

Origins of Dressage

The origins of classical dressage and collection lie in the natural ability of the horse and its movements in the wild. In fact, most modern definitions of dressage state that the goal is to have the horse perform under saddle with the degree of athleticism and grace that it naturally shows when free.

Horses naturally use collection when playing, fighting, competing and courting with each other. When trying to impress other horses, they make themselves look bigger, just as other animals do. They achieve this by lifting the forehead, raising the neck and making it bigger by flexing the poll, while at the same time transforming their gaits to emphasize more upwards movement. When fighting, the horse will collect because in collection he can produce lightning speed reactions for kicking, rearing, spinning, striking with the front feet, bucking and jumping.

This natural ability to collect is visible in every horse of any breed, and probably inspired early trainers to reproduce that kind of behavior in more controlled circumstances. This origin also points out why, according to most Classical dressage trainers, every healthy horse, regardless of its breed, can perform classical dressage movements, including the Haute Ecole jumps, or *Airs above the ground*, even though it may perform them a little differently from the ideal performance due to the build of its body.

The ultimate goal of dressage training is to develop a horse to its ability as an athlete: maximum performance with a minimum of effort. The training scale (as set for in the German riding instruction) is to physically develop the horse in a consistent manner with longevity in mind. Dressage is fitness training and needs to be treated as such, with thought, compassion and patience.

Modern dressage evolved from the classical school, although it now exists in a somewhat different form from its ancestor. Competitive dressage is an international sport ranging from beginner levels to the Olympics. Unlike classical dressage, competitive dressage does not require the airs above ground, which most horses cannot perform well even with correct training, due to physical limitations. Instead, competitive dressage focuses on movements such as the piaffe, passage, half-pass, extended trot, pirouette, and tempi changes.

In theory, competitive dressage should follow the same principles as classical dressage. However, there has been criticism by some riders for the trend at all levels for "quick fixes" and incorrect training that makes the horse *appear* correct, but that is in fact neglecting the fundamentals. Classical riders criticize such training methods on the grounds that they are biomechanically incompatible with correct movement, are painful to the horse, and cause long-term physical damage.^[1] These short-cuts usually catch up to the rider as they move up the levels and need to be corrected to perform certain movements. While these modern methods, such as the highly controversial rollkur technique, can produce winning animals, classical dressage riders argue that such training is incorrect and even abusive.

It is also believed by some that competitive dressage does not always reward the most correctly trained horse and rider, especially at the lower levels. For example, some riders who consider themselves to be training classically would not ask their horse to hold his head near-vertical when he first began training, and this would be penalized at the lower levels of competitive dressage, marked down because the horse is not considered to be correctly on the bit. Other riders, who also would consider themselves classically trained, would disagree, saying that if a horse is not ready to travel in a correct outline (*on the bit*) he is not ready for competition, and this is the reason such horses would be marked down.