

COOLING-DOWN THE WARMING-UP DEBATE
BY RAISING THE HEAT: The FEI does it again

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The April 15th 2010 pronouncement from the FEI Bureau reminds me of the story of the schoolboy who, when asked why he did so badly in the exam said, "I thought it was going to be in the afternoon."

The warming-up ring is now referred to, I see, as the training arena. Perhaps it has always had this designation. Silly me. I had assumed that horses were already trained when they arrived and only needed to be warmed-up, a process for which 15-30 minutes is surely adequate.² But if they still have to be trained, no wonder that such prolonged and draconian "techniques" are to be employed at the ninth hour.

To name the warming-up ring as the training arena seems to exemplify the short-cut training philosophy apparently being condoned by the present-incumbent-administrators-of-the-FEI (PIAFEI ... pronounced 'piaffy'). Never mind! If one hour of training is not sufficient, the PIAFEI have thoughtfully made provision for this to be doubled or even tripled. Three hours should do it. Away with the need for those boring years of preparation!

"Only in exceptional circumstances and with the permission of the Chief Steward, may a pre- competition training session exceed one hour. There should be at least one hour break between any training/warm-up periods."

On first glance, I did see a glimmer of light in the second paragraph of the new guidelines - to wit:

"The Working Group was also insistent that abuse of the horse should be avoided and, in particular, stressing the horse, aggressive riding and inflicting pain and/or discomfort on the horse must be prevented."

As the author of a book that carries the sub-title "The abusive effect of bitted bridles" I interpreted the paragraph as a clear instruction to the stewards to disqualify riders who were using bits. A couple of metal rods transfixing a sensitive body cavity clearly stresses a horse, is aggressive, and causes pain and discomfort. But wait ... perhaps this is another of those doublespeak occasions that the PIAFEI are so good at, whereby they say one thing but do not implement it in practice.

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When I followed the URL provided in the April 15th guidelines, I read something that utterly bewildered me. Yet, at the same time it explained why I am having so much difficulty in understanding what the PIAFEI really mean. Obviously, they do not use words to mean what they used to mean. Here is the brief that the Round Table Conference gave to the Working Group:

*“The FEI will establish a Working Group, headed by Dressage Committee Chair, Frank Kemperman, to expand the current guidelines for stewards to facilitate the implementation of the policy **that any form of aggressive riding must be sanctioned.**” [emphasis added]*

Not able to believe my own eyes, I resorted to Webster to make sure that I correctly understood the meaning of the word sanction. Yes, the brief did indeed mean that aggressive riding was to be *“authorised, ratified, confirmed, approved, encouraged and supported.”*

But then, I recalled that in recent years politicians have been using the word to mean quite the opposite. As the PIAFEI are nothing if not political perhaps, using politic-speak, they meant to say - at least in writing - that they did not approve of aggressive riding, even though, in their heart of hearts, they wished to let aggressive riding continue from a practical point of view. If you are confused, don't worry. PIAFEI-speak is very confusing. We just have to live with it – don't we?

In my February 2010 article I made what the PIAFEI obviously consider to be an outrageous suggestion, that the way to solve the Rollkur problem is for the PIAFEI to abide by the FEI rules. These state that *“The head should remain in a steady position, as a rule slightly in front of the vertical, with a supple poll as the highest point of the neck, and no resistance should be offered to the rider.”* Here is a clear cut, measurable guideline that stewards could work with, apply, record with videotape, and, if necessary, defend in court. What could be simpler? No new guidelines are required; all they have to do is enforce good old 401.

But this was too simple and its menace had obviously been anticipated by members of the inner circle – sorry, Round Table. To link two metaphors, they circled the wagons and, at the same time, cut this suggestion off at the pass. Abiding by the rules would have spoiled the game of hanky panky hyperflexion. So what in their wisdom did they do? Here is the second paragraph of the brief to the Working Group.

“The Round Table Conference decided that measurements should not be used in these guidelines to determine the degree of flexion of head and neck.”

They failed to explain why measurement was unacceptable. Instead, their preference for something more open-ended, less restrictive and completely ineffective is self-evident. The brief brazenly ignores the 401 rule and neatly blocks

the possibility of reaching a satisfactory solution. It defended the status quo and ensured that the Working Group would and could not rock the Rollkur boat.

What else could they do to prevent reform? Easy! The solution to the question of hyperflexion depends on a knowledge of veterinary science. Scientists of all stripes like numbers so, as well as forbidding the use of measurements, they made doubly sure that nothing remotely scientific could occur by excluding all such measure-minded folks from the Working Group. OK! - they could appear to be open-minded by inviting a non-voting input from Dr Gerd Heuschmann, as this would look good on paper. But just to be sure that his advice was drowned out, they also invited input from Sjef Janssen, a known advocate of hyperflexion.

What else could they have done to make the whole thing unworkable? Well a new obfuscating sentence in Annexe XII.2 nicely confuses and complicates “*stating that it is important that the Steward is proactive (prevention can avoid much reaction and negative response).*” Does this mean that stewards are now empowered to caution certain well-known practitioners of hyperflexion before they have started to hyperflex?

But now we come to what the PIAFEI label as the key initiatives. Remember that the recent Round Table Conference is the second time such a conference has been convened in the last few years to consider hyperflexion. After so much attention from the conference and the Working Group, the PIAFEI have concluded that hyperflexion (aka suffocation, pain and stress) is acceptable as long as it does not exceed periods of ten minutes at a time.

“Movements which involve having the horse’s head and neck carriage in a sustained or fixed position should only be performed for periods not exceeding approximately ten minutes without change (diagrams defining the head and neck positions will be provided to the Stewards)”

A horse’s lungs can be seriously damaged by even short periods of complete suffocation. Three frantic efforts to breathe under these circumstances would generate massive pulmonary edema and hemorrhage from which a horse would probably die. At a time of such an emergency, three breaths would take less than 10 seconds. The partial suffocation of hyperflexion will cause less damage at each breath but some damage will occur at the first breath and the damage is cumulative at each succeeding breath. How much damage do the PIAFIE think is acceptable? At rest, a horse may only breath at the rate of 10/minute. At the gallop, the respiratory rate is 120/minute or higher. At the walk and trot, the rate is somewhere in between. Let’s assume for the benefit of this thought experiment that a hyperflexed, partially suffocated horse is breathing at the rather modest rate of 50/minute. In 10 minutes, the unfortunate horse will have taken 500 lung-bruising breaths. How many PIAFIE would like to run for 10 minutes (over a distance of about a mile) with their chin on their chest, and a 40lb child on their back who is ‘armed’ with straps attached to two rods of metal in their mouth, one of which acts like a vice on their jaw?

Readers might be justified in saying, like Alice, “You can’t have a book without pictures.” How is it that the guidelines contain no guiding lines? Have six weeks been insufficient time to draw diagrams? The PIAFIE might be hoping that readers will assume that the diagrams of certain “sustained and fixed positions” will clearly outlaw Rollkur, LDR and all such variations on this theme. Time will tell.

Why, after two conferences, are the PIAFEI still so attached to hyperflexion? There have to be reasons for this continued defence of such a barbarous practice. In my 2007 monograph¹, “Why is Rollkur Wrong” that I sent to the FEI Dressage Committee after the 2007 workshop, I quoted Dr. Andrew Higgins, who was then Chairman of the Welfare Sub-Committee. In his committee’s preliminary report he observed that as over-bending and other training methods “*continue to be used by the top medal winning riders and their trainers, the conclusion is inevitable that their use must help to produce a performance that the judges wish to see (emphasis added)*.” If this so, then the guidelines for judges need to be reformed.

One clue to the Rollkur retention complex is provided by the PIAFEI’s warning to stewards that “*The checking of the bridle must be done with the greatest caution, as some horses are very touchy and sensitive about their mouths (see FEI Steward’s Manual)*.” The question has to be asked – why are they so touchy? I wrote:

Using two bits and a chain (the mandatory double bridle) to over-bend their horse’s neck, riders are, consciously or unconsciously, hyper-sensitizing (‘soring’) their horse’s mouths. The hypersensitized mouth may enable riders to use less force when giving rein aids. The mere hint of an increased pain level from a squeeze of the fingers could be enough to prompt an immediate response. This facilitates virtually imperceptible rein aids; something else that the judges are scoring.

I drew an analogy between the practice of soring the mouth in the dressage horse and soring the shin in the Tennessee Walking Horse. Of the two practices, the first is by far the worse, as the mouth is far more sensitive than the shin. This and other welfare concerns about current dressage must be addressed.

I do not doubt that, as the chairman of the Working Group reports, “*A huge amount of work has gone into producing these guidelines.*” The trouble is that, like the horse in piaffe, we are no further forward.

References

1. Cook, W.R. (2007) “Why is Rollkur Wrong?” *Horses For Life*, February issue. Online at www.bitlessbridle.com
2. Cook, W.R. (2010): “Warming-up: An open letter to the FEI about the role of the dressage steward.” *Horses For Life*, Volume 50. Online at www.bitlessbridle.com