesting. A well-trained horse will become curious, interested and sensitive to all aids.

Having said all this, one must keep in mind that a horse that does not know his position in the society he lives in, will constantly stay on guard. He is ready to fight, in order to gain his position. Such a horse will become stressed and unhappy, he will not concentrate properly, he will always be on guard and uneasy. It is difficult to teach such a horse, and the results will not be acceptable.

VARIED TRAINING

It is a nice but also complicated task to continue a horse's training after he has learned everything expected from him on the oval track. We want him to continue to improve and to blossom, but that demands a lot of work. Too often, people fall into the trap of just training the stamina, usually during riding tours. This means that a competition horse is almost exclusively trained as if he were a leisure time riding horse. This is quite limited and in the long run boring, and there is the risk that the horse looses his curiosity since you are not teaching him anything new. As a result, he can lose some of his light heartedness and his expression becomes less charming.

It is very important that the trainer is wide-awake, and finds his horse new tasks that can possibly help him to improve. You must find interesting things to do and the training must be a combination of strengthening exercises for the muscles, stamina training and entertaining tasks that maintain the horse's pluck and vigour. You must always pay special attention to horses with high leg action, because riding a lot of tölt can be bad for their legs. In short, variety is very necessary, and it is good both for the horse and for the rider - too rigorous a routine is not good for anyone.

LEADING

Leading a horse alongside another as part of the training of a competition horse, mixed with many other tasks, is an interesting system. In my opinion, training horses in this way is a very good method, both to strengthen the horse physically and to help building up his psychological balance. The horse does not carry any weight, he runs more or less freely while still building up muscles, increasing his stamina and strengthening his heart. It is also is less demanding for a horse's legs, running on a rein without a rider.

It is good to train two horses together, switching parts, riding one and leading the other.

It is possible to manage the way the horse carries his head when you lead him, by using assisting reins. If you do that, the

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horse will bend his neck while trotting, which will help strengthening his back and belly muscles. This has a very good influence on his upper line and his carriage. During such work, horses tend to take bigger steps, which increase their push and their suspension.

I maintain that the importance of such training for the psychological health of a horse is enormous. A horse is a herd animal, feeling best among his peers. He enjoys running side by side with another horse and without a rider on his back he will be very lighthearted. When a competition horse gets used to his rider leading other horses alongside every now and then, he will relax better and it will be easier for him to concentrate, rather than when he is alone. For a long time, it has been the custom in Iceland to lead along horses when people went on long riding tours. The main reason was the distance they wanted to ride. But nowadays it seems that leading horses along is becoming a training method in itself for competition and show horses.

TRAINING FOR DEMANDING TASKS AND FAST REACTIONS

If a horse is supposed to enter the competition or show ring well prepared, it is self-evident that all parts of the job have to be exercised during the training period. The trainer needs to have found out what kind of heating up, and how much of it, suits every horse and how he can get the best results in the field. There are endless small factors that make one performance a good one, and if everything is to be optimal one must have exercised every little part of the show, so nothing will come as a surprise.

You need to prepare your horse well for training in the oval field, it must take place at the right moment and it must be done suitably often. It is important to organise it in such a way that it builds up the horse's well-being in the field, so he will want to work hard when appropriate. Thus, the competition ring will become a natural part of the horse's work-environment. Any limited area where you work with a horse, regardless whether it is a riding hall, a lunging paddock, an oval field or just a meadow, must become, in the horse's mind, the equivalent of a very nice classroom in the mind of a child.

I repeat my words from the beginning of the article about how enormously important the psychological well-being of a horse is when you get into the ring. His charisma and expression can be the decisive factors that define your results.