

A CLASSICAL MAKEOVER



Western Pleasure to Classical Dressage

ARTICLE BY CODY HARRISON

Classical riding is not a technique for training but rather principles to guide your training. It is these principles that guide classical trainers:

- To help the horse to feel good in his work
- To help the horse understand, so force is not needed
- Allow the horse to enjoy his work
- To help the horse stay healthy
- To 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 -- as 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 Louie, a quarter horse gelding that was started in Western Pleasure. To go from Western Pleasure to Dressage is about as big of a change that you can ask a horse to achieve. I will briefly go through the process that Louie went through to get him to his current training level.

Let's first observe how a Western Pleasure horse is asked to move:



- Long and low frame
- Balance is on the forehead, and the horse moves in a downhill manner
- No suspension in any of the gaits
- Minimal impulsion
- Slow, Slow, Slow

After observing this, you can now see what changes need to be made to have a classical dressage horse. *So, what needs to change? EVERYTHING!!!!*

Where does one start? You have to start with the most essential aspects in classical training—the horse's willingness to be forward and have impulsion. Lunging is a great place to begin to teach the horse to work with more impulsion and to be more forward. When a horse is trained to be slow in each of the gaits, they do not understand the aids to lengthen the stride. When Louie was first asked to lengthen the stride, he would go to the next gait. For example, if we asked him to have a bigger walk, he would go to the jog, and when asked to lengthen the jog to become a trot, he would go to a slow four-beat Lope. Fortunately for us, the only thing he could do after the lope was to canter. In retraining a Western Pleasure horse, you will find it best to work from the canter, then the trot, and lastly, the walk. You want to take the energy and forwardness from a forward canter into the trot. Once the trot becomes more forward, you will then take that energy and forwardness into the walk.



To help Louie understand to be more forward and help him become more active with his hind end, we lunged over cavalletti twice a week. In

doing this, we realized he would rather jump them than step over them. He seemed to enjoy doing that exercise and started to show some personality. I then decided to try him over a few jumps. He thought it was the greatest thing since sliced bread! He really had no idea what he was doing, but it was fun for him. It was the fun activity for him that gave him the energy needed for future training, and it also gave him the motivation to go forward.

Louie spent a little over a year doing some jumping. Just once a week, along with continued cavalletti work. Over that period, we slimed him down to make him lighter, so it was not as hard on his joints carrying extra weight. I also chose to have a young student I had at the time (Bryanna) jump him as she was not as heavy as me, and it was a good experience for her. She did well with him, and they both were able to learn from one another.

We did not focus much on posture at this time. Louie needed to find his natural position. He could not jump a rail with the position of a pleasure horse. As he would be looking for the next jump, he had to start to lift his head.

As you can see in the picture, he really began to enjoy jumping and developed a natural skill for it. As a trainer, I knew that jumping could not be a long career for him. Louie has small quarter horse feet and has a heavily muscled body that is not designed for long term jumping. When the time came to move more directly to



dressage, he was jumping 3'6" oxers with a rider and free jumping 4'6".



Now Louie has more willingness to work and understands the basics of the aids. With his willingness to work getting better, and now that we are able to bring the energy up, we can start to work on a posture that is better suited for dressage and his confirmation. Correct posture was the most challenging thing for Louie to achieve. For the first time in his life, he was being asked to move in a shorter frame.

**Remember,
this is the horse's
transformation.
Let them guide you
through their journey.**

I did not just shorten the reins and pull him into a shorter frame. This process took another year and a half; inch by inch, we shortened his frame. He was not very willing to try the shorter frame. He would brace at the base of his neck and block his back if he was the slightest bit unsure of what was being asked of him. So, I wait!

Powering through stiffness and resistance is not part of classical training. Over time, Louie began to understand what he needed to do with his body to achieve a shorter frame. Of course, with any horse that is learning, there will be some inconsistency. There were some good days and some not so good days. Eventually, the good days began to come more frequently and outweigh the bad days.

As this shorter frame becomes more consistent, I begin to ask him quite often, "Can you do it on your own?" What this question really means is can he have self-carriage? I ask this by gently

releasing the aids of the hands and legs and continue to ride only with my seat. When he loses the position for whatever reason, I apply the aids to help him get back into position, and then I ask again, "Can you do it on your own?" The ultimate goal of Classical Dressage is descent de mains et descente de jambes, which basically means no hands and no legs.



In giving him the freedom to carry himself, he begins to relax in a position of balance. When a horse is balanced and relaxed, you will start to feel your horse use his back more in the various gaits. When you finally get your horse free in his back, you are now on track to have quality movement. The back is everything. Without proper motion in the back, your horse will not truly have free movement and balance.

After 3+ years of work, Louie now looks and



moves like a good quality Classical Dressage horse. There was a change of plan several times to adjust to his abilities and understanding. Do not get stuck with a strict training plan. You must be able to feel what your horse needs and help them understand. Please be sure to allow the proper time for training. There are no quick fixes. Training is a process, not a race. Remember, this is the horse's transformation. Let them guide you through their journey.



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

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