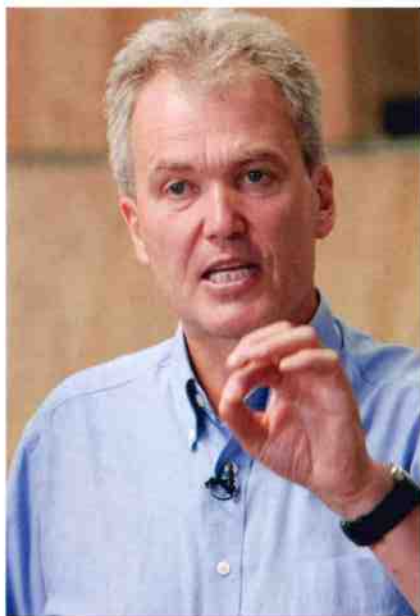


Gerd BAROQUE HORSE Heuschmann



talks to

BY *Danielle Skerman*



Baroque Horse Magazine had the pleasure to talk to Dr. Gerd Heuschmann, a veterinarian and a classical rider from Germany. Dr. Heuschmann was a key person in bringing to light to dangers and harm of riding horses in Rollkur and was apart of the big 2010 meeting of the FEI in regards to it. He is well-known in the dressage community and admired for being able to speak his mind in what he sees as incorrect and damaging training methods commonly employed by riders and trainers involved in competition today. Dr. Gerd Heuschmann was kind enough to talk to us about the biomechanics and the skeletal and muscular connections that run throughout the horse's body. He explains how of these controversial training techniques cause damage to the horse.

BH: Can you explain how Rollkur movement started and what the difference is between Rollkur/LDR and hyperflexion, please?

GH: I chaired a meeting in 2010 where there was a group of 23 people and two representatives from the Worldwide Animal Welfare Department for horses, and this is where the name 'Rollkur' originated.

At this meeting, there were only three people who clearly opposed to Rollkur and 18 people

It's not just about the Rollkur. It's about any flexion of poll and neck by force, there's no big difference whether if it's high up or further down.

A professional competitor doing what they call as LDR - please note this horse is not doing this on their own free will. ▶



who, if there would have been a voting, would have voted for the use of Rollkur. Initially, when I was invited to go my intention was to represent Germany and the people who are against Rollkur. My first opinion was "no need to go there" or "it doesn't make sense to go there because it's clear who has the power" and I felt it would be a bit of a lost cause. Only four days before the meeting a lady came up with the idea to collect signatures against Rollkur via the internet, but the timing was very short. The petition was put on several platforms, and we got approximately 40 thousand signatures in only four days! This was a remarkably good result and the reason why I felt I had to attend this meeting! Everybody had their opportunity to talk, give their viewpoint and their definition to the term of Rollkur, as requested by Princess Haya. After several hours of listening to everyone's difference definitions, Princess Haya concluded that all were saying the same thing!

I am unsure if we already had the term LDR (low, deep and round) but I think the expression originated from Sjef Jannsen (founder of the rollkur method, coach and husband of Dutch Olympic gold winner, Anky van Grunsven), at a previous meeting. Rollkur, hyperflexion and LDR - what is the difference? The term itself is nonsense (I'm not native English speaking), low and deep are the same thing. So why low, deep and round? He just wanted to give it a different name and his idea behind this was to step away from hyperflexion and the negative connection linked to this term.

I discussed this further with a friend who is familiar with Rollkur and with the people who attended the meeting and he said to me.... " you know, it's not just about Rollkur. It's about any flexion of pole and neck by force, there is no big difference whether it's high up or further down. Of

course, the down is worse because the horse cannot see. But from a scientific, and animal lover, point of view I would say, what people do nowadays with this high neck position, holding the horse to its highest capacity of lift and sitting it against itself is more or less similar. So he said, "you should fight for all those against this".

So.... you should not use force to flex the neck of the horse, there is no difference if it is high up or low down. Everyone agreed at the meeting that we don't want the neck to be flexed by force. So I said wow, okay, a first good step.

But, then the Dutch people came again and said; "start with curling the horse in-front, this is what horses can do on their own." And they're right, curling can happen naturally, but again it's a mistake of the rider not releasing pressure, of course. Curling happens a lot, in a brief moment. It happens when you sit a little stiff, and your seat is not soft enough, your stirrups are too long, and the horse feels closed in and curls under. This happens particularly with these warmbloods that are trot machines. So they justify it by saying "it's okay, they'll do it on their own, and this is what we call LDR." As representatives, veterinarians, and animal welfare people we said okay as the horse is curling its neck on its own. We know it's not classical riding and has nothing to do with the classical idea on how to train a horse. But it is at least it is not an animal welfare issue when the horse is just strung in and running. So this was a way to open the door for future discussion.

BH: So this was to become their loophole and justifications?.

GH: Yes. So the definition LDR is accepted. This means nothing else than that the horse is allowed to curl more or less on a loose reign because we decided that flexion of pole and neck by force is forbidden.

Then this addition went into a working group, and their job was to put it in practice, to develop a system or an idea how the stewards and the Princess could put it into text. Finally, they came up with this 10-minute idea.

To the public the recognition of what was going on in this whole situation changed again, because suddenly it was not about the bad or worse quality

This horse is displaying a unforced self curl of the neck and has happened as the horse is feeling closed in and unable to escape the unwanted pressure. This is not a good thing nor natural. ▶



between pulling a head down by force or accepting a curling horse. There is a big difference in quality. But suddenly it was about the duration of riding a horse in LDR position, not what was being done. The original decision was no Rollkur at all. No mechanical flexion and only acceptable when the horse chooses out of its own. This was the decision of the FEI and it was conveyed wrongly. I don't want to say wrongly because the **drawings** and the rules are correct. But the difference was not clearly identified to the public, and many didn't understand and think its OK to use LDR. And so they came up with the term. Yes, they just gave it a new name and limited it to 10 minutes. For me at the time, it was at least a big first step, a big result however now I would sadly say nothing has changed.

BH: Looking at the theory behind it all, is there any part of it that could **actually** be beneficial to the horse?

GH: Not a single bit.

BH: So what does it do to them?

GH: Well, it **locks** the top line. If the horse is behind the bit curling or if it is being pulled down by force, in both cases, the horse has no chance, not a single bit of a chance to relax the poll or to be soft in the poll. And when the poll is not soft the back cannot release, swing **through** and be soft. The back is locked and the whole topline is locked.

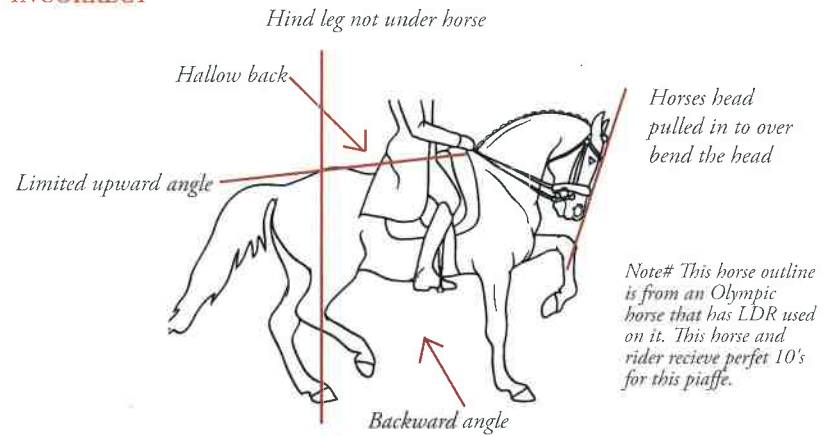
The only difference is probably that when you pull the head down to create topline maybe there's a little bit more lift of the rib cage between the shoulder blades - not fully lifted, but a little bit more up. The horse is locked in a higher position. **Regardless**, head up high and pulled backwards or head pulled down and held in by reins, with loose reins curling or established by force, all have a very negative influence, as I said, to the poll, to the back, the rib cage which sinks. In one case more than the other but in both cases, the back and rib cage sink **between** the shoulder blades. As a result, the loins locks and then the hind legs are out.

Due to this dropped back you don't see any hind leg action in modern **dressage**. This lack of hind leg has been shown in many original works and philosophies where they **use** a **different** balance, with a soft seat a soft back, and a soft contact, but also without action behind, no hind leg action.

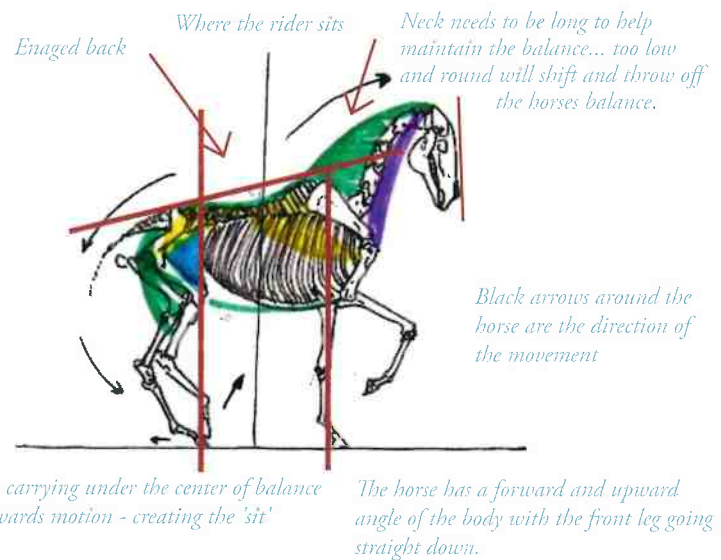
Of **course**, in modern **dressage**, the front leg action makes it look different but mechanically it's the same. It's like a jog, and the hind legs doesn't **swing** off the ground but walk. More or less the same happens in bad **dressage** but by force and poor riding. Although there is a difference in the quality of the **philosophy**, biomechanically it **both** results in bad riding. The hind legs are out and the horse is on the **forehand**. In **this** position, you destroy the poll, you destroy the **suspensory**, you **destroy** the back and you destroy the horse's mind **because** if you lock a horse's back it is always in flight mode. You have to break them so that you can stay on your **seat**. There are so many, many negative results to the horse's mind and body with this style of riding.

the bit curling or pulling down in both cases, the horse has NO CHANCE ... to relax the pole or to be soft in the pole.

INCORRECT



CORRECT



BH: Then why do it? Do you know why it is that these trainers and riders think that this is it?

GH: I give you the answer, more or less. Over the last two to three generations our modern **dressage** horses are bred to be big. They are bred to give a big trot and a big canter all the time. When you start a youngster like this and you mount this youngster, to its nature this three and a half, or four-year-old horse will give you a big trot with a long swinging phase. The longer you stretch the muscle, the longer the horse has to hold the swing. This is why you don't have a suspension phase in the traditional Spanish Portuguese riding because the back is down. The back is calm, there's no swing in the back.

They're in a completely different biomechanics, and this is why there is no swinging phase in trot. If you look at the slow motion video, you see the diagonal on the ground all the time. In modern dressage horses there's a long swinging (suspension) phase. The longissimus dorsi muscle starts behind the thoraces and ends in front of the cervical spine. The longissimus locks with the use of a wrong seat and how you are holding on the reins. Riding

In this example you can see a correct piaffe and incorrect piaffe cause by riding the horse too round and hindering the natural movement. ▲

mistakes at the beginning, being afraid. The horse runs a little bit, you hold on the reins, you shorten the neck and the back locks. When the back locks in a horse 80, 90 years ago they stiffened the neck, and the nose was out in front. Today, these comfortable, beautiful necks stiffen the same, but they pull the lower neck backwards and the front flexes. We call it a foal bend, the horse curls because of the bracing of the back, a tiny little bit is enough in the modern horses. Many uneducated people think a round neck is what you go for. They keep the neck in this position at all times, so there is never a single chance to bring the back up, the rib cage up **between** the shoulder blades, with the neck out and the mouth to the bit. In the rule book, it says a young horse has to go with a long neck and a **hanging** nose so that you can ride it forward and the horse will come to the bit.

BH: Is it physically possible for a horse to be round like that and lift the back?

GH: No, impossible. It is not possible to get a rhythmic horse, it is not possible to get a supple horse, it is not possible to get a real contact. Not a single point of the training scale is available. You cannot get the back-up, you cannot get the swinging back, you cannot bend, and you cannot collect. You only can ride fast and slow.

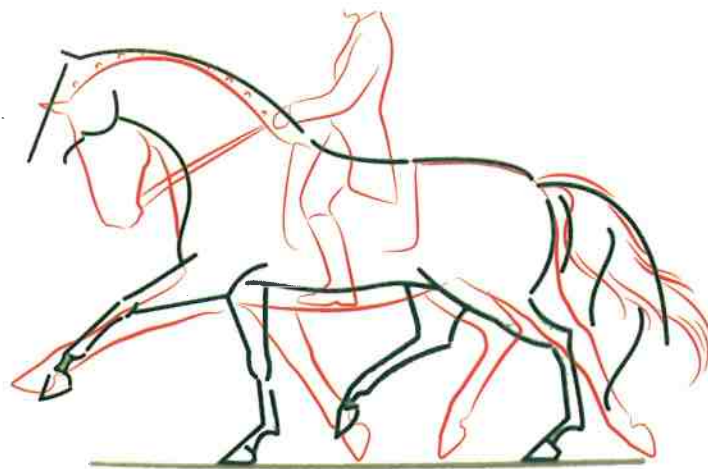
BH: That's why you get almost them do wheelies around the corners because they're not bending around the corners.

GH: Yes. This is a big jump forward in our talk. When we are discussing bend of a **dressage** horse, we are talking about a very different philosophy of bending then, **for example**, the philosophy of bending of the working **cowboys** in Spain and Portugal. A bend is only possible when a horse is in **balance**, when the back is up, and the horse is taking the contact. As soon as the horse is not **taking** the contact and the back has failed to come up you cannot achieve bend, you can only achieve bending the neck but you **will** not get bending through the **trunk**. Only a bending that continues through the trunk will lead to true collection. Without **achieving** this, **people** might call it collection, but it is not. All these short **necked** horses, which we often see in competition are not truly collected. "Fake collection", as I call it.

BH: For the amateurs out there or keen dressage riders what do they need to look for? What are the signs that the horse is actually going correctly? For the collection, for the bend, what can people look for?

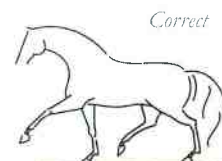
GH: To be able to collect the horse one day, you have to systematically bring the horse out in front in such a way that we create a curved top line. The crest has to be in a **very** nice and open roundness. If you have a very short, super round neck you will never get the back up. You have no chance. **Because** with a short distance from withers to nose line the back will also become **too** short. This will **always** result in a drop of the back.

When I **teach** I use a picture. Maybe this helps you. I always say, please imagine your horse's hind quarters is like a water pump. We want the



energy that this pump creates to flow through into the swinging through the back. This is why we, the classical dressage people, want an up and down swing. A soft, nice, rhythmic swing, as the old master would say, if you get the right swing you will be able to sit and let the horse take you with it. So, it is a soft, **high** swing. The philosophy of the **working** rider (for example, cowboy) is aiming for a calm back, the back is allowed to **drop** down where it stays calm, there is no need for swing. This is why many like riding the Spanish horses, they are **easy** to sit on because there is a lot less swing. When there's no **swing**, for the dressage rider, there's not enough suppleness. There can't be elasticity. Now the horse can be loose, without tension and correctly ridden in Spanish **Portuguese** way, but this has nothing to do with **dressage**. **Dressage** comes alive through a rhythmic swing like a Vienna waltz. For a Vienna waltz you **need** contact. The man has to offer his arm to connect the two bodies. This is why we need a steady, soft contact to get this sensitive and positive tension to the topline which creates the swing. And **when** you have the **swing** through the back, then you get a contact. The horse will search for the contact. The horse wants to take the bit softly. The positive **tension** is created through the chewing of the mouth and the **soft** poll and like with a ballroom dancer who offers you his arm, you take it, if he offers you a steady contact you will **trust** him with your life. Your body is involved in this contact and you **swing** with him. If you avoid or **take** control over the contact you fly away, you cannot **dance** the Vienna waltz. You cannot get suspension without the contact in riding this suspension. Without contact in the **dance** there's no **swing** in the Vienna waltz, it's the same. Today they accept the curling which is a wrong rounding of the topline and of the neck and instead of **waiting** for the horse to **take** the contact the rider takes the contact he **needs** by taking up the reins to **take** control of the horse, because of this they ignore the **back**. As a result the back goes down. Then they hold the horse in **front** and push it **against** this contact from behind and out of this negative tension they create a wrong suspension, an **artificial** swing which shows a passage like, wrong swing in the trot with slow hind legs.

If **somebody** wants to evaluate if he is looking at a **properly** trained horse, he has to look at the **hind** legs. The hind legs have to swing through.



The above image is a combination of a correct and incorrect extended trot that we are seeing nowadays. For the correct one take note of the the hind leg, that it is travelling underneath the horse creating greater balance balanced and uphill and forward motion. The head is in a position to aid this balance. The incorrect is not holding the balance in the hind leg and essentially falling forward and on the forehead. The head is tucked under which will contribute to the horse being on the forehead (not including the health benefits or lack of the head positions) ▲

Looking at them, I see my hopes and dreams. Touching them, I feel joy and serenity. Riding them, I connect with my soul. Being with them, I am who I am meant to be! Being with them every day makes me most Happy!



In this image you'll see a nose band that is too tight and blocking the air way for this horse. ➤

In this image you'll see a tell tale sign of a bend or bump in the horses neck - this is a sign that the neck has been forced in an unnatural position literally causes the bone to be pushed out of place. Often called a break of the C3 or C4. ➤ ➤

The hind legs have to swing far forward under the centre of gravity with a nice uphill bow. And the cannon bone and the forearm have to be parallel. If this is not the case, he is not looking at a classically trained horse. If the cannon bone is lower than the forearm, it's not classical. It has nothing to do with dressage. In the best case, when correctly practiced, it's the working rider's philosophy from Portugal, Spain and so on. In the worst case, it's bad competition riding.

BH: When you look at the FEI, then, and if you read some of the instructions in the rule book on how they're grading a lot of it is very good. It reads well.

GH: The rules are perfect. When you read article 401, it's very good.

BH: We have clear instructions with the rule book, and what is being judged and rewarded highly doesn't seem to reflect it, what is your opinion on why this is so?

GH: Our judges have gotten used to a particular picture over the last 25 years, what a dressage horse should look like. They see horses with an absolutely rising of the forehead. They are used to front legs out, hind legs low. This is what they see every day, everywhere, on the small competition here in Germany and in the international competition. Everywhere in Europe, you see exactly the same type of horse presented. I think one reason is that they are all getting used to it and then I think maybe it is that many of those guys never rode themselves or really read the rules properly. Next point, there is not a real clear message from our federations. But at least some of the federation know that there are big, bad things going on. If they would stop it now, if they would say no from today on we would see classical horses, with balanced backs and with swinging hind legs. I'm sure the people involved are afraid not to be rewarded with positive dressage results, and that they wouldn't win anything anymore. So it's finally money and position.

BH: All around the world, there's a lot of bad training out there, and there's a lot of harshness,

and people absolutely wanting to dominate the horse. What other things are you seeing out there that are happening in certain training methods or equipment that it's not fair that needs to stop?

GH: It starts at the very first beginning. If you have a young horse, and you start training it with a braced back, you end with a curling horse and a stiff poll. Sometimes the horse's reaction is to avoid pushing against your hands, and the most common reaction is curling in.

So, these are the three symptoms and the result - brace the back, curl in, and run. People start to hold the horse on the rein because they have to slow them down and the back braces more, this is a dead end circle. A horse like this, of course, is heavy on the hand. The rider has to hold it hard and as a result the horse opens the mouth, then we crank the nose bands.

A horse who is in a correct balance, with a swinging back softly listening to the seat of the rider, allowing the rider to swing into the motion, will take the contact with a closed mouth also with a loose nose band, then you can communicate. The rider with hard, heavy hands holding horses on the reins have no idea what they are missing.

For example, the TMG (Temporo Mandibular Joint) can give you so many interesting things. When the poll is still, the back is stiff, then the rider (in the warmblood case) cannot sit anymore, it's too bouncy. The high swing that we want becomes a horrible, stiff swing. When the rider can no longer sit, the horse becomes crooked, very stiff on one side and horribly hollowed on the other side. Over time, the horse will always be locked on one side more than on the other side so they end up hanging on one rein. There is no flexion or bending and then the mechanical abuse starts, because if you lock a horse's back, and sit on this stiff back, as you all know, a horse becomes spooky because it's in flight mode. The horse behaves like a flight animal with a lion a back.

BH: Is this why they pull the mean for the Rollkur is also a control method?

GH: Exactly. This is why they have to pull more and more as the horse develops a stiff back. At the beginning it starts just by a little mistake of balance,

the horse braces a little bit. It's not started by bad riding at the very beginning. It's a small mistake, if only they would lengthen the neck and have short stirrups and ride the horse with soft feet and clear legs to the bit into a longer topline, the horse would release, it would start to swing. It would be harmonious. But they don't, they stay with the short neck, so the horse starts to really run. It's a flight animal. A flight animal has to be broken. The symptoms are a bad fall on the feet, the horse doesn't allow to sit, a stiff crawling foot fall, even the nose is down. 90% of the horses with nose down has the stiff poll and is not willing to flex and to bend, this results in uneven steps behind which in many time end up in rein lameness or bridle lameness a loss of control of a spooky horse. Or the opposite happens, the horse shuts down, it gives up, it doesn't go forward anymore. They just give up, learned helplessness. They break them, yes either flight or give up.

BH: What advice would you have for someone looking for a trainer or a coach?

GH: First of all, don't look for a very young trainer because they still have a lot of years to learn them self. I was once a young professional, and now I know I knew nothing - I had no idea. You can be a talented young rider and to quote Charles DeComfy "you have to ride a few thousand horses before you know what you are talking



about". If you want to look for a trainer, I think you have to look for a smart person who is not too young, who has a lot of experience, and who made many mistakes so that he knows how to avoid them. It's hard to find a good trainer worldwide. You have to read, you have to talk, you have to find like-minded people. If you want to learn, you'll steal good ideas too.

BH: You have a new book that will come out, can you tell us a bit about it, please? (English version due to be released early 2017)

GH: I have a new one about flexing and bending, and it will be available next spring. I worked through Steinbrecht and all the old masters to point out why there is no collection without bend in the ribs - it has nothing to do with the neck. In the French philosophy as well as in the cowboys and

many bullfighters philosophy they start with flexing their necks, left, right, left, right but they don't bend the trunk. They call it collection, and it might be a different kind of collection, but not the collection of classical riding. This is why I wrote this book, to point out how you get true collection and explain all the background information about the balance you need to have first before you can start to bend. This is why the HD12 says in the first year if you don't bend. And when you compare this philosophy of no bend throughout the first year, there's a big, big difference in the Baroque world compared to the Western classical. The training philosophies have a big difference because the Baroque, Western, French bend from the first day. We try to have the horse stable, rhythmic and forward with a swinging back. And when the horse takes both reins softly, goes to the bit, then you start to bend, not earlier. Otherwise, you don't get the hind legs, and you don't get either the aimed for biomechanical effect of both the bend and the lowering of the inside hip.

We would like to thank Dr. Gerd Heuschmann for his insight into Rollkur and support him in his quest to have this abolished in the horse world.

For more info

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