



Gaited Horsemanship

with

Larry Whitesell & Jennifer Bauer.



Lessons in Lightness

By: Mark Russell

This is an excerpt taken from Mark Russell's book: *Lessons in Lightness*

"Much of what I know Mark has taught me. He is an unbelievable horseman." Larry Whitesell

By nature horses are capable of true or pure movement. All horses are capable of range of motion within their gaits. While not necessarily ideal, it is uncompressed and true to that horse's natural gait. Because the horse is innately knowledgeable and capable of the exact movements we aspire to train, then as riders we must come to the training process with the commitment that we will maintain that trueness throughout all we do.

Riders of any discipline need to understand that each horse enters training with his own perception of balance and his own areas of stiffness that block energy flow within his body. When left to his natural instincts, the horse will resist or evade the rider's aids whenever he encounters stiffness or difficulty moving his body in the requested way. In most cases this evasion is the horse's attempt to conform to what he believes the rider wants him to do, only in a way that is easier for him to accomplish. Riding in lightness teaches the horse to use his body in new ways, thereby changing his understanding of balance.

By suppling and strengthening the horse's entire body, tension and stiffness can be lessened, thus reducing resistance to the aids. With the release of tension and a lessening of stiffness, the rider can enhance the horse's true and natural gait as his balance becomes more educated. Ideally, this change in balance will develop as a package with the horse and rider working in unison. As the masters taught, the achievement of unison with lightness to the aids comes through relaxation.

Trueness of movement and relaxation are intrinsically linked: To maintain the softness of relaxation, the horse must stay within his realm of true movement. The training process should result in an enhanced gait, not one whose fundamental structure has been changed.

Relaxation allows the horse to stretch and become more flexible in his joints and muscles. In

this supple state the rider can better align the horse's spine and optimize his length bend, allowing him to obtain deeper engagement through flexion. This engaged position develops the necessary "carrying" muscles along the horse's back, which in turn allows the horse to transfer his center of gravity from the forehand to the area beneath the rider and ultimately obtain self-carriage, or equilibrium. Once the horse releases stiffness and tension throughout his body, there will be no resistance to energy traveling forward from the haunch. The horse then finds forward impulsion less of an effort.

Over the years, and most notably since the mid-twentieth century, the concept that relaxation be paramount in all training has been obscured by the dominance of a more precision-based style of training. This "competitive school" has affected more than dressage riding—its influences have been felt across the broad spectrum of horse training and competition.

Although postulating the same objectives of producing a supple, obedient horse with the strength to move in self-carriage, the competitive school uses methods very different from the artistic school for achieving these goals. Although the horse supples, flexes, and learns to balance through many of the same exercises discussed in this book, the competitive approach instructs the rider to drive forward with the leg and seat, then hold through the rein in order to achieve contact.

The competitive school rider actively uses the leg, seat, and hand in the horse's gymnastic process. With less emphasis on and a different perception of relaxation, an impressive movement may be demonstrated sooner using these methods rather than by pursuing lightness. The end result may look similar, albeit poles apart to ride. The sequence in which suppleness, flexibility, and balance is achieved differs dramatically between these different schools of thought. While the beginning phase of training lightness can take time, the horse learns rapidly once there is an understanding of how to move in relaxation. In the end, however, there should be little difference in the overall training time between the two methods.

With the recent rise in popularity of what is now called natural horsemanship, many trainers are reintroducing the benefits of relaxation into their programs. While natural horsemanship does not equate to riding in lightness, there are conceptual similarities, most notably in the way the rider interacts and communicates with the horse. This much-sought-after connection has sparked new interest in relaxation as a training tool and, consequently, how to obtain lightness to the aids.

Riding in lightness challenges the rider to train without creating false movement, even temporarily. False movement is anything untrue for the individual horse or at a particular level of training. For example, most riders want the horse to have an almost vertical head carriage. If the horse's reluctance to bring or hold the nose in is viewed as the problem in and of itself, the solution can be narrow in scope. Many riders attempt to obtain a vertical head carriage by driving the horses forcefully into the hand or possibly using draw reins (or similar apparatus) to hold the position, thus risking false movement.

Achieving lightness to the aids means understanding that the horse moves as a whole and that

for every action there is a reaction. Restraining the head in any way creates tension and creates false movement. If the horse's head is forced into visually appealing position, something else will give in the process. The horse may stiffen, drop his back, or exhibit any number of counterreactions. When training in lightness, the horse's head will flex once he has been gymnasticized (relaxed, suppled, and strengthened) and balanced to support flexion. Forcing the horse into any frame before he is ready risks a false foundation. No matter what is taught thereafter, true and balanced movement will be difficult to achieve. Forcing is not training: the rider need not become an adversary. The horse and rider should always be partners.

Lessons in Lightness is about the art of developing the horse through an understanding of the complexities of how the horse thinks and moves, so that the horse learns to respond rather than react. This is done for the sake of the horse and for the sake of the sport. Attention to the nuances of communication will greatly increase the likelihood that a strong emotional connection will develop between horse and rider.

Visit Mark Russell's website: <http://www.naturaldressage.com/>

Mark Russell's book is available for purchase [click here](#)

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