



# SELF-CARRIAGE – THE BASICS...

Wherever I go, I see some very unrealistic expectations being put on horses. Many of these expectations are based on achieving a 'look' or demonstrating an exercise (such as flying lead changes), yet show a lack of understanding about the nature of the horse, as well as the foundations of how to properly achieve that 'look' or successfully perform an exercise. Most simply want the 'look' or success and they want it now, but they do not want to have to take the horse through the levels of schooling needed to get there.

**Would you really want to try to sit a university exam with a sixth grade education? I know I wouldn't and I know your horse wouldn't either.**

Let me give you an example that I see everywhere I go. It's the difference between achieving collection with proper self-carriage, versus a pretend 'frame'.

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. In this situation, the rider is usually pulling the horse's head backwards, which in turn makes the horse heavy on the forehand.

In more extreme cases, often involving horses used in speed-based events such as cross-country and showjumping, this can result in a tug-of-war where the rider feels that if he or she lets go of the heavy contact the horse would bolt. But what I see is a horse that lacks calmness and any understanding of contact and is basically running anyway with the rider anyway! What usually happens it that the rider tries to force contact by using a harsher bit rather than schooling the horse to understand proper contact – bit or no bit.

The result is that the horse is said to fail the grade, not be good enough. But in reality, it's like I said before – the horse must go to primary school before he can do university. You can't skip grades and expect to understand higher-level lessons – and neither can your horse.

Does this sound familiar? Regardless of your riding discipline, I believe it is essential that a horse develop proper self-carriage and softness – and he will offer it without the use of a bit if he understands what you are asking. If a bit would help a horse collect, there would be such a bit on the shelf – but horses do not gain understanding through force or pain.

Just have a look at a horse I saw recently in the Royal Dublin Show (photos right and at the top of the next page). 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 (something also known as rollkur). Instead of the poll being the highest point, his neck is breaking at its weakest point. 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



## Self-Carriage – the Basics...



This horse is not collected...  
...and does not have self-carriage

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 let's break it down and show you how you can start to help your horse to understand how to carry himself. 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 Photo 1 you can see this American Saddlebred, who because of his conformation is a naturally high-headed horse, trying to hollow his back. When he does that, he can't step fully underneath himself. If I were to lean back and pull on the reins, I would unbalance him further, he would stick his nose up and hollow his back even more. Working 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.

Photo 2 shows how the consistent contact I have maintained has encouraged the horse to lower his hindquarters and begin to carry himself more as he should. See, also, how I have slightly elevated my hands to help him

elevate the neck and shoulders a little. In Photo 3 you can see by my soft rein contact, that the horse is beginning to carry himself in more rounded frame and is not leaning on my hands on the forehand. He is beginning to bring his hind leg well underneath, his poll is the highest point and his nose is slightly in front of the vertical. By working him in this way, I will be helping him to develop the appropriate muscles that will keep him more consistently sound in the long term. Don't forget, I am doing this without the use of a bit or spurs.

After working in this way, it is important to also give the horse a chance to work long and low, and to lengthen those muscles (as shown in Photo 4). Here, you can see that he is seeking the contact, rather than fighting it when I lengthen the reins – which is the result you want if you're working with a horse that doesn't understand contact and wants to bolt.

Photo 5 shows how the horse is copying the feel of my body – when I stretch my back and lean forward, he does the same on a soft rein. This is the beginning of the horse's understanding of self carriage - but there is much work to be done at the walk and trot to develop the foundations of his self-carriage before this guy 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.



## Carlos Tabernaberi

But as the pictures below show, it matters not whether you ride a Warmblood, Irish Sport horse, Quarterhorse, Stockhorse, or Thoroughbred; 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 tradesperson or craftsman 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 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 craftsman, 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*

P.S. Whispering Acres Horse Starting & Training is now on Facebook. That's where you'll find our latest information and training tips. If you like it, please 'Like' it!

# 2011 Carlos Clinics

## October

- 1-2 (Clinic) Bangalow, NSW  
**Contact:** Andi,  
andi.neilands@gmail.com
- 15-16 (Clinic/Private Lessons)  
Bullsbrook, WA  
**Contact:** Debbie,  
debandash@bigpond.com
- 29-30 (Clinic/Trail Riding Clinic)  
Bendigo, VIC,  
**Contact:** Sarah,  
sarah.andrews101@gmail.com

## November

- 6 (Clinic) Endeavour Park  
Equestrian Centre,  
Picton/Camden area, NSW  
**Contact:** Elizabeth,  
0411 390 432  
budz1305@tpg.com.au
- 12-13 (Clinic) Callington Mill Park,  
Esplanade Rd, Oatlands, TAS  
**Contact:** Angie Howard,  
0407 576 061  
aquilant@bigpond.com
- 18-19 (Clinic/Private lessons)  
Bellingen, NSW  
**Contact:** Kim Barnes,  
0428 554 258  
bk.barnes@bigpond.com
- 20 (Clinic) Grafton, NSW  
**Contact:** Kim Barnes,  
0428 554 258  
bk.barnes@bigpond.com

## December

- 10-11 (Clinic) Canungra area, QLD  
**Contact:** Mandy,  
0458 204 433 or  
Angela, 0419 683 204

## January 2012

- 29-30 (Clinic/Private lessons)  
Deloraine area,  
"The Gem" Farm, TAS  
**Contact:** Angie,  
aquilant@bigpond.com,  
03 6254 7350 or  
0407 576 061

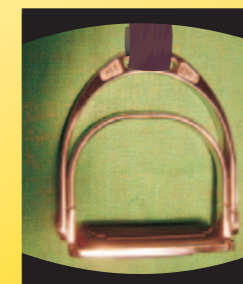


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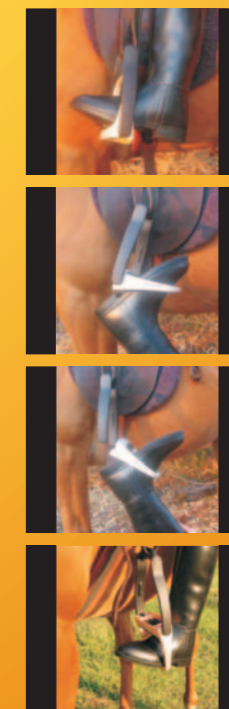
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