

Dressage from the Drivers Seat

Ridden dressage uses terms such as leg yielding, half halting through the seat and indirect rein. Take that away and can you still have “dressage”? Driven dressage has proven that you can, but understanding the communication of bending, collection and extension without ridden dressage aids is a challenge.

In order to replace the leg, seat and indirect rein of ridden dressage, drivers use voice and whip commands. Word commands need to be clear to the horse, mean just one thing and be followed with reinforcement should need be. Intonation of the voice will also add meaning to each word. Whip commands require proper placement on the horse as would a leg.

All drivers develop some sort of vocabulary with their driving horses. For example, Europeans introduced American drivers to the “trill” which signals a downward transition. A short “trill” could mean “slow it down a bit” and a long sharp ‘trill” could mean come to a halt. Extremely useful when driving multiples as not every horse has the same contact with the reins or is at the correct point in their stride to start a downward transition. The “trill” “sets up” the downward transition which is then followed up by the reins.

Each driver develops their own vocabulary and technique to communicate to their horse from the seat of a carriage. It is interesting to hear how these evolved from different drivers. Robin Groves and Sue Rogers are highly accomplished drivers in the sport of Combined Driving. Combined driving, like eventing, accumulates scores through three phases of competition, dressage being the first phase. Robin Groves, of West Windsor, VT, won the 2007 National Singles Championship at Fair Hill driving Lana Wright’s “Thors Toy Truck”. Sue Rogers, of Reading, VT, drove “Noble Gesture”, a Welsh/Arab cross to the North American Pony Challenge Preliminary Championship in 2003 and is consistently in the top three at the advanced level.

“Noble and I know that the other is thinking, rather amazing”, explains Sue Rogers, who has had Noble over 15 years. “When I look back, it is interesting how we developed this relationship. I had a new navigator on the back of my marathon carriage and in order to help her prepare herself for the turns in the hazards, I would yell “LEFT”, “RIGHT”, so she wouldn’t be thrown from the carriage. I guess Noble was smarter than both of us as he learned these verbal commands very quickly. I now use this aid when driving at speed in a hazard and Noble, not necessarily my navigator, knows exactly what to do.”

Of course, yelling “LEFT”, “RIGHT” in a dressage test would not be the thing to do, but driven dressage, unlike ridden dressage, allows for voice commands. Sue admits to whispering “left” or “right” when doing a one handed deviation should Noble stray a bit from where she wants him. When asked why she didn’t consider “gee” or “haw”, very time tested successful commands to horses, she reminded me that her original goal was to help the navigator, not train the horse!

Sue and Noble communicate through a dressage test with voice, whip and body. Sue uses walk, slow trot, trot and come (for the strong trot). Her whip acts as a leg to help direct Noble to bend. “It’s an assist more than a command, “she explains. An

interesting technique Sue uses is communicating her halt. “I take a deep breath, blow out and sit deeply.” This subtle enough for Noble to come from a strong trot to a halt. “He’s very sensitive.”

Since Sue has started training driving horses for others, she has had to adjust her style with each new horse. “I often get horses who already have set up a kind of word communication with their riders and I incorporate those with ones that I add. Noble, however, is so tuned to me after all of these years that I just think and he knows what I want. He has shown me to what level to aspire with my other horses.”

“One command that Noble dislikes is being tapped by the whip,” tells Sue. “If I use the whip in that way, he responds but flips his tail and throws me a look. This does not send a good message to the judges so I had to find another way to ask him to go forward such as my voice. Interestingly, he has no objection when I place the whip on his side to ask him to move over. In fact, he is so sensitive that depending on where I place the whip I can get him to either bend or side step. One of the FEI advanced tests asks for a 10 meter deviation and I am working on asking him to side step out and back and still keep the proper bend.”

As Sue pointed out, giving the right impression to the dressage judges is paramount during a test. John Greenall, a USEF (United States Equestrian Federation) judge as well as an ADS (American Driving Society) judge, agrees. “A dressage test is an opportunity to show to the judges the level of training you have accomplished with your horse. It is not a training session, it is supposed to be the finished product. Constant clucking, repeating word commands or over use of the whip is more a sign of a nervous competitor than a good test. Commands should be used at the point in the test when the horse is asked for that particular movement and it should happen smoothly.

“I don’t expect everyone to have a great test, those kind of days happen to everyone. Keep your composure, just because the horse misses a command it is scored only in that movement. You know that your horse understands what you are asking for and just because he is having a bad moment, don’t change your method of communication. If the driver keeps it together, very often the horse will respond and finish with an acceptable test despite an early bobble.”

Robin Groves starts the communication process the moment she gets the horse. She operates a training stable with her husband, Wilson. “Every time we handle the horse, we are consistent with our verbal commands from leading them to the pasture to driving them. We start with “whoa” which in my language means stop moving...feet in cement...eyes forward...WHOA! The young horses are allowed to look around a bit, but as the training progresses, I am asking for a statue. I need that level of ‘whoa’ when I halt in an FEI dressage test, so why expect anything else from that command.”

Robin, who was an eventing rider before her driving career, understands what legs, seat and indirect rein trains a horse to do. Take that away and the driver needs to come up with other ways to develop the horse’s body and communicate. “I continuously use props, such as cones, ground poles and raised cavallettis while lunging or long lining. This shows the horse the movement I am aiming for, such as bending, raising the back and extending. I pair that with voice commands and cues from my whip. This prepares the horse for when I ask for the same while being driven.”

Robin is very careful with her voice commands. “Inflection of the voice is as important as the voice command itself. All upward commands are given with inflection

on the last syllable, kind of like a Canadian accent. Walk. Walk-on. Trot. Trot-on. Downward commands are the opposite, drawn out syllables and soft. Waaalk. Sloooow.

I expect my horses to reach the point of communication where they respond before I have the word completely out of my mouth. “Tr-”. The horse is trotting before the “-ot”. If not, I enforce the word with a “cluck” and if they still don’t respond an appropriate tap or push with the whip follows. All horses come to respond to my cluck, even those that I am not driving. Somewhat of an issue when I am at a show with several horses I have trained and I cluck, everyone moves! That is because I never leave the horse with the indecision of what I mean.”

One of the problems Robin sees with other drivers is over use of words or incomplete communication to the horses. “If the horse is trotting along to your satisfaction, there is no need to continue to tell him to trot verbally. This makes the horse dull to the voice. The same goes with a driver not reinforcing a verbal command, teaching the horse that sometimes it means walk but sometimes it does not.”

Robin is a firm believer in using the whip as if a leg aid. “This takes some skill and certainly consistency with the horse. I start on the ground, asking the horse to move forward and to the left and to the right. The whip sets the direction of the horse therefore if you wish the horse to move to the right, use the whip on the left side. If I wish the horse to move sideways, I use the whip further forward, aiming for the armpit.” Robin drives dressage with two hands in the riding position, explaining that she has worked hard to develop her whip skills without compromising contact with the horses mouth.

“Without the indirect rein or leg to help with bending, the horse needs to learn different responses to the reins than in riding. The outside rein cue needs to bring the horse to the outside rein and stay there with the inside rein adjusting the curve of the bend. The whip can be used as an assist to this movement, as would the leg, to keep the shoulder from dropping into the turn.” Watching Robin school a horse on long lines to this end is an education in itself.

Communication with a driving horse can be as simple as teaching the horse to respond to a certain sound with a certain action. This story shows to what level horses are able to respond to a simple sound.

The Budweiser Clydesdales are famous in their own right and attend numerous promotional events. Surrounded by fans, these gentle giants stand quietly until cued to move forward by their driver. Since safety is of utmost importance, the driver cannot take the chance that an on-looker could accidentally give the command to start the team. So neither clucking nor saying “walk-on” or a whistle will start the team. In fact nothing will start them except the specific sound of a wooden block at the foot of the driver. And each team has their own tone of wooden block so that teams standing close together would not start by hearing another wagons cue.