

A CLASSICAL MAKEOVER



Racehorse to Classical Dressage

ARTICLE BY CODY HARRISON

Classical riding is not a technique for training but rather principles to guide your training. These are some of the principles that guide classical trainers.

- Help the horse to feel good in his work.
- Help the horse understand, so force is not needed.
- Show the horse how to enjoy his work.
- Help the horse to stay healthy.
- Have compassion and patience for your horse.

Any riding horse can become a Classical Dressage horse; all there needs to be is patience and a clear understanding of classical riding. So long as there was no physical damage done in the previous discipline preventing the horse from its natural movement. Your veterinarian can help you determine if your horse has physical limitations.

This article features Truck! He is a 16.3 hand Thoroughbred off the track racehorse. His previous owner said Truck was a hard keeper, and he was about 75 pounds underweight. (Still in racehorse body condition) She had him for six months and wanted to do dressage with him, but afterward changed her mind and decided to do a different discipline.

When I went to try him out for the first time, it was a little rough. I did not have my own saddle with me. The saddle they had for him was about 2" too small in the seat, and the stirrups

were 6" too short! I was not very comfortable, to say the least. I am sure that the saddle was not even close to fitting him either. He did not feel very good being ridden. He held his head a little on the high side, which dropped his back, causing it to be tight. I could feel tension in most of his body. He moved with short choppy steps at walk, trot, and canter. He was not clear in his mind of what was expected of him, and it caused him to be hesitant. He was very sensitive and had some fear of feeling trapped. Bending to the left was not something he was too keen on doing. I was not able to get his left lead, which is odd for a racehorse. I only rode him for 15-20 minutes, and that felt like a long time, given how uncomfortable I was in the saddle.

Thinking back on it, I am not sure what attracted me to him at the time. My only thought was that I think I can turn him into what I am looking for, and at the time, my budget was minimal for a horse purchase. He cost me \$1,500, a fairly standard price for a used racehorse. Truck raced for five years and won a little over \$40,000.



A racehorse conditioned body.

Before we get started on his transformation to becoming a Classical Dressage horse, let's first look at how things are done on the track, so we know what needs to change.

- A minimal amount of groundwork.
- Training consists primarily of conditioning. (Now you have a fit horse who does not know anything about life outside of racing.)

- The muscle groups that are most used in racehorses are the hamstrings for pushing and the pectoral muscle group for pulling. (The muscles needed to carry a horse's weight in a collected position are the top line muscles.)
- Forwardness is only worked on when galloping.
- Most racehorses have a hotter temperament.
- Go fast, turn left!

Once Truck got to his new home, we started our training by showing him how to relax. He did not need to be so intense about his work anymore. I wanted to get started on his top line right away. Without the proper strength to support collected balance, I would not be able to change his current movement. I started this by work-in-hand and teaching him how to lunge correctly. I used a cavesson in the beginning. This is because most racehorses do not trust the bit, nor do they understand what the bit means. Starting from ground zero is always a good place to start a makeover.

I ask him to lower his head as much as he can while lunging and doing work-in-hand. The work-in-hand at this point is a mild should-in. I want his nose to be somewhere between the bottom of his chest and his knees. No lower than the knees or the horse will lose the forward part of the stretch. There has to be a balance of forward and down when stretching. His top line was not only weak, but it was very tight. In order to build any muscle, it has to relax and contract. If a muscle is always tight, it will only get shorter and tighter but never become stronger. They will also develop a shorter range of motion as time goes on. Truck already knew how to contract the muscles that we need to make stronger. However, he did not know how to relax them so that the muscles could make

a full range of motion. As the range of motion becomes greater, the muscles get stronger.

Truck was scared of the whip when he arrived. He did not run from it but rather just got balled up and could not move. We worked this out in the first few weeks with lunging and work-in-hand. He needed to learn that the whip was not going to discipline him. The whip is only to help explain what he needs to do. What direction and with what energy. It is crucial that your horse understands the tools you use and that they are comfortable with them.

Most of getting Truck to relax was not just asking him to lower and stretch; it was getting him to let go of the idea that he needed to protect himself mentally. With a horse that is sensitive and has a hot temperament, it is more critical with HOW you do things, not as much as what you do. Training needed to be done in a calm, relaxed, and slow manner. Asking very little and rewarding often. As the mental relaxation comes, the physical relaxation quickly follows, with little needing to be done to achieve it. Once a horse can maintain physical and mental relaxation, you can now begin to shape your clay. Put your horse in the needed position for his work. Clay is much easier to shape than cold, stiff steel.

There has to be a balance of forward and down when stretching.



First trail ride.

During his first six months of training, it was

mostly lunging, work-in-hand, and some trail riding. Going up and down hills helps build up a horse's back and top of their rump. It was the work-in-hand that allowed him to start to relax and bend better to the left. At this time, he began to move more freely and to be willing to shorten his frame some without tensing his neck and back. In this slightly shorter frame, he was able to start to be more forward rather than fast.



Lunging with a forward trot.

Truck is now starting to trust what is being asked of him, and he is beginning to enjoy his people. He is now ready to move to more work under saddle. I also started to incorporate cavalletti. When we started to school over cavalletti, I found out how big of a BABY he really was!!! Knowing that he is sensitive, we put leg wraps on all four legs and bell boots on his front. Even with all the leg protection, if he hit a pole for whatever reason (balance, distance was off, etc.), he would be three-legged lame for the next ten strides! After that, he would go back to being perfectly sound. It was almost as if he thought it was going to hurt more than it did. With this mindset, he became very hesitant to go over the cavalletti. This caused him to lose forwardness as he approached the cavalletti, which prevented him from committing to the stretch that was being asked of him. When this happens, take it slow. We did lots of walking over the cavalletti.

This allows him more time to observe and process what is happening. Eventually, he became comfortable with all the exercise at the various heights and began to really build up his back and free his shoulders.



Cavalletti exercises.

After his first year of training, he hit a wall. His wall was just the simple fact that he was not ready for the next step. Physically he was ready; he could do all he needed to take the next step. Mentally, he was not ready.

As the mental
relaxation comes,
the physical
relaxations
quickly follows.

The next step in his training was to begin shortening the frame a little more to start on more collected work. When I asked for his frame to become a little shorter than what we had been working on previously, I could feel his nerves and stiffness start to return. I gently tried for a few days in a row, and after not being able to achieve the frame with relaxation, I decided to wait a little longer.

After another month, I tried again, same results. At this point, I realize that he has not yet completely let go of his past from the track. So, even though physically he is ready for what I want from him, I have to wait for his brain. I decided that while I wait on that to happen, I will use him for some lessons. He was a lesson horse for over a year. He could only be used for intermediate riders and up due to his sensitivity of feeling trapped. He

did lessons 3-4 times a week. Just walk, trot, canter, should-in, and some leg-yields.



Lengthening the stride & frame in trot.

Once I began to notice him sitting more in his canter transitions and stepping farther under with his hind legs during lateral work, I started to think he may be ready now. Ready he was. When I asked him to shorten his frame, he did so without any tension. Not only did he shorten his frame, but I could feel him grow taller under me. This was the first time that I really felt him lift and support his back. Exciting!! Now we can do things! Over the next six months, his position became stronger, more consistent, and he stayed relaxed. His canter to walk transitions and walk to canter transitions started to keep their balance. Another six months goes by, and we are working on Piaffe and lead changes. This was about a three-year process for Truck.

Haunches-in at canter.



People that did not know Truck was a Thoroughbred would often ask, "what kind of Warmblood is he?"



Starting Piaffe.

Listen to your horse. Feel your horse. They will tell you if they can or cannot do what is being asked. If they cannot, then you must find out why. Once you find out why, then you can decide how you will go about helping them.

It is our responsibility as horse owners to be responsible for our horse's well-being.

It is important to remember that most often times, retraining a horse takes longer than if they started training in that discipline to begin with. There is nothing wrong with someone changing their mind about what they want to do

with their horse as long as the horse is ok with it and they are suited for it. Don't try to team rope on a Saddlebred or jump a Clydesdale. Can they do it? Yes. Will their bodies hold up? No. It is our responsibility as horse owners to be responsible for our horse's well-being.

Thank you for reading this article. Please reach out to us if you are interested in clinics, lessons or training. We would love to get to know you and your horse and help you build your partnership with Classical Dressage training. Info@CH-Equine.com

For more information about Cody Harrison please visit our website at www.CH-Equine.com

Like & Follow us on FaceBook at CH Equine.