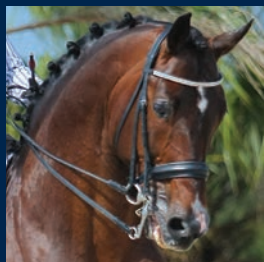
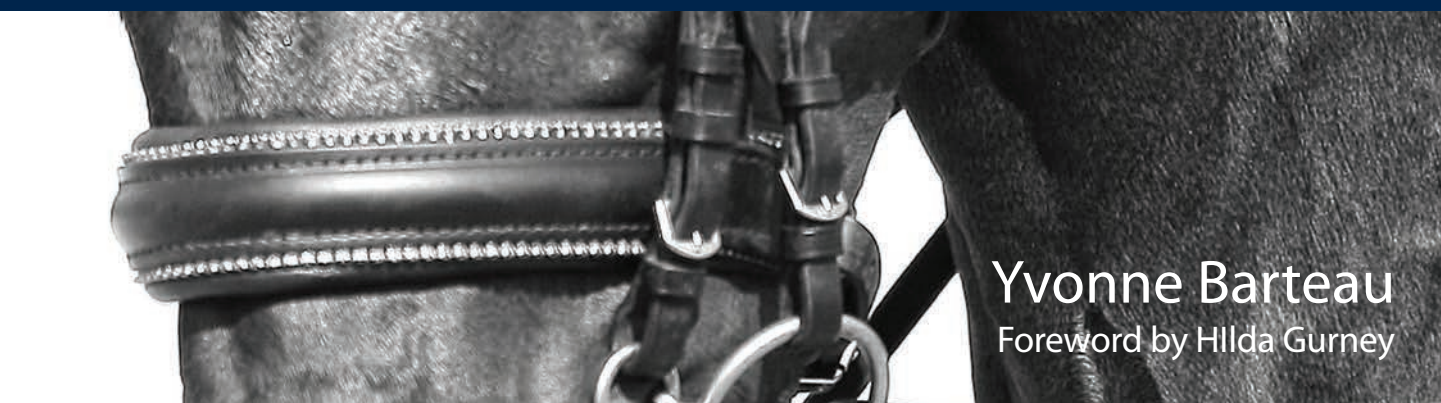




THE DRESSAGE HORSE MANIFESTO



Training Secrets, Insight, and Revelations from 10 Dressage Horses



Yvonne Barteau
Foreword by Hilda Gurney

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LET THE RIDING BEGIN

BASICS

The cornerstone of any good riding program is *basics*. What are the basics of riding and in what order should they be learned? There aren't set-in-stone answers to those questions. Certainly basic *rider position* needs to be addressed, and then basic *connection issues* must be resolved before any real *refinement of the aids* can be studied or applied. So we will start with rider position.

My name is Ublee and I am a Dutch Warmblood. I think I am eleven years old. I was an approved stallion until I was six. An amateur who had never owned a stallion bought me and did not feel she needed a stallion, so now I am a very good quality gelding (if I do say so myself). That owner sold me after a year, and I found myself happily back with the trainers who worked with me as a five-year-old.

I have been a competition show horse most of the time, other than a small hiatus for a blind splint that bugged me more than it should have. I can pretty much put together the "Small Tour" (Prix St. Georges and Intermediare I), but I am partnered now with a new adult amateur named Rose who is working on the Third and Fourth Level movements while we compete at Second and Third Levels. We started at Training and First together-

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er and were Reserve Regional Champions, which made Rose very happy. Those ribbons turned into lots of carrots and apples for me!

I am a “schoolmaster,” of sorts, for Rose. While I am basically good-hearted, relatively forgiving, and certainly not spooky or jumpy, I have made her a better rider because I will not do her work for her. She is a serious student. She shows up. *Repeatedly*. For almost two years now. Her riding is getting better all the time, but like all of us, she always has something to improve.

Rose takes a lot of longe lessons, mostly on me, but occasionally on other horses, as well. Over time, they have helped her a good bit. At first, she was often unsettled in the saddle with no center of balance that I could work under. She slid to the outside in canter, which made it hard for me to keep from cross-cantering or switching leads behind. She now is better balanced, more relaxed, and stable when she applies an aid, which makes my job of discerning her signals and answering them that much easier.

Rose has also become more aware of her upper body, which used to be way too stiff and was always moving around in random ways. While at first her position and actions in the saddle made it hard for me to take her seriously as a rider, she has persevered and is now pretty dang respectable.

Most importantly, she never blamed me for her shortcomings, and so as she has improved, I have been willing to work with her as a team.

Rider Position

What can everyone learn from Rose? Improving balance and relaxation while in correct riding position is the single most effective thing a rider can do to better herself in the saddle.

There is much to be studied about *rider position*, but the bottom line is: Effective rider position complements the use of the aids and allows the rider to be ready to follow whatever movement she is asking for without impeding her horse or mixing up signals with losses of balance or random aids. A state of *controlled relaxation* must eventually be achieved, and this requires the rider to have a supple, stable awareness of her body, and a feel for the balance *the horse* must work in over his feet in order to be able to do his job. The rider must always strive to enhance and not compromise that balance.

Any time spent becoming more supple, more relaxed, and better balanced on the back of a horse is time that benefits not only the rider, but any horse she should ever ride. To my mind, this counts toward becoming a better dressage rider more than any other single factor.

TAKEAWAY

One of the biggest benefits of proper, relaxed rider position is the ability to remain in and get back to *neutral* when in between interactions with your horse.

Neutral is the combination of a correct, supple seat in the saddle and the absence of any aids. It means quiet, centered riding—you are *connected* (see more on this on p. 30) and sitting properly, but you are in an *assessment* mode rather than a more *directive* one. When our riders are in neutral we feel their stillness, and we learn this is a time to relax and wait for further instruction. Riding in neutral is an important skill, and it can only be done when proper rider position starts to feel natural.

So you must learn to sit still and tall in the saddle, as follows:

- Your head should be over your shoulders.
- Your chest and sternum should be open, shoulder blades together.
- Your arms are relaxed at your sides.
- Your hands should be carried low, in front of you, and should be constantly feeling for that “alive” yet “following” communication through the reins.
- Your hips must be open and your weight settled and relaxed on the back of the horse—not “perched” or tight or holding on to us in any way.
- Your legs need to hang down from the hips underneath your body. Don't let them creep forward into a “chair seat.”
- Your heels stretch softly down underneath your relaxed hips.
- There should not be tension or stiffness in any of your joints.

You must not only learn to stay in this position but also to ride effectively in it. Practice makes perfect, and perfect practice is even better, so practice, practice, practice.

Understanding Connection

In my opinion, *connection* is another one of the all-important factors that determine any rider's success in communicating with her horse while mounted. So few humans understand the bridle and the effect it has on us. We, like you, search for and reward that oh-so-elusive, perfect connection with a rider: The one that makes us feel like using our backs, listening, and being the best we can be. Connection is the Holy Grail for horse and rider. It is the one thing you need if you want to achieve “throughness.”

Because it is rather an intangible feeling, connection is hard to describe, but I will make an attempt! From my point of view, connection is what you, the rider, develop with your horse through your particular communication pattern, using all your aids in harmony. Your horse should become your fine-tuned instrument, with you as both conductor and musician. Connection is the epitome of contact—the embodiment of all it can develop into.

And it is all in those dang reins. No, wait—it is all in the hands and arms and balance of whoever rides us. This is both the problem and the solution. *All* riders should take long lessons until they are supple and stable enough in the saddle to establish a reliable connection with the horse and be fair with their hands. If riders would just try to remember our actual *mouths* are attached to the ends of those pieces of leather you all call reins, we would certainly be better off. Let me put it this way: When holding a rein, imagine you are holding a small and trusting child's hand. Would you wish to cut off that child's circulation? Would you drag the child around by force? No, but neither would you wish for the child to slip out of your grasp, run off, and get hurt. Your grasp would likely be relaxed, “breathing” with your movement and the child's, and neither flimsy nor oppressive. When you hold a precious child's hand, your aim is to foster communication between you, not impede it.

The right connection between horse and rider is a continuous entity—it should not vary constantly. To put it another way, connection is *not* a half-halt, nor is it a suppling aid (I'll talk about these in a minute—p. 32). It is a live line of communication *to* you and *from* you, and as such, it needs to be treated accordingly. And *accordingly* means just that. If you are lucky or skilled enough to achieve a useful and cooperative connection with your horse, then you will know how elusive and tricky it is—and you will also know it is fragile and must be forever cultivated. If your seat is not relaxed and independent, you will have trouble maintaining a consistent feel, which translates into connection problems, and then there are many other problems that will stem from that.

KEYSTONE EXERCISE

It is worth time studying and finding the right “feel” you should have on a horse’s mouth. A good way to practice finding this feel is to try this exercise with a rider who has good feel and an ideal connection with her horse when she rides.

- 1 Hold a rein in each hand, or two pieces of baling twine will do.
- 2 Ask the other rider to take the other ends of the reins or twine in hand.
- 3 Establish a connection and take turns moving your hands up, down, or around. Try to maintain a soft, elastic feel that stays consistent.
- 4 Experiment with tightening or relaxing the feel by adding or relaxing muscle tension in your arms. The sensation should be similar to how it feels to have your blood pressure taken—a squeeze and a subsidence of that pressure, not a grab and release. Carry your own arms so the other rider only feels the number of “ounces” in your connection. When in the saddle, the horse should *never* feel the weight of your arms or hands on the reins.

Here’s a really important note about connection in general: *Horses don’t pull*. We don’t. This is important to say here because while some riders understand this instinctively, others never seem to get it. I will try to explain.

Horses allow riders to pull on them without responding, but that does not make *them* pullers—it makes their riders pullers. Personally, I won’t take advantage of the opportunity to lean (which again is *not* pulling) because I am too sensitive in the mouth—the few times a rider got on me and pulled or held on to my mouth, I just stopped moving. Some riders feel their horses slow down when they pull a bit so they drive forward without relaxing the contact, and *that* my friend, is the beginnings of pulling.

If you say to yourself that pulling is *not* an option, then believe me, we will not pull on you. If you determine that you are pulling or holding on to your horse’s mouth as some form of speed control, it is preferable to ask him to do many transitions to achieve control and the desired pace. It is also vastly preferable to let your horse’s head be up in the air as you work to learn proper flexion and suppling techniques, rather than trying to pull and hold his head down. When you and your horse have fulfilled the equation of flexion, body position, soft contact, and being ahead of the leg, believe me, both of you will enjoy a proper connection. Strive for that.

Suppling and Half-Halts

As I mentioned, suppling and half-halts are *not* connection. However, they work in and around the connection. They need a purpose and should never be some odd, random, pointless yanking thing we need to put up with.

For clarity's sake, let me say that *suppling* is just keeping the bit “alive” in your horse's mouth—not dead, dull, or holding. You just keep your hands soft, moving your fingers or wrist joints as you maintain flexion and keep your horse active and balanced with your leg aids. If you never allow your hands to be dead, dull, or holding, then we, too, will not be dead, dull, or holding.

KEYSTONE EXERCISE

Picture the reins being made of smoke whenever your horse tries to lean on or hold them in a dull way. Vaporize your arm pressure for a moment. Then, come back to the horse with a little suppling or a half-halt. If we try to latch on again, vaporize again. No one can grab smoke or a cloud...it is impossible. Make it impossible for your horse to lean on you or offer a dull feel by never being there when he tries.

Suppling is not for beginner riders. You must be able to sit independently and understand the mechanics of straightness. You must stay relaxed with your seat and legs as you use your reins and stay relaxed with your seat and arms as you use your legs before you can start getting too creative with your rein aids. When you have reached this point in your riding, then you can play with suppling and strive to understand what half-halts are and how to use them.

The best riders keep their horses supple with just good use of half-halts and leg aids. In fact, the most important aid for the half-halt will eventually come from your core and your back, but early in your training as a rider, you will need rein aids, too. The thought you want to foster all along, though, is that in a perfect world (for both of you), your horse will listen and respond appropriately when you stretch up through your core in a relaxed way, tighten and brace your seat for a second, and then relax again. This little maneuver (which will eventually become your half-halt) should be practiced on the longe line or even on a chair in your house, again and again, until you have consistent control over it. Then when you are really ready to apply half-halts, you will be ready!

Let's walk through the half-halt process. A half-halt begins with a thought. You need to *want* something when you use a half-halt, and your actions should be in relation to that want, as well as the horse's response to your actions. For example, your thought might be that you want a transition, speed control, or better balance. Whatever it is, think of what

you want, and know where your horse is in relation to your request *before* you ask. This is where educated help on the ground can be valuable in gaining a better understanding of the cause and effect of the half-halt process.

After you know what you want, don't "throw away" anything (like your contact and tall, soft, balanced rider position), but find a neutral, relaxed riding position. From there: Stretch up through your core, opening your shoulders and remembering to breathe so you don't tighten your body too early. When you are ready to apply the half-halt, stay open in your upper body, tighten your back for a one- or two-count, and if nothing happens by two, tighten your arms for a second. Then relax back up into your stretched core and neutral seat. Do this at that very second, whether your horse responded or not. If the horse did not respond as you wanted, repeat the process with slightly more insistence each time, always offering a quick, soft relaxation in neutral in between, until you get your desired result. Then relax and ride on.

The mantra you should think about as you ask for a half-halt or suppling should be, "Give to the bit, go to the bit," as two halves of the same sentence. Making sure the horse *goes to the bit* to stay ahead of the leg and under the rider brings the leg aids and the horse's response to them into the equation.

Just after your half-halt works and you are in relaxed neutral is when the leg aid is often needed, and this is the best time to apply it. You will need to experiment with what works best for your horse. You might need a quick bump with the heel, a squeeze with both legs, or a sharp little dig with the spur if your horse does not respond, because as soon as we stop caring or answering your every action or aid and you tolerate it, the less trained and less disciplined we will become.

TAKEAWAY

As already mentioned (and as will likely again be pointed out to you over the course of your dressage journey), there are very few absolutes in riding. For example: Connection should be an "alive," soft communication, but if your horse tries to lie in your hands, you must "disappear" in an instant, and then come back with a series of half-halts until he learns to carry himself. Once the horse is not trying to have you support him with the reins, proper connection can be reestablished.

Timing and Dosage

And speaking of the aids...the timing and dosage of your aids—the cues you use to communicate with your horse, namely seat, legs, and hands—can be a reason for the success or failure of your interactions. And so, this subject needs to be addressed. For example, you may know the sequence of aids for riding a leg yield, but those aids, if not correctly timed, or properly dosed, could have a negative or confusing effect rather than achieving the desired result. You will get the best feedback concerning optimal timing and dosage of your aids from us—the horses you ride.

Reading about and gaining an understanding of the aids and how to apply them is of course necessary, and these basic skills can be acquired through study and a qualified lesson program. *Refinement of the aids*, however, is the result of attention paid to the “best recipe” for each horse—what combination, how should they be applied, and when—to enable him to fulfill your requests without you overstimulating, worrying, or annoying him.

As horses, we hear the aids as “voices” that we can choose to ignore or respond to. What encourages us to respond appropriately is if these voices come *one at a time, out of a quiet, neutral place*, meaning via a well-balanced and relaxed rider who employs good timing and dosage. I will give you an example: If you as a rider could take a lesson from three of your favorite clinicians in the world, but the catch is that they will all teach you “in stereo,” at the exact same time, using their own particular words and favored language, overlapping ideas and talking over one another. Just how much would you benefit from such a lesson?

Just as you need to hear each instructor's point and advice in a clear and separate space and time in order to be able to heed it, each of your aids needs to come at its own proper time to be understood by the horse. When any aid in a sequence is not understood or responded to, a big opening is left for the next aid and the one after that to fail, as well. This is how many communication problems between rider and horse begin, especially with more novice riders.

So, how can you tell if the horse understands an aid you've applied?

I will tell you. Let's use an example: If you want me to move off your right leg, and you sit quietly, relax your arms, move your right leg back an inch or two, apply it with a squeeze to my side, then relax it as soon as I start to move away from it, you could then gather that I understand to some degree how to move off your leg. If you apply that same leg aid more sharply or strongly, and I move more sideways more quickly, you would know that I can also vary my response based on your dosage and timing. If you repeat this test three times in a row, and I answer predictably based on how you timed and dosed that leg aid, you can then assume I have a solid grasp of how to move sideways off your right leg. If

you begin the same process on the left, you might find that I am even quicker to move over on this side, as I am “hollow left” and “stiff right” and so it would take less leg pressure to get the same amount of response as you got on the right.

This is all good information to keep track of when you are the rider. Why? Because if you then walk a few laps of the arena and ask me to move off your right leg, using the same aids you used before, but this time I do not respond, you will be obligated to reprimand me with a *higher dosage* of that same aid, or to back up the unanswered request with a touch of the whip, if necessary. If I just answered the exact same aid minutes ago, there is no reason for me not to answer correctly again other than inattentiveness, laziness, or disobedience.

When we do comply with your request, whether imperfectly or just as expected, we should feel you get quiet and relaxed as our reward. The next thing we should feel is either a correction (clear and well-timed when we make a mistake), or a new request, also clear and well-timed. This requires you, the rider, to have good control of your body parts, a good understanding of what it is you want so you will know *when* to “get quiet,” and oh yes, proper timing and dosage of your aids. When you see happy horses working well for their riders, then this is the recipe that resulted in what you are seeing.

Proper communication under saddle with impeccably timed aids turns riding into an art form and brings out the best in any combination. That should be your goal. When you become aware of what your recipe of aids and interactions should be, you can then continue to fine-tune and adjust them until you have a communication pattern built up with your equine partner that you both can depend on.

When your riding position is secure, yet soft and balanced, when you understand connection and how to achieve and maintain it, and when you have learned to apply the aids clearly and give the horse peace when he complies, then and only then should you think about stepping into the competition arena.

TAKEAWAY

Here is a simple truth for you to keep with you always: We horses want peace. Some of us will go to great and theatrical lengths to achieve it. If we are well trained, we will work hard, even if we are by nature lazy, and it brings us peace. We want you to make yourself clear to us in the quietest, fairest way possible, and then we want you to let us be at peace when we comply. We appreciate as few as three seconds of peace, so never feel that relaxing and being still for a moment—even in the middle of a movement—is not a good idea.



THE GRIPE LIST: WHAT ARE YOUR HORSE'S PET PEEVES?

Listening to your horse is a skill like any other that must be developed over time. We try to communicate with people all the time, both on the ground and through the tack. Your job is to figure out when your horse is trying to tell you something that will help you in your riding and training process.

If you really want to learn to read and understand our body language, you will have to apply time and attention to the task. Books on the subject will help. Spending time with a respected horse professional will prove enlightening. And then, of course, there is no substitute for studying us as we interact with each other and with our riders and handlers—and I mean watching horses in general as well as putting particular effort in observing your own horse.

In addition, watching the combination of a good coach, rider, and horse, working together during a productive training session can be a very valuable training tool. Many barns allow auditors during lessons or clinics,

Every day should involve carrots, turnout, and sunshine.

and horse shows offer many opportunities for you to see examples of communication patterns between horse and rider that work or don't work—with tangible results.

Most interactions with horses can be narrowed down to simple cause and effect. That is why the best trainers are invariably quiet, relaxed, and calm under pressure. They understand there is a correct time to apply each aid and a proper dosage (as we've already discussed), and they vary their actions depending on the feedback they get from the horse. They start with the most subtle aid possible and increase the "volume" or dosage on their interaction until the horse starts to comply.

Most horses' pet peeves—as far as riding goes—come from inconsistent or poorly timed aids, or the failure to remove the aid or stimulus once the horse has responded appropri-

ately. Let me tell you about these and several others so that maybe you can begin to sense when your horse is trying to tell you something important.

Pet Peeve 1: *Riders Who Do Not Know Where They Are Sitting in the Saddle*

We don't like it when the weight of the rider, which should be an important tool and method of influence, is random, ineffective, and is not coordinated with other aids. This causes us to learn to ignore weight changes in the saddle and often causes riders to need to resort to harsher aids from the reins or spurs. Riders need body awareness and control while in the saddle, even if it takes dozens of longe lessons and many hours of instruction to achieve.

Pet Peeve 2: *Riders Who Are Unaware of the Importance of a Proper Connection*

When the connection is always in question, we will lean, “hide,” and curl, or be above or below the bit, inconsistent in the contact, and unresponsive to either half-halts or a suppling rein. The rider needs to be sure she has an independent seat and good balance, and then step by step learn the cause and effect between what she does with the reins and what her horse does in response. The rider needs to build a working relationship between her hands and the horse's mouth that will facilitate her riding goals. One of those goals needs to be that the horse willingly accepts the contact and promptly responds to changes of rein pressure based on his understanding of its meaning. Eventually, more and more of the rein aids should be replaced by signals from the rider's seat and back.

Pet Peeve 3: *Riders with Bad Timing*

When we are ridden by riders with bad timing, we are often out of proper balance. This issue also makes us unsure of the cause-and-effect pattern of aid sequences because these riders are usually too early or too late in either application or removal of an aid. We are then left with the impossible task of trying to respond to seemingly random movements from a rider. Aids should be associated with a rider's request and be removed when we respond. A lack of good timing throws this equation out the window.

Pet Peeve 4: *Riders Who Do Not Know How to Be in Charge*

We horses are herd animals. We want to be bossed around (in a nice way), and we want you to be consistent in being a quiet, fair, and predictable leader in our little herd of two. Horses with riders who do not provide this important “security” often display behavior

and obedience problems, from rearing and bucking to outright refusal to acknowledge the aids when they are applied. We need consistent and fair leaders in the saddle, every ride. Note that *being in charge* is different than *being busy*. Aimless “chatter” with any number of aids being used at once or overlapping each other just to exert some form of authority over us is not the point at all. We want you to give us direction, properly and fairly, at the exact moment we need it.

Pet Peeve 5: *Riders Who Are Inconsistent with the Aids*

When a rider is inconsistent with the aids, it is very unsettling to her horse. The horse is constantly led to believe he *does not know* what he *thinks* he knows. Each horse in this situation will react differently, depending on his energy level and disposition—but he will likely either ignore or take advantage of such a rider.

Pet Peeve 6: *Riders Who Misdiagnose Horse Behavior and Act on It*

This issue leads us to become suspicious of our riders and not trust them. Listen, we usually have a reason for our behaviors, and when a rider reprimands us when what we need is reassurance, or reassures us when what we need is a reprimand, we often become suspicious, worried, belligerent, or just tune out the entire training process. Keep in mind the action/reaction, cause-and-effect rule that works best with any long- or short-term horse training partnership: Predictable, reliable aids, expecting predictable, reliable consistent answers.

Pet Peeve 7: *Riders Who Never Allow Their Horses to be at Peace*

As I mentioned on p. 35, we horses love peace almost as much as we love food. We need to feel you *do nothing* quite often—in fact, more often than not in the training process. No horse will continue to interpret a never-ending stream of leg, rein, and shifting seat aids if he cannot make them go away by responding to them.

Pet Peeve 8: *Riders Who Get Stuck in the Problem and Can't See the Solution*

When you spend more time thinking about and telling your horse what you *don't* want him to do instead of continually directing him to what you *do* want him to do, it is easy to get stuck in a problem and lose sight of the solution. Visualize what you want from your horse in your mind's eye even *before* you ask, and don't lose the thread of your desired response until you get it (or the best possible version of it your horse can give you at that time).

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Remember, we horses have our gripes—the things that bother us—and there may be things your horse is trying to tell *you*. Some of these communications might be important to your training process and the journey you and your horse are on together, so pay attention. (Of course, some of us will try to tell you things like we do not want to leave our buddies or walk past the doorway that leads to the barn...you probably shouldn't listen to that sort of stuff).

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

Here are a few simple reminders for you to take with you into the next chapter:

- Work on your rider position until it feels natural to stay in balance and still be relaxed in all three gaits.
- Learn to ride in neutral between interactions.
- Refine your connection constantly.
- Perfect the timing and dosage of your aids—it is a huge factor in our compliance.
- We are simple creatures, and we strive for peace.

We will meet again when it is time for Third Level!

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This is me with my trainer's daughter, Kassie. She is much more focused than I am here!