

What is Classical Horsemanship?

By Ann Bennett

"Classical Horsemanship" is a term used to describe the art of riding. *Classical* denotes a practice that is pure, tested by time, beautiful and harmonious. It is art based on science and principles.

A Greek philosopher and general named Xenophon (430-354 B.C.) wrote two works called *Peri hippikes* (*On the Art of Horsemanship*) and *Hipparchikos* (*On the Cavalry Commander*). He is considered the founder of Hippology, the science of horses and riding. He wrote that a horse needed to be treated with kindness and respect to get his best efforts, that the application of pressure and the immediate release when a horse cooperated was the best training method, and that a horse needs to be rewarded for small efforts and rewarded often. Xenophon also recognized the value of lateral and suppling work to teach his war horses different battle movements.

Undoubtedly, oral traditions are much older, as man's association with domesticated horses is at least 10,000 years old.

These fundamentals are the basis of what is called *dressage* today. Dressage is a French term meaning "to dress, to school, to train." The oldest riding school still in existence today is the famous Spanish Riding School of Vienna. It was first mentioned in 1572 and taught combat art on horseback to the noblemen.

Later the preservation and perfection of battle movements in the manege (arena) was called *haute école* or *High School movements* and *Airs Above the Ground* and practiced as an academic study. While a frieze on the Parthenon pictures a levade, piaffe, and passage, other movements like the courbette and capriole were perfected later.

The reference to Spain was to honor the Spanish horses from Andalusia (called *Andalusians*) imported to Lipizza, Austria, to develop the Lipizzan breed. The Iberian Peninsula also includes the Lusitano breed from Portugal. These three breeds are referred to as *Iberian* or *Baroque style horses* and bred especially for their strength, balance, intelligence and suitability to perform the High School movements. The horses of the Iberian Peninsula were bred for the purpose of *tauromachy*, including bull baiting, bull fighting, bull turning, bull herding, and bull wrestling. This was originally a Roman practice but banned



Kalika and Courtney Conrad in a 4H Horsemanship class

from Italy by Pope Paul IV in 1558, and only retained in the region of the Iberian Peninsula.

The agility, courage, and maneuvers of the bull fighting horse, like the war horse, was borne of necessity, as the horned bulls were deadly and so the horse was especially bred for this purpose.

The Spanish Conquistadors brought their men, cattle, and horses to the Americas. The skills were adapted to the great open plains of the Americas. The use of a sword or lariat requires riding the horse in one hand and directing the horse's feet with precise control and use of subtle aides. This Spanish *vaquero* style of horsemanship is alive and well today throughout California and the Great Basin states of Nevada, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming.

Tom and Bill Dorrance are considered the founders of the natural horsemanship movement in the United States. They were *vaqueros* and fine horsemen who felt that the horse needed a better deal and taught with the same wisdom reflected in the writings of Xenophon. Their student, Ray Hunt, took the message on the road and started teaching clinics and spreading the word. Buck Brannaman credits Ray Hunt as his teacher, and has made it his mission to teach and preserve the Spanish *vaquero* traditions.

So Classical Horsemanship, good horsemanship, or poor horsemanship, can be practiced by anybody, anywhere, any breed, in any discipline, in any tack. Classi-



Az Kalika and Courtney, pelham curb bit, English Pleasure class

cal Horsemanship is based upon a proper education and sound schooling principles, not gimmicks. It makes the horse a partner not a slave.

A good horseman assumes responsibility for his horse's condition and behavior and does not blame the horse. He considers the nature of the horse - psychology, physiology, and sociology. He treats his horse with respect and consideration.

An example of a classical schooling exercise is the circle. It teaches the horse how to bend and keep his rear prints in the track of his front prints. The horse develops strength by stepping under with his rear supporting leg and then pushing off. The horse develops a sense of balance not achieved on a straight line. The circle is also the foundation exercise for teaching other lateral movements like the shoulder-in and haunches-in.

A classically-trained horse shifts the center of balance more to the haunches, to better carry a rider and perform different movements. The head is carried vertical, with the bend at the poll, the jaw is soft, the back is raised, the haunches are lowered, and the feet step under the horse. The term most often associated with this type of posture is *collection* or *self-carriage*. A collected horse has fluid transitions, suppleness in figures, and grace. The horse and rider become partners much like figure skaters, with the same degree of finesse, balance, strength, and beauty. It is art, not mechanics.

A horse and rider pair without training, lack discipline and accuracy. The rider is stiff and braced and bounces on the



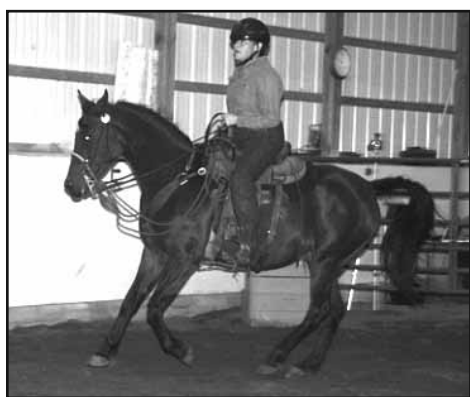
horse's back. The rider sits out of balance in the saddle in a chair seat, and expects the horse to pack him like a sack of potatoes. The horse is pulled around with the bridle reins to stop and turn, and booted in the belly to go. A horse ridden like this will travel heavy on the forehand, be stiff and braced, hollow-backed, nose stuck out, with a hard jaw and mouth. He will pound the ground, and have little maneuverability or athleticism. He will be resistant, unreliable, and lack forward impulsion. The horse is often labeled as unwilling, lazy, clumsy, crazy, grumpy, dull, flighty, or bad, but that is because we have made him so.

A classically trained horse and rider understand the complex application and use of aides - reins, legs, and a balanced body position - the mind, eyes, head, hands, fingers, shoulders, hips, back, seat bones, thighs, and calves. The rider understands that it is imperative to ask at the right moment in time to the phase of the gait, in time to the horse's feet.

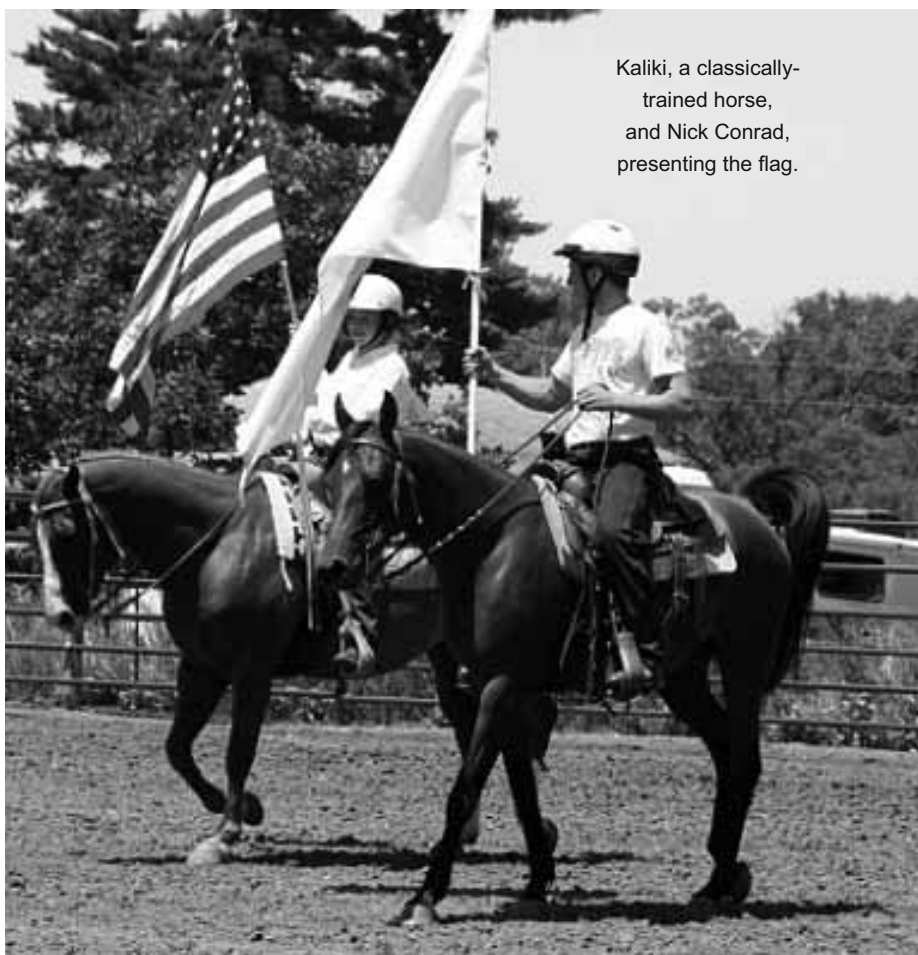
The horse that travels with balance and cadence, covers the ground with scope and suspension, and hits the ground softly. The horse has impulsion and self-carriage. He is calm, forward, obedient, and supple.

A good horseman rides in a classical position with alignment of his spine, legs underneath him, elbows at his side, hands soft and in front of him, head up, and in the center of the horse. The rider will be able to follow the horse's movement and be relaxed. The horse will perform different movements with aides that are invisible, you will only see soft hands and legs that drape around the horse's barrel. The horse is well balanced, willing, and athletic and can change gaits and change directions handily.

The horse understands his job, is schooled and conditioned to do his job, we have learned to ride him properly, and therefore he is happy. This is because we have made him so.



Kalika and Ann Bennett in the vaquero style two rein (bit and bosal)



Kaliki, a classically-trained horse, and Nick Conrad, presenting the flag.

