

Classical vs. Modern Dressage

DOMINIQUE BARBIER'S PERSPECTIVE

By Jean Llewellyn, Canada



DOMINIQUE BARBIER WAS BORN AND RAISED IN FRANCE, BUT HAS LIVED FOR MANY YEARS WITH HIS FAMILY IN HEALDSBURG, CALIFORNIA - THE HEART OF SONOMA VALLEY WINE COUNTRY. A FORMER STUDENT OF THE LEGENDARY TEACHER NUNO OLIVEIRA, BARBIER IS A WELL-KNOWN MASTER OF FRENCH CLASSICAL DRESSAGE AND HAS DEVOTED HIS LIFE TO PERPETUATING THE TRADITIONS HANDED DOWN THROUGHOUT 400 YEARS OF HISTORY.

The dictionary definition describes French classical dressage as “horse ballet,” adding, “Although the discipline has ancient roots, dressage was first recognised as an important equestrian pursuit in the West during the Renaissance (14th to 17th centuries). The great European masters of that period developed a sequential training system that has changed little since then. Classical dressage is still considered the basis of trained modern dressage.” According to Dominique Barbier, however, the differences between classical and modern dressage are as far removed as the differences between today's Warmbloods and the Lusitanos with whom he has shared a life-long passion. Certainly, the latter breed and its Baroque cousins have been more synonymous with the work of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, the Real Escuela Andaluza de Arte Ecuestre in Spain, and the Escola Portuguesa de Arte Ecuestre in Portugal, rather than international dressage arenas - although their special qualities are now being recognized for FEI-level sport.

However, before discussing the merits of classical versus modern dressage and sharing Barbier's training philosophies, we should recall certain events that prompted the FEI's decision last November to request the immediate resignation of their entire Dressage Committee. In recent years, competitive dressage has been under the microscope following revelations of abusive training methods - including



▲ Barbier riding Sedosco

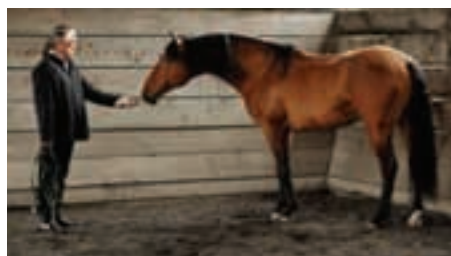
the controversial rollkür - that were first published in a German equestrian magazine. Subsequently, few fans will forget the unconscionable behaviour exhibited by a few of the world's top dressage horses in Hong Kong's Olympic arena last August, compounded by the questionable marks awarded by the international judges for virtually non-existent movements. Dominique Barbier was candidly critical, saying, “Modern dressage horses are not under control. How can they buck in the middle of the ring and win the World Championship?” His view is that, “German marketing has created a sport called 'dressage' to promote big horses, with big gaits. For



centuries the classical dressage horse has been a Lusitano, Lipizzaners, Andalusians... Today, the word Baroque (which typically exemplifies artistic grandeur) has been totally destroyed."

Responding to the FEI's creation of an investigative Dressage Task Force Dominique Barbier is asking, "What do we do? The educators are the judges and the judges are wrong. Dressage is facing its biggest challenge because we're trying to change the education and beliefs of a whole generation." Barbier, who even abhors the use of spurs, suggested that from the outset, the meaning of the word "dressage" should be completely redefined. "New rules, new judging, strict welfare controls, and from the outset we call it "sport dressage," synonymous with competition. It means creating a new generation where love and harmony replace domination and fear."

For the sake of clarity and in line with Barbier's long-held beliefs, it is important to emphasise that the word "dressage" conjures a variety of meanings and perspectives depending on an individual's affiliation to riding and equestrian sport. In the context of this article, "modern" and "competitive" dressage are interchangeable, and equate to a skilled rider performing a series of movements with a horse that is obedient, willing and relaxed. To others it may simply conjure an image of someone inconceivably wearing a top hat and tails and doing fancy tricks with a horse! However, with its origins



▲ Barbier & Narsil - negotiating!

firmly rooted in Italy and then France, the word "dressage" literally translates to mean "training." Therefore, "dressage" provides the foundation for any activity a rider might want to pursue with any horse at all levels and in all disciplines, according to Barbier, "based on lightness, communication, and harmony." More specifically, dressage should epitomise a system of training that employs progressive methodology to optimise a horse's natural athletic ability.

Proclaiming his "less is more" philosophy, Dominique Barbier's view is that the pure meaning of "classical dressage", whether applied to Warmbloods, Lusitanos, or any other breed, no longer exists in the competitive dressage arena. "Modern dressage - in other words, modern competition and training - has lost the quality of the gaits. Few dressage horses have a correct walk, and the trot is artificial because it changes the natural gait. The FEI rules for extension say that the back leg should extend as far as the front leg, and the toes should be pointed where they land. The rules were created because the essential quality of the extended trot is

relaxation. If the movement is created with resistance or rigidity, the back leg doesn't work and the front leg has an exaggerated Spanish trot, a movement that has no name. The essence of dressage is to make natural movement even more beautiful, respecting and improving the gaits. I have a hard time with [modern] dressage because I know how it's done and it's not pretty!"

Believing that dressage should be completely demystified, Barbier wistfully recalled his own classical training, when students were not permitted to question the riding master. "The old trainers were the untouchables." But, some years later, during a clinic presented by his former mentor, Nuno Oliveira, Barbier dared to raise his hand and ask; "What I would like to know is what you are actually feeling on a horse?" Oliveira's response was; "I can't tell you that, it's too private!" This response deeply saddened Dominique Barbier. "I told him this was one of the most important things I wanted to know, but his answer illustrated the mentality of that generation. 'I can do it, but you can't.' It's the same as great chefs keeping secrets about their ingredients, which is a shame because the next generation doesn't learn. You ride who you are, but as a learning experience, all classical training at that time died due to lack of teaching." Barbier continued by adding, "In many ways, it's not really classical versus modern - it's about knowledge. Young riders want to emulate their heroes,



▲ Ray of light

but if the heroes don't have the necessary knowledge....! The pyramid system of training is not designed according to the horse but to the level of competition. It's a reversal of the old system. Competitions are being designed and horses are trained to achieve it - instead of designing competitions to suit the horses."

Critical too of the politics that have infiltrated top-level sport, Barbier said, "Many people with influence have too much power. Dressage represents two emotions: love or fear, and people can make their choice every single day. Are we able to combine sport and classical dressage? Honestly, I'm not sure. It depends on what the FEI wants dressage to represent. Are we sticking strictly to the rules? It used to be very beautiful to watch but now I have a hard time with [competitive] dressage. To the uneducated eye something might look beautiful, but someone who is sensitive will understand the tension. The ultimate goal is for every horse is to actually enjoy dancing with you."

"If you take a horse that's sensitive and beautiful and ready to trust man, and you treat him like certain competition people treat their horses, you will lose their complicity. One of the outstanding qualities of a Lusitano is that they are beautiful the way they are, but they don't want to be pushed and compressed, half halted like some other breeds can take. They are sensitive individuals that require a minimum of understanding from their riders and not be treated like machines.

"Warmbloods are more predisposed to [modern] dressage because the competition judges are placing more

Over the past three or four decades Warmbloods (i.e. sport horses) have undergone an enormous transformation due to selective breeding strategies employed by many of the top European studbooks. This man-made evolutionary process has accelerated parallel to the demands of modern-day equestrian sport requiring horses that have been bred for a specific discipline, rather than suiting the needs of the majority of riders. Dominique Barbier's suggestion is that everyone should allow themselves to sit on a Lusitano and experience a Lusitano, and they will immediately start to understand the difference to a Warmblood. "Ask a well-trained Lusitano to walk, trot, canter, passage and pirouette - then understand why you should have one. A Lusitano is always interested in playing with you, learning, getting a conversation going. It's all about interaction. Warmbloods don't volunteer themselves. Lusitanos will!"

importance on horses with larger gaits than normal. In other words, if your horse does not have an extraordinary trot in competition, it is not even considered. Conformationally, we need big movers and a good engine room, but we also need horses capable of collection, because dressage is all about collection, and we see a lot of problems with horses lacking pure blood [Warmbloods], because the sensitivity is not there. These problems originate with training that is "forcing" them to go somewhere - they are not collected

they are compressed!"

Dominique Barbier explains that gaits should only be in proportion to the size of an animal - whether it be Warmblood or Lusitano or a pony! "The judges should recognise that when a big horse enters the ring, their gaits should also be big. But it is a fact, with few exceptions, that when a horse is above 16.3hh (170 cms) he will have much more difficulty in balancing his movement than a smaller horse. When you consider how many people aspire to Olympic-level dressage, you have to ask how many can actually sit on a big-gaited Warmblood? Not many. So, what have we done? Man has created saddles that help people to grip and stay on - which is anti-classical and anti-dressage!"

Dominique Barbier also candidly refers to spurs as "A loaded gun! How primitive is it to poke a piece of iron into someone's ribs. It's like saying, 'I invite you to dance, but you will have a noose around your neck and I will carry a gun in my pocket.' Spurs create tension and are terrible for the relationship. Dressage is beauty and harmony - and people think they can achieve this by kicking!" He continued by saying, "When your body is comfortable, your mind is at rest. The reverse is also true, when your mind is screwed up, you cannot sit still. For horses, if you allow them to remain comfortable in a proper position, when they can use their body with the least effort, they start to enjoy it. They feel okay about what you're asking them to do."

"Many people consider horses as a tool to achieve selfish goals. Today, everything is too results oriented. As soon as competition and winning becomes your first priority, it's over. How are you going to demand something from a horse if you don't respect him?" Barbier concludes by saying, "Today, people are starting to think! This gives me cause for optimism. Today, people are learning to take better care of themselves, going to the gym, meditation, yoga... so perhaps then they go the stable and understand the same process with their horses."

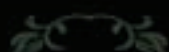
"A horse mirrors his rider - people have certain qualities that become part of their horses. Horses live in the here and now. Most students are unable to understand that concept. Our own inadequacies can provoke action and reaction with both positive and negative results. A horse is the mirror of your soul, of who you really are. It is your reflection that you see through their eyes. Through them, you can more easily come to know yourself. Through you, they can more easily come to fulfil themselves." **HT**

D
Barbier

هواء السماء يسرى بين أذنى الجواد.



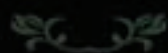
© Karim Pellae



Achieve your riding dreams with
internationally renowned author, instructor and trainer

Dominique Barbier

Dominique Barbier offers clinics worldwide, blending classical dressage
with mental communication. From beginner to Grand Prix,
experience and enjoy being one with your horse.



www.DominiqueBarbier.com

North America ~ South America ~ Asia ~ Europe ~ and soon in Dubai