

Scenic Rim
The magazine on the scene

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"Love de Cause"

Standing at
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"Saint Thomas"

"Tanabota"

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Design by Annie Minton

Carlos Tabernaberrí

Training through the eyes of the Horse

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Foundations for self-carriage

When it comes to self-carriage and collection, I believe it is about proper training to develop the horse and the horse's understanding of what is being asked.

Many clients who come to me are keen to work on collection. But very few are actually ready to do so sometimes because their horse may have been worked on a 'pretend' frame, and therefore are often heavy on the forehand with a hollow back and often disengaged steps.

By self-carriage, I mean the ability of the horse to carry himself, rather than the rider carrying or holding the horse's head in a pretend frame because the horse does not understand how to use his body properly and the rider is pulling the horse's head backwards. So, in essence, the horse is working front to back rather than back to front into the hands.

Regardless of your riding discipline, I believe it is crucial that a horse develop proper self-carriage if he or she is to reach their full potential and remain sound for the long-term.

When a horse understands how to use his body properly, he will offer that self-carriage and softness. And he will offer it without the use of a bit. If a bit would help a horse collect, there would be one on the shelf. But horses do not gain understanding through force or pain – just look at how ineffective rearing bits are, for example.



In these photos (above), you can clearly see what I mean. On the left, is a 10-year-old warmblood mare with behavioural and physical issues (including a long back, which is not the strongest), who had been improperly trained with many important steps skipped. In this one-hour lesson, you can see that without a bit or spurs, she is offering self carriage because she understands how I am asking her to use her body. The poll is the highest point, her nose is slightly in front of the vertical and the contact is soft.

On the right is a horse that I saw recently in the Royal Dublin Show during my recent trip to the UK. There, you can see that despite bits and a whole lot of hardware, the horse is not collected and does not have self-carriage. In fact,



it is so heavy on the forehand the rider is actually standing in the stirrups. Instead, the horse is hyperflexed (also known as rollkur) and breaking at C3/C4, which is the weakest part of the neck. Add to the pain he is experiencing from the bits and harsh contact, the horse is unable to see where he is going or hear what's happening around him (due to the ear coverings). It's little wonder he would not be concentrating on what is being asked of him, let alone be able to understand it.

Developing self-carriage is not about bits – it is about proper and systematic training that helps the horse learn to use his or her body. From the horse's perspective, a horse has over 700 muscles and each must be working correctly if he is going to be able to carry himself. From the rider's perspective, having good balance and an independent seat is essential to ride softly. Collection is when the horse engages his hindquarters and carries more weight appropriately. But many steps, such as calmness, rhythm, impulsion, contact, straightness, with balance and the introduction of lateral work, are the foundation for working towards collection. But that's several articles and a lot of hard work – in between!

So where do I start? I start at the walk with consistent contact, encouraging the horse to bring her hindquarters underneath herself and carry more weight there instead of being on the forehand.

In the photo 1 (above), you can see her trying to hollow her back. When she does that, she can't step fully underneath herself. If I were to lean back and pull on the reins, I would unbalance her further, she would stick her nose up and hollow her back even more. Working a horse this way is particularly bad for horses with back problems and it can create back problems in a sound horse, as you are not encouraging development of the top line, including the ligaments, muscles and tendons that bear the rider's weight.

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This next photo, shows how the consistent contact I have maintained has encouraged the horse to lower her hindquarters and begin to carry herself more as she should. See, also, how I

have slightly elevated my hands to help her elevate the neck and shoulders a little.



In this last photo, you can see by my soft rein contact, that the horse is beginning to carry herself in more rounded frame and is not leaning on my hands on the forehead. She is beginning to bring her hind leg well

underneath, her poll is the highest point and her nose is just slightly in front of the vertical. By working her in this way, I will be helping her to develop the appropriate muscles that will keep her more consistently sound in the long term. Don't forget, I am doing this without the use of a bit or spurs.

In the photo below, you can see how the work at the walk begins to translate into the trot in which she is extending nicely and moving freely on a soft rein. But there is much work to be done at the walk and trot to develop the foundations of her self-carriage before this mare is ready for the canter.



It would be a VERY long article if I went into detail about what I am also doing with my seat and legs, so for the purposes of this article I'll just say that it is important not to unbalance the horse, and also to re-balance the horse by the use of half halts.

But as these pictures below show, it matters not whether you ride a Warmblood, Irish Sport horse, Quarterhorse, Stockhorse or Thoroughbred cross; have a horse with good or average conformation; use a western, halfbreed, or dressage saddle; favour flatwork or jumping; or ride bareback, bitless – even bridleless, it's not about the tools. It's about the trades person or crafts person on the tools (or simply on the horse) during the training who must help the horse to understand how to use his body properly when carrying a rider.



There is a story that many may have heard me recount about this that I like to tell. It goes like this:

There was once an Italian sculptor named Donatello, who ordered an 18-foot block of marble. When it arrived, he didn't like it, saying it had far too many flaws and cracks to be worth anything. He told those who delivered it to take it to the guy down the road, who wouldn't remember whether or not he had ordered it. To make a long story short, that 'other guy' was Michelangelo, who said 'OK, I'll see what I can do with it'. Out of that block of marble, with all its flaws and cracks, Michelangelo created the statue of David. When he was asked how he could create something so beautiful and perfect out of something with so many flaws and cracks, Michelangelo answered 'David was always there. I just chipped away the excess'.

So when you're working with your horse next, perhaps be a bit less concerned about what you think your horse may lack or isn't able to do and focus on being a crafts person, working to uncover the special talents that your horse already has – and help him or her to develop those to the best of their ability. I believe there is a David in every horse.

And until next month – good riding and God bless!
Carlos