

Introduction to French Classical Dressage at Ecole de Légèreté

A presentation about the basic principles of training at the Ecole de Légèreté ¹

3 Basic Styles of Dressage

Academic: e.g., Bent Branderup, rediscovering the European **art of riding** of the past centuries.

Military/ Utilitarian: e.g., Philippe Karl, using past training know how (the earlier classical trainers²) with modern science and technology to build athletic horses ready for work in any discipline not just haute Ecole

Modern: (Competition) Dressage. FEI dressage,



¹Ecole de Légèreté: one of the most renowned French Classical Dressage Schools established by Philippe Karl.

² E.g., Guérinière, Decarpentry, Baucher,

The Ecole de Légèreté is a utilitarian dressage school training in the style of traditional riding masters testing it against modern know how and building horses ready for a long and athletic life.

History of the School

Philippe Karl, founder of **Ecole de Légèreté** was born 1947, and admitted to medicine but, in 1968, chose to work with horses. He was invited to join the Cadre Noir³ in 1984 and left in 1998 to teach and develop his own schooling philosophy and eventually his own school in 2004.

What is Légèreté?

Légèreté – means “lightness” In terms of riding, lightness of aids to create grace⁴ and élan⁵

Légèreté is both the process and the result.

The Légèreté school has some basics which are essential to the correct training of the horse to become “light”. To start you need:

- **Respect for the Horse.**
- **Relaxation**
- **Balance**
- **Impulsion**

Then, with relaxation, balance, and impulsion you work towards:

- **Flexibility**
- **Mobility**
- **Collection**

If things go wrong – go back to basics do not add a gadget to force a result.

Respect for the horse

Respect for the horse is more than being “kind”. Respect for the horse includes both providing for the wellbeing of the horse physically as well as mentally. The mental well being of the horse is often overlooked and it is fundamental to training. To provide for a horse's mental well being we should have an understanding of the *nature* of the horse. The understanding of the nature, or behaviour, of the horse is known as “**Ethology**”⁶

At its simplest, a horse becomes stressed (mentally unhealthy), if it cannot:

- a. Graze/ forage,
- b. Move about
- c. Socialise with other horse
- d. Feel safe.

³ Cadre Noir: the French military riding academy, École Nationale d'Équitation at Saumur in western France, founded in 1828.

⁴ **grace**, to move in a smooth, controlled, and attractive way.

⁵ **élan** to move with energy and confidence.

⁶ **Ethology** is the scientific and objective study of animal behaviour, usually with a focus on behaviour under natural conditions, and viewing behaviour as an evolutionarily adaptive trait.

Relaxation

Horses do not learn very well when they are stressed A stressed horse is certainly not in a frame of mind to learn the complex cues required for training. It is more likely to buck, bolt or shy or a combination of them! It makes sense then that relaxation (freedom from stress) is a basic requirement for training it is also respectful to the horse.

Separate cues in training is also less stressful to the horse

Horses have extremely good context specific memory and they learn easily by operant and classical conditioning using positive and negative reinforcement. (**Pressure Release training**).

It is important at Ecole de Légèreté to use pressure release training correctly. To that end we have a principle: **hands without legs and legs without hands**. The phrase relates to the separation of cues and responses.

A horse which is given conflicting cues such as go and stop at the same time creates stress and often that stress results in “conflict behaviour” bolting bucking and shying.

Balance

Balance is a fundamental requirement at the very start of Légèreté training. Balance is created before movement. Balance before movement differs from the modern dressage training where balance is meant to be found *through* movement. You will find the phrase “position before action” often used in Légèreté training. What does it mean?

Horizontal balance Balance between the front and the hind quarters

Vertical Balance Balance between the shoulders / Correction of asymmetry

Most horses have less than perfect conformation and with the added weight of the rider, the balance of the horse becomes more concentrated on the forehead. To address the imbalance, the horse is asked to work in a higher head position (but never hollow) as well as in neck extension. The higher head position has the effect of distributing weight to the hind quarters and lightening the forehead. The process of lightening the forehead changes the horizontal balance.

The vertical balance is achieved when the horse is able to maintain its weight between its limbs evenly. Put another way: the correction of asymmetry is a fundamental requirement of training.

Impulsion

Impulsion is simply the willingness to go forward off the lightest request. It is fundamental before the horse can start flexibility and mobility training. Impulsion is separately taught as simply a forward response to a light cue.

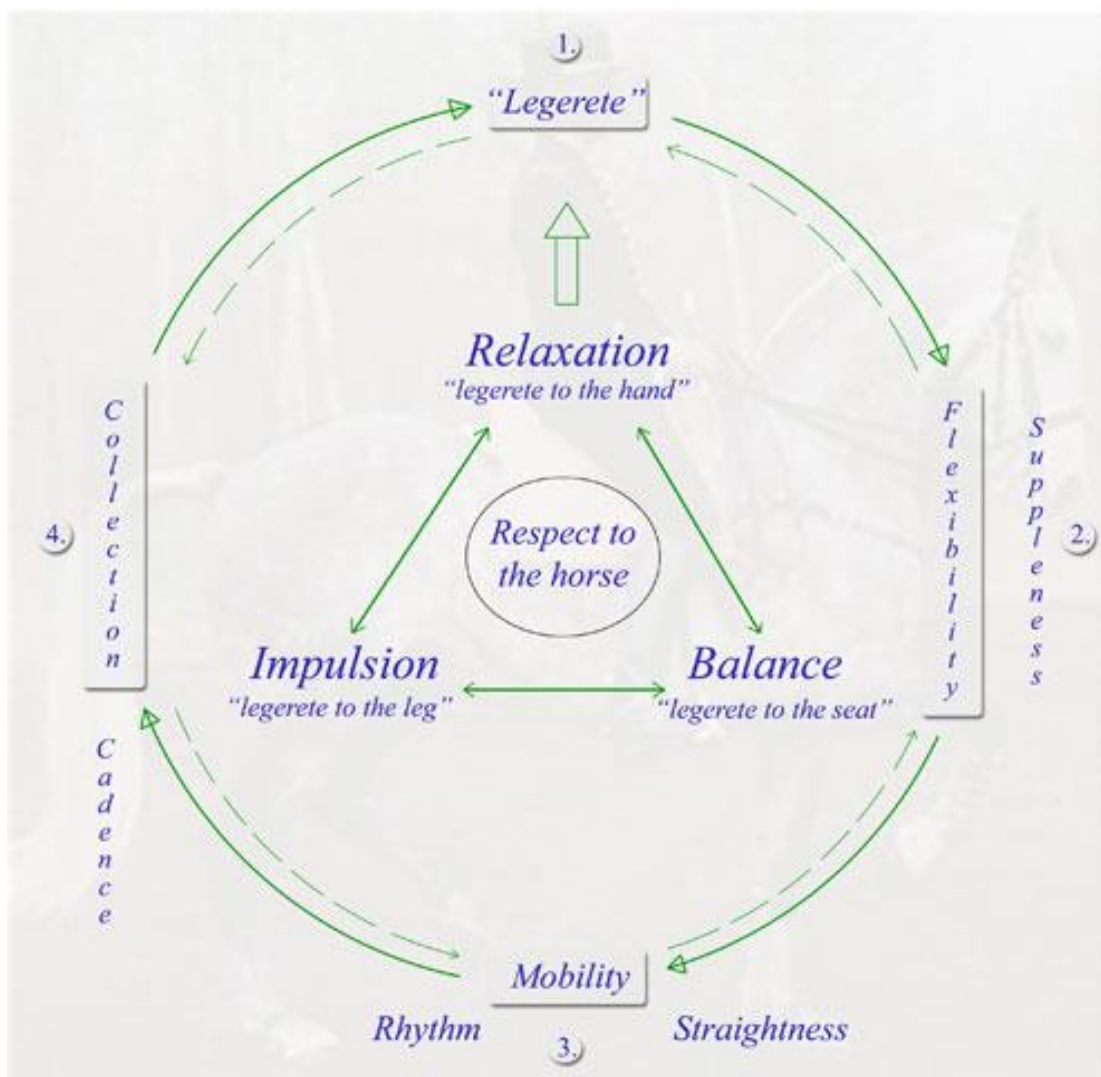
Without relaxation, balance and impulsion it is not possible to train flexibility or mobility and develop straightness.

Flexibility the even bend on circles in various exercises. If the horse resists (does not bend so easily) then go back and establish relaxation work on balance and impulsion and start again.

Mobility further development of balance once flexibility is found. Lateral exercises, transitions all with lightness to the hand.

Collection (cadence) is perfect mobility.

The relationship of each aspect of Légèreté training is set out in the training scale:



Practical Examples

Examples of basic training steps and more advanced moves:

1. *Mise en Main* (education of the horse to the hand)

- Jaw mobility:
 - To create relaxation and start of education of the horse to the bit.
 - The bit is used on the lips in the corners of the mouth not on the tongue or bars.



Search for a natural "mise en main"
– Principles



First step: jaw-yielding

- Balance
- Relaxation
- Confidence.

NB Prerequisite and validation of any
use of the hands.

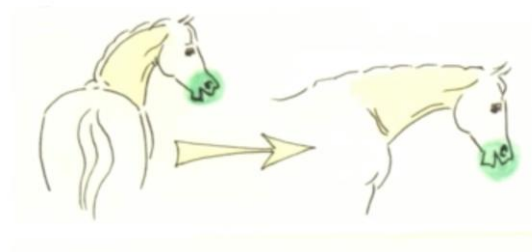
- Flexions in hand:
 - To help establish flexibility and self-carriage.
 - To analyse stiffness and tensions in the rest of the body
- Higher position:
 - Lifting the base of the neck using the demi arrêt.
 - Rebalance of rider weight.



Search for a natural "mise en main"
– Principles

Second step: flexibility of the neck.

Lateral flexions → Neck-extension



- Neck extension:
 - Eccentric contraction
 - Required to develop self-carriage.

- Not the same as long and low.



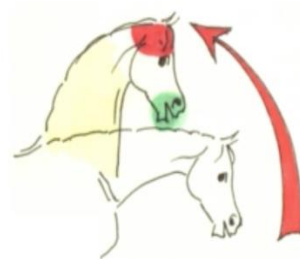
An example of neck extension⁷

- Poll flexion:
 - Rounding without lowering the head.
 - Usually comes as a natural consequence of jaw mobility, flexibility of the neck in the higher position of the head.



Search for a natural "mise en main" – Principles

Third step: flexion of the poll.



Natural consequence of:

- Raising the neck (balance),
- Flexibility of the neck (suppleness),
- Jaw-yielding (relaxation).

Ramener: fully "in hand"

NB ready At any time the horse should be ready to return to neck extension.

2. **Balance**

- Shoulder Control – rebalancing the horse between the shoulders /correction of asymmetry.
 - Fleche et droit
 - Counter-bend turns
 - Shoulder in

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/EcoledeLegeretePerth/posts/warming-up-in-neck-extensionyou-dont-warm-up-and-then-start-the-training-the-war/2060813550884395/>

4 basic errors according to Philippe Karl



Why the School here and now?

1. Clear and concise training system allowing for all types of horses not just the gifted ones.
2. It incorporates modern science and know how.
3. The step by step training required to establish self-carriage and straightness is developed over time with lasting effects.
4. The theory and the practice focus on the horse rather than competition results.
5. The nature of the horse and its welfare really is central to the training.
6. It makes my horses happy!

Questions?

Further Reading:

Twisted Truths of Modern Dressage: A Search for a Classical Alternative by Philippe Karl (2008) Cadmos
Equitation Science 2nd Ed McGreevy Janne Winther Christensen Uta Königvon Borstel and Andrew McLean (2018)

Racinet explains Baucher Jean Claude Racinet (1997) Xenophon Press

Baucher and His School General Decarpentry Xenophon Press (2011) translation by Michael L M Fletcher

Academic Equitation General Decarpentry (2012) Trafalgar Square Books translation by Nicole Bartle

A Method of Horsemanship Founded on New Principles Francois Baucher The 12th edition⁸.

<https://www.wehorse.com/en/blog/philippe-karl-school-legerete-training/>

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⁸ The 12th edition. published in 1864 and called the deuxième manière or second manner which contained notable changes from Baucher's original method