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Fact:

80% of horses that are involved in the sport of dressage and jumping experience ossification at the poll.

An astounding and scary statistic.

80%!!!

When the researcher discovered these amazing statistics, he truly thought he had discovered research that was going to change the world of dressage and riding. He thought this was going to be more profound, more earth shattering than any other discovery made by any master in the last thousand years.

He thought every rider would take this discovery, and we would see a healthier way of riding for every horse. This was a truth. This wasn't pretend. He had proved that dressage horses were in very serious trouble with the way they were currently being ridden.

Perhaps the researcher's greatest fault was in believing that the truth would prevail. If he had been a student of history rather than a student of science, he would have discovered how laughable that concept actually was. Silly, silly man to think that people wanted to hear the truth! To think that people would change when faced with the truth.

Did he not take the history of his own science into account? The world was flat. Everybody knew it. Scientists and researchers that said and were trying to prove otherwise were laughed at, dismissed. Even Albert Einstein in our own century ran into the same problems. In 1905 he published his paper on special relativity, overturning the established concepts of time, space, energy and matter. 10 years later, his paper on general relativity caused much controversy. It wasn't until technology advanced in levels to prove his theory, that his paper and his work were then accepted. If someone isn't going to believe Albert Einstein, who had already at the age of 26 garnished huge respect for his scientific ability, they certainly are not going to believe or be willing to change for some scientist called Horst Weiler.

80%!!! That is eight out of ten horses will have this problem. Eight out of ten. But everyone either chooses to dismiss this research, or seem to want to think that they are in that tiny minority of two out of 10, 20 out of a hundred, 200 out of a thousand. So while 800 out of a thousand horses will be suffering with this problem, the average rider chooses to believe that either the research is flawed or that somehow it doesn't apply to them.

Many of those who choose to believe in the research seem to think it only applies to the worst-case scenarios of training that can be seen out there. Training that is frequently referred to as rollkur or hyper flexion. Well, if we were going to follow up logically on that train of thought, that would mean 90% of horses trained for dressage are trained in rollkur. 90%? Well, at least 90%...maybe more. We know of at least two horses that are trained in rollkur that do not show symptoms of poll ossification as referenced in the research. Those two horses were used at the debate last year at the F.E.I. as proof that rollkur really doesn't hurt horses, so if at least two horses don't show symptoms or the physical changes of ossification, it only makes sense that X. percent of horses will not show these problems. We know that X. percent of women will get breast cancer, we know that X. percent of men will get prostate cancer. There is research out there showing things that we can do that may influence the percentage risk of you getting either of these cancers. But these percentages are just percentages, which means that it is not going to affect everyone equally. Thus, while 80% of horses may show the damage of poll ossification while ridden in the sport of dressage, there will be those, who for some reason that we may never know, will not show this damage.

We know, or at least we desperately hope, that 90% of horses who are trained in dressage are not being trained in rollkur. So if 80% of horses show this kind of damage, we cannot assume that only those practicing the training methods of rollkur/hyper flexion will experience this problem. To do so is to bury our heads in the sand.

If we are to be honest with ourselves and to be honest with our horses, we have to face up to the fact that there is another problem. Our unwillingness to take this research and these facts at face value and keep diligent research on what the problem might be, is not only being dishonest with ourselves but it's also being dishonest with the horses we work with. This is abuse in its worst form when we allow ignorance - because we don't want to deal with it - to be our truth.

Let us look at the facts.

Fact:

Horses, which were not ridden, did not show this problem.

This is not a problem that is seen in racehorses, or children's ponies. It is seen by horses that are trained in dressage. Dressage is not the only culprit. The same problem appears in jumping horses. It is up to us to reflect and to think through why these incredible statistics exist in these sports but not others.

While further research may be indicated, it is difficult to set up circumstances that may end up damaging otherwise healthy horses. And truly, is it really necessary?

We are intelligent creatures. This is a problem that only requires a bit of logical thought. It should not be beyond us to compare and sort through the known facts, to establish the differentiation between the horses that experience this problem and the horses that don't.

So what are some of the differences?

Let's see, why don't we start with looking at the racehorses.



Well, the racehorse goes as fast as he can. Stretching himself to the absolute limit. Limbs extended, joints locked. But joints locked in the legs wouldn't have an effect on the nuchal ligament and the poll.



Racing horses have their noses lifted upward. Raising his nose gives the same effect on him that raising our chins would do to us, thus bringing the top back part of the skull closer to the neck.



While this might be true of the jumping horse going over the jump, it can be quite different between the jumps.

The Western pleasure horse, the child's pony, are usually left to their own devices on where the head and neck are going to go.

The common denominator that makes logical sense is of course the head and neck position. While logic may point us towards the answer, it does not give us the final answer. And so, we return to the question: how much is too much?

While we may know that 80% to 90% of riders do not practice rollkur, we do know that probably 80% to 90% do practice with the horse's head on or behind the vertical. And this is where we get to the question of how much is too much. Is there a difference to what possible damage can be incurred by the horse, whether he is on the vertical or behind the vertical? And after



that comes the truly difficult question: does it make a difference if the horse is placed there by the rider or places himself there based on the activity of the rest of his body? The masters of the past have suggested this is the only correct way to train a horse.

Until quite recently, the FEI rules stated that all movement was to see the head ahead of the vertical, coming close to the vertical only in piaffe. Somehow, one is left wondering, that if this rule were still in existence and followed by the riders both in the training arena and in the competition arena, the statistics the researcher would have found would have been far different.

We know that 80% of horses were shown by this research to have damage at the poll. Looking for a common denominator between the horses that don't have these kind of statistics and the horses that do, the obvious thing that jumps out is the head and neck position of the horse. Knowing this, how can we ignore the very real possibility that placing the horse's head on or behind the vertical in all likelihood is the cause of this problem? How can we continue to practice or condone any training method that has the rider in any way fixing or influencing the horse's head position so that the head is at or behind the vertical?

When we are fixing the horse's head to such a degree that the pull of the ligament on the bone is so continuous that we cause damage to the actual bone, how can we even consider thinking that what we are currently doing is good for the horse?



We owe it to the horses who are given no choice in this matter. We owe it to them to work with and ride them in such a way that is most harmonious for them physically and emotionally. The masters of the past insisted that we needed to ride from back to front. Have we perhaps, in losing this important guideline, lost far more than we ever realized? And have the horses paid the price?

There are many instructors out there who teach many different things. Some instructors are more popular than others. Thus, their methods get passed on. They get passed on based on the popularity, not necessarily on whether they are good for the horse, or not good for the horse.

It is easy to look at the pictures of rollkur and see horses who are in distress, horses who are in pain, horses who are struggling. It is much more difficult to look at a horse that is slightly behind the vertical and see that the horse is having problems.

People say that you can learn something from any instructor no matter how bad or good they are. Well, you may learn something new from even the worst instructor, but what is the cost to your horse when you go through the learning process?

For the sake of your horse, please be careful. Never think that behind the vertical or at the vertical is ever a good place to start. Beware the instructor or the training method that has you in any way fixing the position of head or neck. Remember the words of the masters and always ride from back to front. Your horses are depending on you.

[Editors Note: For further information the translation of the interview with Dr Horst Weiler is available in our June 2006 Issue. [Click Here.](#)]