

„SHORT IN THE NECK - ACCEPTANCE BECAUSE WE ARE USED TO THE LOOK?“

by JOI HINNEMAN

My dear friend, Mr. President, Eric Lette; International dressage judges; fellow trainers and coaches.

First of all, I would like to thank the organizing committee, especially Mr. Mechlem, Mr. Shutte, and Mr. Hess, for inviting me. Before Eric Lette became head of the F.E.I. dressage committee, I can't remember when judges and trainers had so much opportunity to openly discuss certain points, with regard to rules and regulations.

The sport of dressage has grown immensely in the last years and there are still developments that need to be discussed.

The theme of my speech is „The Short Neck“, however it should also be expanded using the subtitle „Accepted Because We Are Used To The Look?“ I don't want to bore you with this old subject which has already been through the international press as „Rolling In The Neck“, rather I want to make you aware of the horses frame that, when presented in the competition, you as judges are responsible for giving positive or negative scores.

I hope my speech will start positive discussions among you. At the same time, I hope it will support riders and trainers to be able to concentrate on good solid basics of dressage. In the long run, they will be able to achieve higher scores.

In the last two or three years, all too often at large national or international shows, I have seen horses that were too short in the neck during most parts or even during the entire test. These tests were given high scores and were often well placed in the class.

When I say „Short in the Neck“, I mean that the horses profile no longer shows a freely carried neck with a smooth arch from withers to poll. The poll must remain the highest point, with the nose always slightly in front of the vertical. Unfortunately, a short neck is often scored wrong. This incorrect frame is scored too high, which leads the rider to believe that this is a correct, acceptable frame for the horse to have.

When I ask „Is this correct or acceptable?“, we find the answer clearly stated in our F.E.I. Rules and Regulations, Article # 4:01, which are the guidelines for the appearance, frame and quality of the dressage horse. As licensed judges and qualified experts, according to Article # ---- you are bound to accept these rules. Our German National Rules come from the F.E.I., and are identical. We find a second answer to our question in the expert opinions of equestrian literature, and simply in our basic theories of riding. I think it is necessary to deal with riding theory to make it clear that judges have to keep in mind not only what they see in front of them, but the reasons for it.

More important, we should recognize and note the following points. The two main causes of a short neck are:

1. Too much contact with the mouth or
2. Not enough contact with the mouth.

Let us first establish the characteristics of the correctly going horse.

Firstly, the horse moves forward with an active bending of the joints in the hindquarters,

Secondly, this leads to using this impulsion over a supple, swinging back carried

forward, and
 Thirdly, which leads to a freely carried neck with a giving poll carried as the highest point.
 Fourthly, the contact to the riders hand is even and soft. The horse gives easily to the bit.

If the horse doesn't fit these characteristics, there is a definite reason.

Too much contact to the mouth generally leads to the nose dropping behind the vertical, at the same time, the poll is no longer the highest point. Without a doubt, this leads to a hindering of the hindquarter activity, as well as the free looseness of the neck, chest, and leg muscles that lift and extend the forelegs. Expression in the movement is lost. The result has to be scored negatively.

In all walk tempos, the front legs reach a shorter distance. In the collected trot, there is lack of activity in the hindquarters. It becomes even more obvious in the collected canter, where the stride becomes quick and short and the required forwards upwards canter stride is lacking. The horse doesn't come off the ground anymore, the movement becomes very flat.

Too much contact leads to an extreme overloading of the horses strength. Actually, the carrying power of the horses hindquarters is too strongly loaded, no elasticity can be produced and the hindquarters are effectively shut down. This is often seen in exercises of strong collection such as canter pirouettes. The hocks work up and down, no longer forward and under towards the center of balance. A good example is the pirouette tour of the Grand Prix. When the horses are too much collected with the hand they are unable to proceed in a correct canter rhythm to the next movement.

Article 404 clearly describes how the various trot tempos should look. At the working trot, the hind hoof steps at least into the print of the front hoof. At the collected trot, the hind hoof steps at most into the print of the front hoof. At the extended trot, the hind hoof definitely tracks as far as possible over the print of the front hoof. The neck must reach longer and the nose must stay in front of the vertical. The horse expresses his full range of motion. With too much contact and a short neck, the evenness, harmony, and round way of going is no longer possible. This quick, stiff movement is basically uneven and should be scored accordingly.

I have spoken about the fact that too much contact can actually shut down the jumping ability of the horses stride in canter. The same thing applies to piaffe and passage. With a strong contact, some horses will still passage because they are so willing, but the hindlegs are stilted, with no bending of the hips, stifles, or hocks. This becomes more obvious in the piaffe, it is impossible for the horse to move in an acceptable two beat rhythm and swing off the ground. Further, the transitions will not swing through forwards and upwards over the back to the poll. The horse will not give or soften on the contact.

Too heavy a contact with a short neck will always lead to a stiff poll, the horse will never lighten up in the bridle.

As a second problem, I mentioned too little contact with the mouth. This is actually the lack of willingness to stretch the neck. The horse does not step correctly up onto the bit. Usually, the mouth is fussy, where the horse is playing with the bit so much that it can be seen or heard.

With too little contact and a short neck, the connection from the hindquarter is lost, it goes backwards out the hindquarter, instead of forwards over the back, to the mouth and onto the riders hand. The rider will have a big problem controlling the horses hindquarters. One of the

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best examples being the trot half pass. The more difficult the exercise becomes, the more difficult it is for the rider to keep the horse in front of the aids with the poll the highest point. The danger of the horse becoming very short or tipping his head becomes greater. For example, during two tempo flying changes or one tempos, where the rider has to work more with the leg aids, the rider will have to use more contact to regulate the movement, shortening the neck even more. The same goes for the difficult movement on the centerline, pirouette - change - pirouette - change, as well as all other difficult movements.

All problems coming from a short neck due to not enough contact stem from the lack of willingness to reach onto the bit.

I have to conclude that the two reasons for a short neck either from too much contact, causing a stiff poll, or too little contact, causing no stretching onto the bit, are a result of the horse not being totally through.

The horse is through when it accepts the aids of the rider from back to front, front to back, or from side to side with no resistance. All aids in the pure sense of the word are allowed to go through, this is the base of all training.

Throughness or submission is scored in the collective marks and you as judges must give this score careful consideration.

On the subject of collective marks, one should not fail to mention that during the test, the judge must recognize the origin of the riding problems I described. I also want to direct your attention to the correct hand position and the proper use of the rein aids. I believe we should put this together with the already discussed problems. Any pulling, bouncing, or jerking movement of the hand, including quick dropping or collecting the reins, will have a negative influence on the soft, elastic connection to the mouth. High hands with stiff or bent wrists will prevent quiet aids to the horses mouth. Since the last score in the collective marks is for „Seat and correct use of aids“, it is your responsibility to make sure you carefully consider your decision.

The logical result of all the previous points, short in the neck, or going behind the vertical, cannot be accepted simply because we have gotten used to the look. It is in no way correct and it should not be tolerated.

Riders and judges are bound by the rules. Riders have the duty to ride correctly and judges have the responsibility to judge correctly. No judge has the right to put his personal opinion above the valid rules. Nor does he have the right to say „I'm not so strict on that point.“

Our equestrian organization has provided rules and regulations for the judges to follow. The judges, together with these rules, can influence or stop the incorrect developments of the dressage sport.

Luckily, we all have eyes and clear vision, I only hope that we all learn to clearly recognize what we are looking at.

Thank you